



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Tuesday 8 September 2026

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Bev McArthur (from 18 November 2025)

David Davis (from 27 December 2024)

Georgie Crozier (to 27 December 2024)

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Bach, Matthew ¹	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Luu, Trung	Western Metropolitan	Lib
Batchelor, Ryan	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Mansfield, Sarah	Western Victoria	Greens
Bath, Melina	Eastern Victoria	Nat	McArthur, Bev	Western Victoria	Lib
Berger, John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	McCracken, Joe	Western Victoria	Lib
Blandthorn, Lizzie	Western Metropolitan	ALP	McGowan, Nick	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, Gaele	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira ²	Western Metropolitan	FFV	Ratnam, Samantha ⁵	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem ⁶	Northern Metropolitan	Ind
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina ³	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee ⁸	Northern Victoria	ON
Limbrick, David ⁴	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard ⁷	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

¹ Resigned 7 Dec 2023

² Lib from 26 Nov 2022 until 28 Mar 2023;

IndLib from 28 Mar 2023 until 27 Dec 2024;

Lib from 27 Dec 2024 until 28 Jul 2026;

Ind from 28 Jul 2026 until 6 Sep 2026

³ Appointed 14 Nov 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 Jul 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 Nov 2024

⁶ DLP until 25 Mar 2024

⁷ Appointed 7 Feb 2024

⁸ PHON until 3 Aug 2026

Party abbreviations

AJP – Animal Justice Party; ALP – Australian Labor Party; DLP – Democratic Labour Party;
 FFV – Family First Victoria; Greens – Australian Greens; Ind – independent; IndLib – Independent Liberal;
 LCV – Legalise Cannabis Victoria; LDP – Liberal Democratic Party; Lib – Liberal Party of Australia;
 LP – Libertarian Party; Nat – National Party of Australia; ON – One Nation Victoria;
 PHON – Pauline Hanson’s One Nation; SFFP – Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party

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Tuesday 8 September 2026

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 12:02 pm, read the prayer and made an Acknowledgement of Country.

*Announcements***Photography in chamber**

The PRESIDENT (12:04): There is going to be a photographer in the chamber today and also tomorrow.

*Condolences***Robert Stuart Ives**

The PRESIDENT (12:04): I advise the house of the death on 20 August 2026 of Robert Stuart Ives, member of the Legislative Council for the electoral province of Eumemmerring from 1988 to 1996. I ask as a mark of respect that we all stand for 1 minute's silence.

Members stood in their places.

*Bills***Corrections Amendment Bill 2026****Crimes Amendment (Recruitment of Children for Criminal Activity) Bill 2026****Racing Legislation Amendment (Entity Governance and Other Matters) Bill 2026****Safe Patient Care (Nurse to Patient and Midwife to Patient Ratios) Amendment Bill 2026****Workplace Protection Orders Bill 2026****Consumer Legislation Amendment Bill 2026****Energy and Resources Legislation Amendment (VEET Strategic Review and Other Matters) Bill 2026***Royal assent*

The PRESIDENT (12:06): I have a message from the Governor, dated 1 September:

The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the under-mentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:

31/2026 Corrections Amendment Act 2026

32/2026 Crimes Amendment (Recruitment of Children for Criminal Activity and Production Notices) Act 2026

33/2026 Racing Legislation Amendment (Entity Governance and Other Matters) Act 2026

34/2026 Safe Patient Care (Nurse to Patient and Midwife to Patient Ratios) Amendment Act 2026

35/2026 Workplace Protection Orders Act 2026

I have another message, dated 8 September:

The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the undermentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:

36/2026 Consumer Legislation Amendment Act 2026

37/2026 Energy and Resources Legislation Amendment (VEET Strategic Review and Other Matters) Act 2026

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Construction industry

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:07): (1461) My question is to the Special Minister of State. Recently it was revealed that the government would block IBAC from investigating corruption matters it had already investigated, decided not to investigate or referred to another agency, including because it did not have the relevant powers at the time. Make no mistake, this is a ban on IBAC using any new powers to investigate 12 years of corrupt behaviour by this government. Why under these new rules would IBAC be prohibited from choosing its new follow-the-money powers to further investigate former Premier Jacinta Allan's infamous IBAC referral letter of July 2024, to which IBAC replied that it did not have the powers to investigate these very serious examples of CFMEU corruption?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:08): I thank Mr Mulholland for his question, and I have to say that the opposition seem to be the only people who cannot grasp the seriousness and the broad remit of the –

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, I believe the minister is reflecting on the opposition, and I ask you to bring her back to the question.

The PRESIDENT: The minister has only just started.

Ingrid STITT: I think in my answer I am reflecting on the premise of the question because the point needs to be made that those opposite do not seem to understand the significance of the royal commission that has been established and that will have broad, sweeping powers to look into these very matters. The other issues of course that are at play here are the ways in which the special prosecutor will work alongside the royal commission and that referrals may be made to IBAC and to VicPol to investigate matters which the royal commission has been established to get to the bottom of.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Mrs McArthur, please.

Ingrid STITT: On a point of order, President, I am finding it quite difficult to hear my own words.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, can I call the house to order, please.

Ingrid STITT: The other issue that is incredibly important to note is that expanding these powers, as proposed by the bill that will make its way to the Legislative Council in due course, represents the most significant expansion of IBAC's powers in many, many years. It will give IBAC the ability to follow the money. These are changes that they have been calling for for some time. It will also expand the definition of 'corrupt conduct'. These are important changes, and there are a range –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order, please. It is a bit unfair to ask a question and then start shouting down the minister when she is answering. I call the house to order. I call for order on all sides of the chamber.

Ingrid STITT: The other important fact to note is that IBAC have very broad powers and discretion to investigate matters as they see fit. There are also a range of ways in which matters can be investigated retrospectively, including if IBAC receives a new complaint or additional information in relation to a matter that may have already been the subject of an investigation. I want to acknowledge the work of the expert reference group in helping the government to develop –

Members interjecting.

David Ettershank: On a point of order, President, I am listening with interest to the minister, but due to interjections from both sides of the house I cannot make out anything she is saying, to be honest.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold the point of order. Please, all sides of the chamber, the minister needs to be heard.

Ingrid STITT: I was just in the process of acknowledging the work and the constructive way in which IBAC and other integrity agencies have worked with the government, through the expert reference group, to help develop the provisions of the bill that will make its way to our chamber in due course. But we know there is more reform work to do, and that is why there will be a second tranche of reforms that the government will bring next year. These are all important changes to the ability of IBAC to get to the bottom of any corrupt allegations aired.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:12): My supplementary: Minister, the opposition recently referred allegations to IBAC that then transport infrastructure minister Jacinta Allan's office pressured contractors to install crime figures onto Big Build worksites. Why does the government's bill prohibit IBAC from being able to investigate these very serious whistleblower allegations?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:13): I thank Mr Mulholland for his supplementary question. I will not be drawn on individual scenarios and hypothetical positions –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Maybe do not ask the minister a question if you do not want to hear her.

Ingrid STITT: IBAC are an independent statutory authority, and it is not for anybody in this place to dictate to them what they should or should not investigate. Further to that, we have called and established a royal commission with broad terms of reference. They are charged with getting to the bottom of these matters, and that work is continuing at pace.

Fire services

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:14): (1462) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, the ABC has revealed that a record 62 Fire Rescue Victoria trucks were offline at the end of August, while frontline firefighters say mechanical and equipment failures that were once almost unheard of are now a regular occurrence. The ABC also detailed an incident where firefighters responding to a house fire in Truganina were forced to conduct a search and rescue without water after the fire truck's pump failed. Minister, when Victorians call 000 during the worst moments of their lives, how can they have confidence they are receiving the emergency services they deserve when firefighters themselves cannot have confidence that their trucks and equipment will work when they arrive?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:14): I thank Mr Puglielli for his question and at the outset note the importance of our fire services across Victoria. That is why they are the highest funded and have the best response times in the nation. The Minister for Emergency Services is on the record addressing many of the issues that you have raised, so I am sure he would be delighted to provide you with more information in accordance with the standing orders.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:15): Minister, this is not an isolated failure. Your government has been warned repeatedly about the condition and availability of Victoria's firefighting fleet, yet the ABC reports that the number of FRV appliances has remained essentially unchanged since 2020 while trucks are being taken offline through wear and tear faster than replacements are being added. How many more fire trucks have to fail at emergency incidents before your government accepts that its current replacement program is not keeping pace and provides FRV with the reliable fleet Victorian communities deserve?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:15): Again, Mr Puglielli, in relation to your request for more information on the fleet, the minister will be able to provide you more information on the ESVF and allocation to FRV as well as the investment in trucks and provide you with a list of the new ones that have been rolled out since 2020.

Ministers statements: First Nations health care

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:16): Last week I joined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders from across the country for a roundtable discussion on health and wellbeing alongside other Commonwealth and state and territory health ministers. We know that listening to Aboriginal communities and ensuring their voices shape the way we deliver health services is essential to building a system that is culturally safe, accessible and responsive. That is why I was pleased last week to join Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation to launch the next Victorian Aboriginal health and wellbeing partnership agreement action plan. The agreement reflects an important partnership between the Victorian government, the Aboriginal community controlled health sector and the broader health system, with a shared focus on improving health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal people. Designed to complement and not pre-empt or constrain our ongoing treaty process, the next action plan supports a stronger role for the Aboriginal community controlled sector in informing and shaping health system reform consistent with the principles of self-determination. It promotes a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention alongside culturally safe approaches to care to improve long-term outcomes, and it supports coordinated action across portfolios. It highlights our whole-of-government approach to improving health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians. I want to take the opportunity to thank VACCHO and Aunty Jill Gallagher for their leadership and sharing their expertise and priorities for Victoria at the round table last week, and I am looking forward to celebrating 30 years of progress with them at Parliament later this week. There is important work still to do, and we are committed to listening and working in partnership with the community.

Construction industry

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:17): (1463) My question is to the Special Minister of State. Minister, the Premier has announced that his changes to IBAC powers will specifically protect former premiers Andrews and Allan and him by excluding past examinations from being reconsidered under these amendments. Why does the government's legislation prevent IBAC from investigating allegations relating to Victoria's Big Build sites?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:18): I completely reject the false premise contained in Mr Mulholland's question, because he just fails to acknowledge the fact that our government has established a royal commission into these very issues. There can be no higher level of scrutiny than a royal commission with sweeping powers and more terms of reference, so the premise of Mr Mulholland's question is an absolute nonsense. He knows that he is playing politics and mischief with this issue, deliberately misleading the Parliament and the people of Victoria.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, to bring the minister back to the question, my question went to why the government's legislation prevents IBAC from investigating serious matters relating to Victoria's Big Build.

The PRESIDENT: The minister was relevant.

Ingrid STITT: It simply does not is the very simple answer to Mr Mulholland's question, and he knows that.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:19): I would say it does because the 2024 letter to IBAC from former Premier Jacinta Allan specifically went through a whole range of allegations of CFMEU corruption, which would all be dismissed and prohibited under this bill. As the minister is responsible for, and I quote the Premier, ‘leading the work of the government in transparency, integrity and accountability’, is this a transparent and accountable change?

The PRESIDENT: I think that is asking for an opinion, but I will let the minister answer as she sees fit.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:20): I want to reiterate for the benefit of those opposite that the royal commission that has been established by our government is the highest level of serious accountability that we can have. In addition to that, we are this week bringing legislation to the Parliament –

Members interjecting.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President –

The PRESIDENT: I am assuming Ms Terpstra is going to make a point of order about how she cannot hear the minister. I will uphold that point of order and ask the chamber to come to order.

Ingrid STITT: Again those opposite, either by design or because they simply do not understand how this all works, need to be reminded that the royal commission and the special prosecutor legislation which has been brought to the Parliament this week will work together with IBAC and other agencies, including VicPol, as the royal commission undertakes its important work. To suggest otherwise is to deliberately mislead about the nature and the breadth of the investigations that will happen at the royal commission.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:21): I move:

That the minister’s answers be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Drug harm reduction

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:21): (1464) My question is for the Minister for Health, Minister Stitt. Last week I attended the SHARC and Penington Institute’s International Overdose Awareness Day event. Victoria recently recorded its highest number of overdose-related deaths, with most being accidental overdoses. SafeScript was implemented in April 2019 to prevent accidental overdose caused by polypharmacy, such as with opioids and benzodiazepines. While SafeScript plays an important preventative role, there has been limited public health education to ensure Victorians understand the risks associated with high-risk medications. The Victorian government ran a six-month public awareness campaign when SafeScript was launched. However, more needs to be done to ensure Victorians are informed about the potential harms of these medications, including the risk of accidental overdose. Will the minister consider a statewide public health campaign to ensure Victorians are educated about the safe use of prescription medications and to help prevent accidental overdose?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:22): I thank Ms Payne for her question. I also had the privilege to attend that event, and it was a very moving event. I want to acknowledge that every single life that is lost to overdose is a tragedy not only for that individual but for their loved ones and for the communities that they live in, so of course it is important that we continue to look at ways that we can get ahead of some of the drug harms that are occurring. We know, for example, that the illicit drug market and indeed the way in which some medications are prescribed are causing significant harm for some individuals in the community. We do take a deliberate health-led approach

to these challenges. We have funded, as Ms Payne would be aware, the statewide action plan to reduce harm and to minimise drug overdose. It is important work that is also being considered carefully by the AOD ministerial advisory committee that I have established to advise the government on the best ways that we can continue to reduce drug harm and minimise lives lost to overdose.

In relation to SafeScript, obviously that is important software that does provide doctors and pharmacists with that comprehensive history of the high-risk medicines that have been prescribed to an individual and helps them make better decisions about the care of their patients in real time. We know that these particular protections are having an impact. There is also the coroner's report into overdose deaths between 2015 and 2024, and they have also acknowledged the importance of the SafeScript scheme in helping to reduce the proportion of overdose deaths that involve pharmaceutical opioids.

Of course there is always more to do, and I am very open to continuing to work with members of this chamber but also with our AOD sector to make sure that we are reducing the risk and increasing the education in the community about some of the emerging risks we are seeing, including synthetic opioids and the like. That is work that I take very seriously as part of my mental health ministerial responsibilities.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:25): I thank the minister for her response. Alarming, this year's report showed that people aged between 50 and 59 years make up the highest proportion of unintentional deaths due to overdose, at 25.5 per cent. Victorians over 50 are more likely to have multiple health conditions, requiring medications for sleep, pain and anxiety, and are at a higher risk of accidental overdose. So would the minister consider a targeted public health campaign for Victorians on recognising the signs of overdose, particularly for populations most at risk, such as the over-50s cohort?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:26): I am very happy to take that on notice, Ms Payne, and get a little bit of advice from my department, including from the chief addiction officer, which is another initiative of the statewide action plan. He is doing great work with the AOD sector on these very issues. I am very happy to take that on notice and come back to you with a little bit more information.

Ministers statements: energy policy

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:26): Today I would like to speak on the Labor government's plan to maintain electricity reliability. Our energy plan is not driven by ideology, it is driven by evidence. As Victoria's ageing coal-fired power stations retire, we are replacing them with more affordable renewables and the transmission needed to get that energy to households and businesses. The Yallourn closure in 2028 will be covered by our record investments in renewables and major transmission projects, and we are building on the investments through to the 2030s to cover the closure of Loy Yang in 2035. This includes Australia's first offshore wind auction, which I have had the pleasure of talking about in this chamber, which will contribute to \$18 billion in regional wages through the *Victorian Energy Jobs Plan*.

But we are not the only ones with a plan. Others have said that they will seek to extend the life of the ageing Loy Yang coal-fired power station, scrap renewables and replace them with Mrs McArthur's favourite: nuclear power. It is a plan that I have not heard any of those opposite say they disagree with. I really have not heard this. Perhaps it is a passive partnership that would have disastrous impacts for Victorians: higher bills, more blackouts and a dirtier energy system. Even AGL has warned that the plan to force its ageing coal-fired power station to operate beyond its scheduled closure, even if possible, will drive up costs and increase the risks of unplanned outages.

On this side of the house we know that renewables are the cheapest form of the new electricity generation required to deliver reliable electricity for decades to come. Whilst the Liberal–One Nation coalition clings on to yesterday’s energy system, we are getting on with delivering what Victorians need. I would encourage those opposite to come clean on which side they are on.

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:28): (1465) My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, Joanne’s GP sent an urgent referral on 24 June following a positive iFOBT – an immunochemical faecal occult blood test. She was categorised at the time as an urgent category 1 patient, meaning she should be seen within 30 days. Her symptoms include rapid weight loss, and she has a family history of bowel cancer. She finally had a telehealth consult on 2 September, some 70 days after her initial referral, but she still has no date for a colonoscopy. Why is Joanne, who is deemed to be a category 1 patient, still waiting to be seen?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:29): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. I just want to acknowledge Joanne’s circumstances and invite the member to provide me with details of that matter, which I am very happy to and want to follow up with the department so that we can get some advice for Joanne about her particular situation. Obviously I am not in a position to go into individual patient matters in the chamber, but if Ms Crozier provides me with the details, I would be very happy to follow that up.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:30): Again the minister refuses to answer the question around why somebody like Joanne, who is deemed to be a category 1, is still waiting to be seen. The minister is going to follow that up, and I thank her for that, given the information that I have provided, but it is around those patients that are not being seen. That is a failure of the minister. Minister, last sitting week in the Parliament, in response to a question from Ms Bath regarding another Victorian patient who has been waiting for surgery on his broken hip for almost a year, you said:

Our clinicians are always ensuring that we are – the only state in fact in Australia – delivering category 1 surgeries in the recommended timeframe.

Minister, that is not true, is it?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:30): I thank Ms Crozier for her supplementary question and note that she has acknowledged that I will follow up these matters for the person she is making representations on behalf of, and it is important that I do that. In relation to category 1 surgeries, we are indeed the only state in the country completing category 1 surgeries in the recommended timeframe. Of course every individual patient’s care is important, and that is why I have offered to follow that matter up.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Ingrid STITT: I get a lot of correspondence, which I respond to in a timely fashion, because I understand that many people interacting with our health system are writing to me on these occasions because they want support, and I will follow this matter up promptly when Ms Crozier provides me with that information.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:32): I move:

That the minister’s responses be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Also, I will ask you to reinstate the first question, thank you, President.

The PRESIDENT: I will not be doing that, but I will put that the motion be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:32): (1466) My question is again to the Minister for Health. Minister, last Wednesday night, on 2 September, a code brown was initiated at the Royal Melbourne Hospital due to a significant electrical failure. Services at the Royal Melbourne were disrupted, with patients being diverted to the Alfred hospital. How many surgeries were cancelled because of the code brown at the Royal Melbourne Hospital?

The PRESIDENT: I will ask the minister to answer, taking note of the level of detail that has been asked.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:33): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. I obviously have been advised of the situation that occurred at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. They experienced a power outage last week, and their backup power arrangements operated as planned. The hospital activated its contingency plans, which was appropriate in those circumstances, and continued to provide care to its patients. Ambulance Victoria temporarily diverted some patients to other hospitals while the matters were being managed. I am advised that those diversions were managed very smoothly, with AV allocating resources across the system to make sure that patients continued to get the care that they needed. I do want to acknowledge the team at the Royal Melbourne, who managed this situation with professionalism, calmly, and managed it very well. I am advised that the hospital and the broader health system responded exactly as they should in these circumstances, and I thank them for their efforts in dealing with this situation promptly.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:34): Again the minister has gone nowhere near answering the question given the electrical failure and the disruptions to patients at not only the Royal Melbourne but also other hospitals. Minister, we know that thousands of Victorians are waiting for surgery – tens of thousands in fact – although we do not yet have the most recent quarterly data, including the surgery waitlist, which you have failed to release. The last data we have is from January to March. Minister, how many patients are on Victoria's planned surgery waitlist?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:35): I just want to take issue with the way in which Ms Crozier is framing this question, because of course I did answer her substantive question by reassuring the chamber that safe care was provided throughout this situation, and I thank those at the Royal Melbourne Hospital for their work.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, the minister in her answer is debating the question that I put in my supplementary. I would ask you to draw her back to the specifics about this very basic question that I have asked: how many Victorians are waiting for surgery?

The PRESIDENT: I am just a little bit concerned about how it related to the substantive question.

Georgie Crozier: Can I explain it to you?

The PRESIDENT: Yes, sure.

Georgie Crozier: The first question was around how, because of the electrical failure, surgeries had to be cancelled.

Members interjecting.

Georgie Crozier: A long bow – are you serious? At the Alfred last week elective surgeries had to be cancelled.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, I understand that, because of a power outage.

Georgie Crozier: When the Royal Melbourne Hospital's electrical failure occurred, more surgeries had to be cancelled on Thursday and Friday. So surgeries were cancelled – that is people waiting for

surgery – and that is what I asked. She did not answer that. I am asking the second question: how many Victorians are waiting for surgery?

The PRESIDENT: The substantive was about an occurrence with a power outage at one hospital, and then the supplementary was about, I understand – I hate to paraphrase – the whole health system through all hospitals. But I will let the minister continue as she sees fit.

Ingrid STITT: Although Ms Crozier is trying to link a bunch of things in that supplementary question, the fact remains that the power outage at the Royal Melbourne was handled in a manner which made sure that patients in that hospital received the care that they needed without disruption.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, we have got 20 seconds left. The minister is going nowhere near answering the question. I ask you to bring her back. Stop diverting from the supplementary and answer it: how many Victorians are waiting for surgery? It is very simple.

The PRESIDENT: As I stated, my concern is around the substantive and the supplementary, but the minister can continue.

Ingrid STITT: In fact our health services and our incredible health workforce have delivered record numbers of surgeries in the 2025–26 financial year. Over 210,000 surgeries have been performed in Victoria, which is a credit –

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, there are 7 seconds left, President. The minister is going nowhere near answering this very simple question: how many Victorians are waiting for surgery?

Sonja Terpstra: On the point of order, President, every question time the same thing happens: those opposite continue to interrupt the minister giving an answer by saying she is not answering it. There have been multiple rulings in this place that say that those opposite cannot direct a minister how to answer a question. The minister is answering, and they do not want to hear the answer because they do not like it. That is not a point of order for those opposite to make, and I would ask that the minister be allowed to continue in silence without continued interruption and interjection from those opposite. I also cannot hear her.

The PRESIDENT: On the point of order, Ms Terpstra is right in that the minister can answer the way she sees fit. If the opposition are not happy with an answer, then they can call a point of order at the end of question time and ask me to review it, if I have not asked the minister to give a written answer within the standing orders.

Ingrid STITT: Our government's planned surgery blueprint is a game changer for delivering record numbers of surgeries across the system – *(Time expired)*

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:39): I move:

That the minister's response be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: kindergarten funding

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:39): I rise to update the house on the Carroll Labor government's Building Blocks partnership with the Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Limited. This morning I joined the director of Catholic education at DOBCEL Tom Sexton and the Victorian Catholic Education Authority, represented by CEO Elizabeth Labone, and parliamentary colleagues Ms Ermacora and the members for Wendouree, Eureka and Ripon, representing electorates across the diocese, to announce our 22nd Building Blocks partnership.

Prior to the 2022 election our government made a commitment to build or upgrade 60 kindergartens at low-fee non-government schools, and with this being our fourth Building Blocks partnership with

the non-government sector, we are delivering exactly what we promised. Working with DOBCEL, the Carroll Labor government is investing an initial \$5.47 million to build a new kindergarten at St Mary's Primary School in Swan Hill, delivering 178 places for local families, as well as planning for future kindergarten projects in Coragulac and Kororoit.

This partnership is the culmination of work that we began together back in 2022. I want to thank DOBCEL and the Victorian Catholic Education Authority for their constructive engagement throughout that process and for bringing this partnership together. It is work that builds on our government's longstanding investment in Catholic education. It is the second-largest provider of education across Victoria. We have been proud to support Catholic schools through both the \$402 million Non-Government Schools Capital Fund and the \$450 million Building Fund for Non-Government Schools. To date this has included an investment of over \$46 million into schools operated by DOBCEL.

As the Carroll Labor government rolls out 15 hours of free three-year-old kindergarten as well as additional hours of free four-year-old kindergarten, we are continuing to invest in the early years infrastructure that will help deliver these reforms. Building Blocks partnerships are a critical part of this work. With one in every five students in Victoria attending a Catholic school, this sector will continue to play a crucial role as we expand access to kindergarten across the state. On this side of the house, we know that actually delivering for families means investing for the future, building those strong partnerships, expanding access to kindergarten and giving every child the best start in life.

Ballarat Base Hospital

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:42): (1467) My question is to the Minister for Health, and it relates to the Ballarat Base Hospital. Last Thursday doctors walked off the job in protected industrial action. Issues raised include long emergency department wait times, physical safety, bed block and staff burnout caused by stress and fatigue. Dr Caitlyn Conway, who is a doctor at the Ballarat Base Hospital, said:

Shifts are so long, you're exhausted, you make mistakes and it's not safe for us and not safe for patients.

Minister, last week I raised concerns from a former nurse who worked at Ballarat Base Hospital. This week doctors are raising concerns about safety and conditions at the hospital. Minister, why won't you investigate the situation at Ballarat Base Hospital?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:43): There was a little bit in that question, including relating to bargaining that is happening in the health system at the moment for our incredible doctors, and I want to acknowledge the work that they do each and every day. Our government will always respect their right to collectively bargain, and protected industrial action is something they are entitled to participate in as they see fit.

I want to also indicate that since coming into the portfolio I have had the opportunity to meet with AMA and ASMOF to understand their concerns firsthand. I would describe that as a constructive conversation. Negotiations are continuing in good faith to reach agreement on some pretty important matters that our doctors are bargaining around. In relation to Ballarat Base Hospital, I want to acknowledge all of the staff that work in that service. It is a very important, major regional hospital, which is becoming busier and busier, and that is acknowledged. I have had the opportunity since the last sitting week to talk with my department about some of the pressures that have been reported to me directly from some of the staff at the Ballarat Base Hospital, and my department is working closely with that health service on the challenges that have been raised. I want to also acknowledge the individual workers who have written to me. I have taken on board their feedback carefully.

Joe McCracken: On a point of order, President, with the greatest respect, my question was, 'Why won't you investigate the situation at Ballarat Base Hospital?' and you have not even used the word 'investigate'. Why?

The PRESIDENT: The minister was relevant to the question.

Ingrid STITT: I think you are kind of lost in the moment there, with respect, because I have just been talking about how since these issues have been raised, not only in the chamber but also by individual health workers in that service who have written to me, I have raised these matters with my department, and my department is working closely with Ballarat Base Hospital on these issues. That is the appropriate way in which these matters ought to be followed up. I also acknowledge that there is bargaining going on across the system, not just at Ballarat but obviously across our health system, and the issues that are being raised through the bargaining are important. The government is taking those matters seriously, and the negotiations are continuing in good faith. We all want to reach a fair deal here that acknowledges the incredible work and the hours that our doctors and health workers put in to provide world-class care to Victorians accessing these services.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:46): Minister, Dr Rob Roscioli, who works in an emergency department, said last week:

If you have unhealthy doctors you have unhealthy patients and an unhealthy health service ...

Dr Yates, a former AMA president, said:

... the government doesn't care about doctors. I think deep in their hearts they think ... there's nowhere for these ... doctors to go so we can treat them like rubbish, we can disrespect them.

Minister, doctors and nurses are all saying the same thing: conditions at Ballarat Base are at breaking point. If you will not even investigate, what are they actually supposed to do? Where do they go? They cannot go to you. We raise legitimate questions, and you brush them aside. Where are they supposed to go?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:47): That was more performative than actually based on any facts. It also asserts a number of things that are incorrect. I absolutely, categorically reject the suggestion that our government does anything other than back our health workers in. Those opposite might take a different approach to industrial relations to us –

Joe McCracken: On a point of order, President, I do not appreciate being verballed, but secondly, my question was: where are these doctors – people that are concerned – supposed to go? You have not gone anywhere near that.

The PRESIDENT: The minister was relevant to the question.

Ingrid STITT: I am not sure what Mr McCracken is referring to in that statement. There are negotiations going on right now. We are taking very seriously the concerns that doctors are raising through their representatives at the bargaining table, and I am not going to cut across those negotiations in question time. Those negotiations are continuing in good faith, and we are listening carefully to the concerns that are being raised.

First Nations custodial health care

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:48): (1468) My question is also for the Minister for Health. Minister, people do not stop being patients when they enter prison. The government's own 2022 cultural review of the adult prison system recommends that Victoria urgently implement a public health model for health care across the entire adult prison system. The 2024 Victorian Ombudsman's investigation into healthcare provision for Aboriginal people in Victorian prisons recommends the same thing. Yet health care in men's prisons remains the responsibility of corrections. In July 2025 the Yoorrook Justice Commission recommended that the government:

Transfer oversight and responsibility of First Peoples' prison healthcare from the Department of Justice and Community Safety to the Department of Health.

Now, in 2026, VACCHO is again calling on the government to put prison health care in the hands of health professionals and move all prison health care to a public health provider. Minister, will the government finally implement all these recommendations and transfer responsibility for prison health care from corrections to the health system?

Enver Erdogan: On a point of order, President, I think this question is better addressed to the Minister for Corrections in the other place. Justice health and decisions about health care in correctional settings are for the Minister for Corrections in the other place, Minister Spence, so I am not sure if this question is correctly directed to the Minister for Health in this place. I am just seeking your clarification.

The PRESIDENT: I think the Minister for Health can address the question, and she may make that point herself.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:50): My colleague is correct; these matters fall within the responsibility of the Minister for Corrections. But obviously I am aware of the representations that have been made, particularly by VACCHO and our community-controlled organisations across the state, about the provision of health care in our corrections system. It is also a matter that has been a recommendation of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, and of course the government is in the process of considering those recommendations. But I think that it would be more appropriate for the specifics contained in Ms Copsey's question – and I am happy to pass this on – to be referred to the Minister for Corrections, who is responsible for health services in prisons.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:51): Thank you for that offer, Minister. No, I am interested in your response and your government's response, so I do not need that question reinstated. Your answer is what you gave. Detailed findings of the Victorian Ombudsman's 2024 investigation into healthcare provision for Aboriginal people in Victorian prisons show that previous reviews repeatedly identified the same themes: cultural safety must be embedded, Aboriginal organisations should be decision-makers rather than merely consulted, Aboriginal health organisations should provide prison health care, and Aboriginal-led services need adequate funding. The Ombudsman specifically observed that the cultural review's recommendation for a public health model had at one point only been implemented in the women's system so far. VACCHO, as you mentioned, is asking for \$1.7 million, Minister, to develop an ACCO-led model of prison health and wellbeing care for Aboriginal people – a very modest investment to begin implementing reforms that successive reviews have already recommended, not just represented. Minister, will you fund VACCHO's \$1.7 million proposal, and if not, why not?

The PRESIDENT: The minister will answer in line with her portfolio responsibilities.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:52): This is definitely a matter that does not fall within my responsibilities. However, I think that you may have noted from my ministers statement today that these matters have been the subject of discussion at a round table of state and territory ACCOs from around the country. Indeed the provision of health services did come up at that event, and it is something that all states and territories, including Victoria, are in discussions with our peak bodies in our respective states around. As I have already indicated, there are also recommendations that the government will be responding to in relation to the Yoorrook Justice Commission.

Ministers statements: cybersecurity

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (12:53): I rise to update the house on the Carroll Labor government's work to build Victoria's cybersecurity workforce and ensure we have the skills and expertise needed to protect Victorians from growing cyberthreats. Last week I had the pleasure of visiting RMIT to congratulate the recent graduates of the Victorian government's cyber

internship program for completing their six-month internships. At RMIT I also had the opportunity to meet with Dr Nick Patterson, one of the leading academics, experts and consultants in this field, and the Future Technologies team to discuss the university's work in emerging technologies and the skills Victoria will need to address future cybersecurity challenges. The cyber internship program is one way we are building those skills to give Victorians who have completed a certificate IV in cybersecurity the opportunity to gain paid, hands-on experience working alongside cybersecurity professionals across government. These graduates have worked across areas including incident response, threat intelligence, cyber awareness and security operations, building practical skills while helping protect the systems and information Victorians rely on. Importantly, every graduate I met came through free TAFE, demonstrating how we can connect skills, training and real career pathways in areas where Victoria needs skilled workers.

In the past two years 17 interns have participated in the program, with many graduates going on to roles in the Victorian public service and related fields and some furthering their interest and study. The program is part of the Victorian government's broader commitment to strengthening Victoria's cyber defences and developing the next generation of cybersecurity professionals. As cyberthreats continue to grow, building Victoria's homegrown cyber workforce is an important part of keeping our community safe. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate this year's graduates on their achievements and thank our departmental cyber professionals who have supported them throughout the program. I look forward to seeing where these talented graduates take their careers.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:55): Can I thank Minister Symes, who will get, in line with the standing orders, the supplementary and substantive answers from the Minister for Emergency Services for Mr Puglielli.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, I would ask that my second questions be reviewed. Both questions were not answered by the minister, and I would ask them to be reinstated.

The PRESIDENT: I am happy to review that. I think I did say the first one was answered, but I am happy to review both. I will get back to the chamber by the end of the day.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, I just want to raise with you what I think is a developing and slightly worrying trend, where you were musing or passing an early judgement. I am not trying to be critical here; I am just trying to make question time move smoothly. For example, with the question Ms Crozier asked about the code brown at the Royal Melbourne, you said partway through, passing what I would say is an early judgement, that the question was too detailed. That might be your view, but what we learned is the minister actually had been briefed on this specific matter.

The PRESIDENT: No, I did say I was concerned at the level of detail. I did not say 'too detailed'.

David Davis: President, what I am putting to you – and it is just for discussion – is that in fact you making that statement cuts time and also changes the tone of the question and inserts a judgement at an early point, which in this case proved to be quite wrong. The minister had actually been briefed on this in detail, and you at that point made a judgement, which is not your role, I would put, at that early point. It might be later, but not at that early point, so I just want you to think about this in future question times.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, that is a fair point, and I will take it into consideration. Because I am leaving I can say this: I do not like a world where as soon as someone questions a Presiding Officer, it is 'You're reflecting on the Chair.' I think that there should be times – it might be me personally, and I can say this because I am on my way out – when it is fair for members to raise a point of order and say, 'Hey, President, can you think about this or that?' Because if we have this situation where there is this Grand Pooh-Bah sitting up here that can never, ever be questioned about their rulings, I think that is naff, and that is what it has been for 150 years. So thank you. I will take that into

consideration. I think it is actually a fair point. If people want to use this as a ruling for future presidents – and I am not being a smartypants – they should, because I have been here a long time and there have been times when I have thought: why can't the President, politely and respectfully, be asked to think about the way they go about things? So thank you. I am being 100 per cent genuine.

Constituency questions

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:59): (2580) My constituency question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it again concerns the Western Highway, particularly the patch between Gordon and Ballan. I was driving it yesterday, and it has been reported to me many times that there have been roadworks signs put up. I drove it yesterday. There are no roadworks going on whatsoever. There are big yellow signs. They even have electronic signs saying 'Road work happening'. They slow you down to 60 k's an hour. But I will tell you what is happening: absolutely nothing. I will tell you what is there, though: a hell of a lot of potholes. So my question to the minister is: what are you going to do to fix this situation? People are incurring thousands and thousands of dollars of expense just to repair their cars. They are playing dodgem cars every time they get onto the roads. What is actually going to happen to these poor people who put their lives on the line every time they get on the roads? It is a disgrace.

Western Metropolitan Region

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (13:00): (2581) My question is for the Minister for Artificial Intelligence and the Digital Economy. My constituent resides in West Footscray. Her family experiences broken sleep and other adverse health impacts caused by the hyperscale data centre across the road. Reflecting on the light, sound and air pollution spewed out by this sinister building 24 hours a day, they also wonder what happens to the spent hardware generated by the data centre. As data centre processing infrastructure typically has a life of three to five years, we are looking at around a quarter of a million tonnes of e-waste generated over the next five years. Data Centres Australia have said that e-waste belongs to the customer, conveniently passing the buck. My constituent asks: how will the government deal with the mountains of spent technology generated by data centres?

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:01): (2582) My constituency question today comes from material I have received from David Aquilina in Highett in my electorate, and it relates to the impact on his local architecture practice, of which he is the director. He is a registered architect. He is worried about the new regulations in 2026 and the impact on his local practice. He is worried about the transition times and the uncertainty about compliance, increased administrative burden for low-risk advisory services, potential liability implications for mandated contract provisions and the overall regulatory load on small businesses. He asks that the Minister for Planning look at the disallowance of the Architects Regulations 2026 as they currently stand. A risk-proportionate review would be a sensible way forward, and he seeks genuine consultation. These have been imposed without the proper discussion, and given housing affordability, our architects have an important role.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (13:02): (2583) My constituency question is for the Premier. Nyayioni, a young woman from my multicultural youth advisory committee, raised with me the lack of a public holiday recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Northern Metro Region is home to approximately 14 per cent of Victoria's Aboriginal population. Nyayioni highlighted that while NAIDOC Week, National Sorry Day and National Reconciliation Week recognise First Nations' histories, cultures and experiences, none is a public holiday. The ACT is the only Australian jurisdiction with a public holiday specifically focused on reconciliation with First Nations peoples. Following Australia's first treaty, Victoria must continue to lead. My

constituents ask: will you commit to establishing a public holiday recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and celebrating their cultures, history and achievements?

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (13:03): (2584) My question is for the Minister for Public Transport. Residents in Williamstown and Newport are increasingly concerned about the growing impact of displaced truck traffic travelling along Melbourne Road, Kororoit Creek Road and surrounding local streets. I was recently contacted by residents who described a frightening escalation of traffic conditions over recent months, reporting that from as early as 6 am trucks are travelling through the area using local roads to bypass road tolls and truck restrictions elsewhere. The increased volume of heavy vehicle traffic is contributing to congestion, noise, road deterioration, potholes and significant safety concerns for local residents, pedestrians, cyclists and motorists. Can the minister update my constituents: what action is the Carroll Labor government taking to address the displaced truck traffic in Melbourne's inner west, particularly in the communities of Williamstown and Newport?

Northern Victoria Region

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (13:04): (2585) My question is for the Minister for Health. As the largest electorate in the state, Northern Victoria is home to many families who need to travel significant distances to access specialist cancer treatment. The Leukaemia Foundation this week released its national scorecard, which exposed major gaps in the travel assistance on offer to people in my electorate, who are forced to travel long distances to access life-saving treatment, often for extended periods of time. Victoria ranked last on the national scoreboard, receiving just 41.3 out of 100 based on how well our travel scheme covers the cost of accommodation and private vehicle travel. My office has been impacted by leukaemia and knows firsthand the brutality of cancer treatment. For people in my electorate, they have the added stress of having to travel to access this specialist care. Will the minister support the Leukaemia Foundation's Cut the Cost of Cancer campaign and provide better financial support for northern Victorians impacted by cancer?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:05): (2586) My question is to the Minister for Public Transport. Gippsland rail passengers have again been treated like second-class citizens. On the weekend the V/Line services were cut at 10 pm, before the end of the blockbuster AFL game. Passengers who missed the 11 pm service were forced to wait for an hour until midnight and then did not arrive home until 3 o'clock in the morning. After 12 years of disruptions, delays and cancellations, Gippslanders are rightly frustrated. Labor continues to make regional passengers pay for Melbourne's infrastructure projects. The Nationals and Liberals have committed to an extra 1100 seats on Traralgon and Bairnsdale services through additional VLocity train sets and longer peak period trains – more seats, better services. Will the minister finally acknowledge that Labor's failure to properly manage Melbourne's infrastructure program has unfairly burdened Gippsland passengers and accept it is time for a fresh start?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:06): (2587) My question today is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs. Residents in apartment towers across Box Hill were really pleased to hear that the Parliament supported the amendment that I moved to end proxy harvesting in owners corporation meetings, according to a number of pieces of correspondence in recent days. Many residents of these large buildings have brought up serious concerns about the impact that proxy harvesting is having on their buildings, particularly in relation to governance and proper decision-making. That part of the bill may not come into effect until December next year via proclamation. Each day that passes in the meantime, non-owner agents and developers will continue to use large numbers of proxy votes to influence decisions affecting an entire building. These residents want to see this practice ended as soon as possible. Minister, will you advocate that this part of the bill come into

effect before the caretaker period begins so that residents in Box Hill can be protected from bad actors controlling decision-making in their buildings?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (13:07): (2588) My question is to the Minister for Environment, who is responsible for the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, regarding a public asset on Crown land. The mayor of Loddon shire Cr Dan Straub raised concerns on behalf of the East Loddon Men's Shed, who are seeking support from DEECA to utilise the public facility opposite the East Loddon P-12 College in Dingee Road, Dingee. The site was previously managed by the Lions Club, which has been disbanded, and East Loddon Men's Shed are keen to continue. They have around 20 active members, who do regular bus trips to maintain connection, support men's health and build community. Since July the group has been seeking a memorandum of understanding with DEECA to grant permission for the East Loddon Men's Shed to continue as a committee of management for the facility. I would appreciate the minister's support to avoid further delays, make use of this public asset and support the great work of men's sheds in our region.

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:08): (2589) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Will he ensure that commercial freight operators who pay the full heavy vehicle registration are not disadvantaged by competitors misusing the primary production concession? A concession for primary producers allows them to pay a much lower heavy vehicle registration fee than commercial freight operators. One of my constituents is concerned that some commercial operators may be misusing the primary producer heavy vehicle registration as a loophole to register vehicles that carry out freight transport work that is beyond the intended purpose of the concession. This puts commercial operators who follow the rules and pay the much higher rego fee at an unfair disadvantage. In New South Wales concession applicants need to prove their status with a tax office assessment, but Victoria only requires a letter from an accountant. Heavy vehicle regulation should be nationally consistent, and Victoria must ensure that its rules maintain fairness across the transport industry. This is particularly important in Greater Shepparton – *(Time expired)*

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:09): (2590) My question is to the Premier. When I am talking to residents and traders in suburbs across my electorate, from Oakleigh to Bentleigh to South Melbourne, they tell me crime is the number one issue. On Saturday I was out in Oakleigh with Mr Davis and others, our candidate and some volunteers. One of the volunteers, Amanda, is a victim of crime. She lives in Malvern, and I know her very well. She, like many other Victorians, is living in fear. Their sense of safety has been eroded by the home invasions, machete attacks and firebombings that have become all too frequent. They feel unsafe in their homes, in their businesses and in local streets. The Premier last month said:

Victorians have told us they still want to see someone at the counter when they walk into their local station, and I'm listening.

Weeks later we learned that a number of stations will close their front counters on 4 October, including in Southbank, in the electorate of Albert Park. Why have you backtracked, Premier, and left my constituents without a manned police station in the middle of a crime crisis?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (13:10): (2591) My constituency question is for the latest Minister for Police, and it concerns Broadmeadows police station. Minister, not a week goes by that we do not see another horrific crime in my electorate and across the state, thanks to Labor's

record crime crisis. I was shocked to be told recently by a constituent that staff at Broadmeadows police station have been told that no more allocated overtime will be allowed. To quote my constituent:

They are then expected to do whatever it takes to cover matters as required and if that means pushing time frames out that is what they will do.

At a time when aggravated burglary and robbery are up 20 per cent in the City of Hume and serious assaults are up 17 per cent, this is unacceptable. Will the minister commit to reversing this dangerous decision that will put the lives of my constituents at risk?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (13:11): (2592) My constituency question for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety is from a constituent who drives on western Victorian roads and seeks clarity about Labor's pothole policy. After 380 parliamentary contributions without raising potholes once, Labor's Jacinta Ermacora has finally conceded that she has a gut feeling that something is not quite right with the roads and that they seem to be falling apart more easily. She suggests Snap Send Solve. Victorians have done the snapping and the sending; after 12 years of Labor it is the solving that has gone missing. Her government colleague in this place says some Victorians are quite happy to have roads full of potholes and are not on board with this pothole thing. Minister, which colleague is right: the one who says roads are falling apart or the one who says people like potholes? Which south-west roads will be repaired with the \$352 million, and when?

The PRESIDENT: I might have a look at that one. We will see.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:12): (2593) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public Transport. Constituents in my electorate were very curious to see that the Suburban Rail Loop had de-scoped the crossing at the proposed Burwood station. It was claimed to be a saving when of course it was never in scope in the first place – that is curious in itself. But the fact remains that there is not going to be a connection now from one side of Burwood Highway to the other between the two stations. It is used by, for example, Presbyterian Ladies' College and Deakin Uni students, who now will have to cross six lanes of traffic, a tram track and three traffic lights daily at what is meant to be a busy, busy station. My question is: what pedestrian safety and crossing capacity assessment was undertaken before the decision was made to remove the Burwood pedestrian bridge?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:13): (2594) My question is to the Minister for Community Sport. Minister, I recently visited Carrum Downs Cricket Club, where this Labor government apparently spent a whopping \$700,000 doing its publicised upgrade. The floor was not levelled properly, and when I visited there was a pool of water in the middle of the room in the newly renovated area. I fail to understand how an internal wall of paint and a bathroom refresh could cost so much money. The upgrade failed to provide a girls change room and toilets, and the current facilities only have one combined change room. Hundreds of locals and multiple sporting clubs use the facility. Sharing a single change room for the home and away teams alone with just a foldaway wall is unacceptable. My question for the minister from my constituents is if the Carroll Labor government will reinvest in the fixes and provide the overdue double-storey clubrooms that the locals really need.

Petitions

Victorian Fisheries Authority

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 966 signatures:

The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that Victorian Fisheries officers provide a first line of defence for Victoria's vast fisheries and restructuring the

authority by reducing staff on the ground can only lead to a worse outcome for both anglers and the environment.

The Petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the government to immediately reinstate these removed positions and invest in more on the ground staff.

Victorian Fisheries Authority

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 260 signatures:

The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the urgent need for real action to address the budget and staffing cuts made in 2025 to ensure that the VFA still has the ability to effectively manage Victoria's fisheries resources.

The Petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government urgently to review the current strategic plan to ensure that the Victorian fishing Community still has the core regulatory marine and freshwater fisheries management, fisheries science, and aquaculture management services, including undertaking fish stock assessment and compliance monitoring.

Outdoor recreation

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 1468 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the urgent need for Parks Victoria and the Victorian Government to recommit much needed funding to ensure that bush tracks are well maintained and kept open.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to ensure that the Victorian 4x4 community can safely access all tracks available to visitors in Victorian parks throughout the year.

Housing

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 191 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that Victoria urgently needs more housing, and we support increasing housing supply to improve affordability. However, recent planning reforms introducing the 'deemed to comply' pathway have significantly reduced the ability of local councils to exercise planning discretion when assessing developments subject to that pathway.

Local planning policies and planning scheme amendments are developed through extensive community consultation, and local councils are best placed to assess the infrastructure capacity, public safety, drainage, flooding risk, transport impacts, cumulative development impacts, established tree canopy and neighbourhood character of their municipalities. A standardised assessment pathway may not adequately account for these diverse local circumstances or allow appropriate consideration of local issues where warranted. This petition does not oppose housing growth.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to review the 'deemed to comply' pathway under the Victoria Planning Provisions and support amendments to restore appropriate local council planning discretion when assessing developments subject to that pathway, including ensuring councils can properly consider local infrastructure capacity, public safety, drainage, flooding risk, transport impacts, cumulative development impacts, established tree canopy, environmental values and neighbourhood character where local circumstances warrant further assessment, and in undertaking this review consult with local councils, planning professionals, industry, environmental organisations and the community to ensure Victoria's planning system delivers increased housing supply while supporting well-planned, sustainable and resilient communities for current and future generations.

Health system

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 214 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that two members of the same family died in preventable circumstances after missing medical appointments where no follow-up call, welfare check, or escalation protocol was initiated. These deaths occurred in 2023 and

2025, involved different clinics, and yet the failures were identical. Both individuals were high-risk patients with known medical vulnerabilities, and both were later found deceased at home.

There is currently no mandatory requirement in Victoria for medical clinics to follow up high-risk patients who miss scheduled appointments. Existing guidelines do not specify when a welfare check should be initiated, how risk should be assessed after a missed appointment, or what escalation steps clinics must take when a vulnerable patient cannot be contacted. As a result, high-risk patients may be left without any safety net, even when non-attendance may indicate deterioration, crisis, or medical emergency.

These two deaths demonstrate a systemic gap in duty of care protections. Without clear, enforceable follow-up requirements, vulnerable patients remain at significant risk of preventable harm. Action is required to ensure consistent statewide standards that protect high-risk patients and prevent further avoidable deaths. Specifically, the creation of mandatory follow-up protocols requiring clinics to contact high-risk patients who do not attend scheduled appointments, the establishment of welfare check triggers when a high-risk patient cannot be reached, and the development of standardised escalation pathways for missed appointments involving vulnerable patients. Documentation and communication standards should also be strengthened to ensure all follow-up attempts are recorded, and a requirement that coronial and regulatory bodies review systemic patterns when multiple preventable deaths occur under similar circumstances. These reforms aim to prevent further avoidable deaths.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to introduce clear and enforceable duty of care requirements for high-risk patients who miss medical appointments.

Wendy LOVELL: I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Cranbourne–Koo Wee Rup rail line

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 4242 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the urgent need to restore and extend the Cranbourne to Koo Wee Rup rail line. Since the last passenger service in 1993, the region has seen rapid population growth and housing expansion. The City of Casey, through which the disused line runs, is projected to grow by 59 per cent by 2041. Yet public transport options have not kept pace with increasing urban sprawl. Existing bus services are infrequent, unreliable, and lack the capacity to service new estates and outer communities. Many residents are left with no practical alternative to driving. Restoring and extending the Cranbourne to Koo Wee Rup rail line would ease road pressure, provide sustainable transport choices, and deliver critical infrastructure to support the Victorian Government's housing and growth targets. It would reconnect communities, reduce emissions, and improve quality of life for thousands of families across the region. An extension of just fifteen more kilometres is modest, especially when compared to the extensive rebuilds seen across other metro lines as part of level crossing works.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council Call on the Government to prioritise and fund the restoration and extension of the Cranbourne to Koo Wee Rup rail line.

Koo Wee Rup planning

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 13 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the urgent need for rezoning 365 Koo Wee Rup-Longwarry Road, Koo Wee Rup and granting a planning permit to enable the construction of a school with opportunity for trades-based agriculture and horticulture education and training.

Despite multiple applications, permit approval has been denied by Cardinia Shire Council due to green wedge zoning with a rural overlay. This proposed school will provide essential educational infrastructure and train the next generation in agriculture and horticulture, equipping them with skills in agricultural innovation, land management, and sustainability, to sustain and strengthen our rural industries. The demand for additional schooling options is evident as shown with Lighthouse Christian College in Cranbourne having 300 students on its waitlist with over 1,000 students turned away each year.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to rezone 365 Koo Wee Rup-Longwarry Road, Koo Wee Rup and approve a permit for the development of a school that provides opportunity for trades-based agriculture and horticulture education and training to meet the urgent needs of the community.

Specialist schools

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 240 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the critical shortage of Special Developmental Schools (SDS) in Melbourne's west.

Only two SDS currently service the western suburbs, and both are operating at over their capacity. As a result, children who meet the eligibility criteria for a SDS are unable to secure appropriate placement. Many families have been advised that there are no available SDS places for their child, despite their significant and complex disabilities.

Children who require a SDS have severe to profound intellectual disabilities, are non-verbal, or have multiple disabilities that require high levels of specialised support. When these children cannot access an SDS, they may be placed in settings that are not designed to meet their developmental, behavioural or communication needs.

It has been more than 38 years since a new SDS was built in Melbourne's west. Over this time, the population of the region has grown substantially, contributing to increasing demand for SDS placements.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to urgently plan, fund, and construct a new Special Developmental School in Melbourne's west to meet current and future demand.

Western Victoria Region train services

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) presented a petition bearing 247 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the poor state of public transport between Geelong and Ballarat, Ballarat and Maryborough, and Maryborough and Castlemaine. These links, along with the good public transport link between Castlemaine and Bendigo define the Western Crescent which links Victoria's second, third and fourth largest cities. The Geelong to Ballarat link, which was serviced by passenger rail until 1978, is currently served by three weekday return V/line coaches. The Ballarat to Maryborough link is currently served by two weekday return V/line trains and the Maryborough to Castlemaine link is currently served by five weekday return V/line coaches. There are now 600,000 people living along the Western Crescent and around 280,000 jobs making existing services clearly inadequate.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Minister for Public and Active Transport and the Minister for Transport Infrastructure to reinstate the Geelong to Ballarat passenger rail services and upgrade Ballarat to Maryborough passenger rail services to hourly frequencies with connecting hourly coach services between Maryborough and Castlemaine.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Beach management

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 739 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that mechanical raking of beaches by councils, including Mornington Peninsula Shire, has caused long-term environmental harm. It destroys vital seaweed habitats, buries and fragments plastic litter, including syringes, and disrupts fragile ecosystems. A supervised 2023 test confirmed mechanical raking was ineffective, financially wasteful, and ecologically damaging. These findings were acknowledged in the Commission for Environment Sustainability Victoria's State of the Marine and Coastal Environment 2024 Report. In contrast, a 12-month hand-cleaning trial in 2024, delivered cleaner beaches, visible foredune regeneration, and rediscovery of the endangered coastal plant, *Salsola Tragus* subsp. *Pontica*. Early evidence suggests reduced storm-related erosion, as natural sand-berms are allowed to form. The continuation of mechanical raking is inconsistent with State and Federal policies which call for marine and coastal stewardship, biodiversity protection, and the adoption of low-impact solutions for coastlines. Under the Marine and Coastal Act 2018, councils as land managers have a duty to maintain beaches in good condition and prevent erosion. Mechanical raking undermines these obligations, while sustainable hand-cleaning supports compliance and ensures alignment with the Victorian Coastal Strategy and commitments under the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to review local council beach cleaning policies to ensure practices align with State and Federal frameworks for marine and coastal stewardship, including the Marine and Coastal Act 2018 and the Victorian Coastal Strategy, and introduce legislation to cease the practice of mechanical beach raking and permanently adopt sustainable hand-cleaning methods that protect biodiversity to secure healthier marine ecosystems, safer public spaces, and more resilient coastlines for future generations.

Geelong West fire station

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) presented a petition bearing 2167 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that the land directly behind the Geelong West Fire Station, identified as 67B and 67C McCurdy Road in Herne Hill, has been declared surplus by VicTrack and is being considered for residential development. If this occurs, rear access to the station will be permanently removed, significantly affecting emergency response times. The Geelong West Fire Station is a key operational and training hub supporting district and state emergency response, including the deployment of strike teams across Western Victoria. The station was purpose-built with the intention of future rear access and with the rear wall designed to allow for roller door installation. Many operational firefighters currently use the old rail corridor behind the station to reduce turnout times, particularly during peak traffic periods. Losing this access will compromise community safety and long-term emergency management capability.

The land should be allocated to the Country Fire Authority (CFA) or other emergency services to protect operational access, training capability and response efficiency. There should be no rezoning, disposal or development of the sites until a transparent assessment of emergency management impacts is completed in consultation with the CFA, relevant emergency services stakeholders and the local community. Current and future population growth should be considered to ensure planning decisions do not compromise emergency response capability or public safety.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to retain the land behind the Geelong West Fire Station, specifically 67B and 67C McCurdy Road, Herne Hill, for emergency services and community safety purposes, and if retention is not immediately possible, pause any proposed rezoning, disposal or development until a transparent assessment of emergency management impacts is completed in consultation with relevant stakeholders.

North East Link

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 2406 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council to the North East Link Project (NELP). The NELP construction has caused significant native animal habitat removal and fragmented wildlife corridors serving Plenty Gorge, the Simpson Army Barracks to Banyule Flats and Yarra Parklands. Thereby increasing kangaroos and wildlife killed on roads through Macleod, Heidelberg, and Bulleen. Distressed kangaroos have been rescued or euthanised from these suburbs including Yallambie and Viewbank, causing heartache to residents while also presenting traffic hazards. During the project's Urban Design and Landscape Plan consultation, NELP "received more than 250 submissions from local community groups, businesses, residents as well as local councils and made changes to the project design including: ... A new wildlife crossing under Lower Plenty Road between Borlase Reserve and Banyule Flats". This was signed off by the Minister for Planning in February 2023.

NELP have since reneged on an underground wildlife crossing at Yallambie and propose a rope bridge for climbing species, ignoring kangaroos, wombats and echidnas and the possibility of platypus and turtle travel.

This is a betrayal of NELP's commitment to protect wildlife.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council calls on the Government to ensure that the underground Wildlife Crossing at Banyule Creek, Borlase Reserve Lower Plenty Road, Yallambie is installed as previously promised to the community in the North East Link Tunnels Urban Design and Landscape Plan and publicly release the Kangaroo Management Plan for the project interface with Simpson Barracks and for the M80 interchange.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Montrose quarry

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 1171 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the major concerns from communities and professionals of the Monbulk, Croydon, Bayswater and Evelyn electorates around Boral's Montrose Quarry. These concerns include potential cumulative long-term impacts of site operations, dust, airborne particulate matter, blasting, noise, vibration, landslip, habitat and vegetation loss, groundwater, waterway, cultural heritage, traffic and associated amenity impacts. Montrose Quarry does not meet the EPA's 500-metre recommended separation distance for quarry operations, nor the planning scheme's 1-kilometre buffer for asphalt plants.

Boral's proposed Montrose Quarry Extension seeks to extend operations 30-plus years beyond current life expectancy, and increase extraction area by approximately 12 hectares, significantly encroaching upon homes, schools, businesses, childcare, aged-care, and other surrounding land-uses.

Boral's proposal includes an additional extraction area almost 60 per cent larger than its previous expansion application, which Yarra Ranges Council unanimously rejected in 2007. The State Government declined Boral's request for intervention in 2008. Councillors recognised incompatibility of expanding operations with surrounding sensitive land-use.

The Minister for Planning determined an Environment Effects Statement (EES) is required due to significant environmental and community impact potential. Human health impacts have not been identified within the Minister's statement of decision or reasons for decision.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government and the Minister for Planning to reject Boral's proposed Montrose Quarry Extension, implement long-term, accountable protections guarding against any future extension of the facility and guarantee that any forthcoming Environment Effects Statement scoping requirements will include an independent Human Health Impact assessment that examines the cumulative health impacts associated with dust, fine particulate matter, silica exposure, pollutants, noise, blasting, vibration, traffic, emissions, amenity loss, mental health, any other quarry-related impacts on nearby sensitive receptors.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration on the next meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Committees**Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee*****Alert Digest No. 12***

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:23): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table *Alert Digest* No. 12 of 2026, including appendices, from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. I move:

That the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Legal and Social Issues Committee***Inquiry into Anti-LGBTIQ+ Hate Crimes in Victoria***

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (13:24): Pursuant to standing order 23.22, I table a report on the inquiry into anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes in Victoria, including an appendix, extracts of proceedings and a minority report, from the Legal and Social Issues Committee, and I present the transcripts of evidence. I move:

That the transcripts of evidence be tabled and the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Joe McCracken: I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

At the outset I want to thank my fellow members of the Legal and Social Issues Committee. This I believe is our last report that is being submitted to Parliament, and I want to acknowledge every single member of the committee that has made a contribution. It has honestly been great fun working with everyone. There is a diversity of views, but that is all fun and an important and integral part of democracy. I also really want to acknowledge the committee staff: Patrick O'Brien, as the committee manager of course, and some of the wonderful staff that are in the gallery today. Thank you so much for your efforts in helping us get to a point where we have been able to deliver this report and a number of other reports. Honestly, thank you from all of us. It has really been much appreciated, and the work that you have done is first-class.

Now to the report itself: there are a lot of interesting things in this report that I want to go through. I do not have enough time to get through everything, but I do want to draw the Parliament's attention to a number of different areas. Firstly, finding 1 is that anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiment is not something that just happened yesterday. In finding 1 it is something that has happened in recent years, and it is something that has been bubbling away but has been brought to the fore by technology. That is basically why this report came about, because of app-facilitated violent attacks, and those facilitated attacks have caused a lot of harm. I want to acknowledge all the witnesses that came forward and gave very personal and very heartfelt accounts of their experiences. It has been a harrowing experience to listen to some of the comments that have been made by witnesses who shared very personal accounts of what has happened to them. We thank them for coming forward and putting their voices to this report.

Finding 3 in the report talks about the fact that there is no nationally consistent definition of hate crimes in Australia. If those in the federal Parliament will listen to this, I think it is incredibly important to have a nationally consistent definition of what a hate crime actually is. One of the most important aspects of this report talks about the typology of people that are committing these crimes, and the typology that is the most common is those that are thrillseekers. Thrillseekers are not particularly motivated by any ideology; they are motivated by a sense of seeking a thrill. They get off on the excitement of the experience, and sometimes that can lead to criminal offences like stealing a phone or a wallet and those sorts of things, and that can lead to assaults. But it is not motivated by some ideology; it is motivated by the thrillseeking aspect of this, which is an incredibly important part to note.

One of the other parts that this inquiry found is that there is not significant or adequate data collection to really reveal the full extent of the problem, particularly when these matters are reported. Quite often they are reported as 'other', and that needs to change so that accurate reporting and data collection, and action from that, can result in meaningful change going forward. That is finding 7.

Finding 13 talks about Victoria Police. They do not support the establishment of a dedicated hate crimes unit. Instead they prefer a statewide policing model supported by different specialist areas. There was other evidence to the contrary in the report, but it is a worthwhile point for consideration going forward, because it is a very significant issue.

One of the aspects in finding 17 that was quite widely spoken about is the fact that victim-survivors often face significant barriers in navigating the justice system and support systems. In a perverse sort of way, the more that someone has felt an impact by an instance, the more difficult it is to navigate through the various complexities of the justice system and actually get to justice. Hopefully the government takes that finding very seriously.

Lastly, I want to point to finding 37, which notes that the federal eSafety Commissioner declined to participate in this inquiry. If the federal eSafety Commissioner had in fact agreed to participate, perhaps we would have had some insight from a federal perspective about what changes could be made. With the short time left, thanks, everyone, for your participation in the inquiry. We hope that this leads to meaningful change.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:30): Just on four weeks ago five young people were arrested in Dandenong, in the heart of my electorate, for a spate of horrific gay bashings. This all too well went to the crux of what we looked at in this inquiry. We have seen a global trend of assaults on particularly gay men and other people who use these types of dating apps, a trend that has been observed across the Western world. It often comes in spikes and is clearly driven by a range of forces, more than we can adequately confront and fully address in one state. But there are things that we can do in this state, and that is why I am very pleased to speak to the tabling of this report today and its findings and recommendations that go to what we can do and where we can advocate to the Commonwealth to advance those protections. I look forward to having much more to say on this subject when we have some more substantive time to do that.

I want to acknowledge our incredibly hardworking staff on this committee, including Patrick, Jess, Fred and Julie, for their work – tireless, as always – to bring this report together. I want to particularly acknowledge all of those stakeholders who did come and give their evidence, whether in writing or in person. We heard some very powerful evidence ranging from academics right through to those with direct lived experience as victim-survivors. There was a great deal of evidence in this inquiry, and I look forward to talking about it further in subsequent contributions. I will make the note, though, that the evidence that we received showed that thrillseeking behaviours certainly are a part of hate crimes. When someone is being assaulted and having homophobic slurs shouted at them, that certainly underscores the point.

It was an interesting pathway to get this inquiry approved. It was very sad to see the Liberal Party opposing this inquiry. However, I do want to absolutely acknowledge and pay tribute to our chair Mr McCracken, who thoroughly, meticulously and compassionately guided us through this inquiry in a sensitive and supportive way. So I acknowledge Mr McCracken.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:32): From the outset I want to thank fellow members of the committee, particularly our chair, Joe. Thank you for your work on this inquiry. Thank you to Patrick and the entire secretariat for the tireless efforts that went into this over a very short space of time proportional to other inquiries we might engage in in the Victorian Parliament. I want to thank the community for their input, their lived experience and their sometimes quite harrowing stories that were contributed as part of this inquiry process. I think that part of the Greens moving this motion to establish this inquiry in the upper house was so that these stories could come to the fore and be properly examined, and that hopefully we, through a range of findings and recommendations here, can seek to offer a pathway for justice for so many people that have been targeted and attacked, often violently, on the basis of who they are or for loving who they love. It was just so important that this got the time that it deserved before this parliamentary term ends.

We heard about hatred and violence against LGBTIQ+ people rising in the community and how that has been bubbling away, as the chair has acknowledged. We heard about how technology is being used to facilitate attacks against community members, particularly through dating apps like Grindr. I want to thank, in particular, Thorne Harbour Health. I want to thank Switchboard Victoria. I want to thank LGBTIQ+ communities commissioner Joe Ball for their profound evidence that they shared with us. It was incredibly important that we heard them in the hearings. We examined where the hate ends, but importantly we had to look at where it begins. The prevention part of this piece is so pivotal and cannot be overlooked. We heard about how conditions are creating the background for this hate to fester. We heard about the difficulty in reaching young people, particularly young men, as they are flooded with manosphere content online. We heard about misogyny becoming a gateway to violence where difference becomes a target. These are such important recommendations and findings. I call on the government to move on this as fast as possible, and I commend this report to the house.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:34): I also rise to speak on the anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes in Victoria parliamentary inquiry report and to acknowledge the chair, Joe McCracken, for his great work; the secretariat, committee and staff who are here in the gallery today for their hard work; co-chair Michael Galea from Labor; and the significant input from the

Greens with Aiv Puglielli and other Labor and Greens MPs on this particular report, which for many of them was very personal in the sense that they were very aware of what they were fighting for and the importance that it held for the people in the community that they were speaking up on behalf of. The inquiry, as we have heard, was prompted by a series of assaults on people in the LGBTIQ+ community that were facilitated by particular apps like Grindr. Many of these crimes were found to be, as has been noted, the result of thrillseeking, and the inquiry report makes findings and recommendations about improving safety on dating apps and social media more broadly. I firmly believe – and I made that very clear – that everyone in our community deserves to feel safe. I do not want anyone in Victoria – or in the world, for that matter – to be a victim of violent hate crime, including people in the LGBTIQ+ community. We have heard that there is an issue with definitions. We have heard that there have been historical challenges for people in the LGBTIQ+ community.

I do want to note, though, that there were issues for me in areas where I felt there was a lack of data. There was a constant concern from people saying that there is a need for more data. Questions arose for me about the lack of data and independent data for programs like Safe Schools and Respectful Relationships being the solution. I note that the Greens also brought a number of vilification laws to the inquiry report adoption meeting but not to the hearings.

I had a number of things I wanted to say, but I will just end with this: it was wonderful to hear the contributions of people working together collaboratively to bring a solution for legitimate voice in the community, and I commend that in particular as being a wonderful solution to look at.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (13:36): I rise to offer a very short contribution to the anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes parliamentary inquiry report. I also want to thank my colleague Aiv Puglielli, the Victorian Greens spokesperson for LGBTIQ+ equality, for championing this important inquiry and what this means for the broader community. I also want to add my sentiments to everyone that made a submission and appeared online and was brave enough to share their harrowing accounts of violence and abuse being hailed against them for who they are. We heard evidence from many stakeholders on solutions, both preventative and restorative, to deal with this rapid increase in violence. Everyone deserves to feel safe in online spaces and in public. We heard that evidence is showing a growing trend, not just in the state but across the country, in the way online dating apps are being used to lure people into horrible, facilitated violence and how this violence is in most cases perpetuated by young men. We also heard about advances in AI and how this is increasing the threats. Now is the time for governments to work together to stamp out this violence and address the harmful attitudes and norms that allow these sorts of violent behaviours to fester. It is just as important to acknowledge the historical harms that have been perpetuated against the LGBTIQ+ community as well. I want to end with a quote. During the hearings Jenna Tuke, the CEO at Switchboard Victoria, said:

Leadership matters here. When leaders and institutions look away, are silent or fail to offer alternative messaging to the hate speech that is pervading our screens and airways, that emboldens those who seek to harm and divide us.

I hope the government is listening. I hope that they do what they need to do, and that is to advocate for the community. Thank you, just quickly, to Patrick O'Brien, Jessica Summers, Fred Toll and Julie Barnes for their dedication during this inquiry. And thank you, Joe.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (13:38): I am pleased to speak on this report, and I want to begin by acknowledging the incredible courage of every single person who contributed to this inquiry. To the victim-survivors and their families and loved ones and the community organisations who took the time to provide submissions and give evidence: thank you. We recognise how profoundly difficult and distressing it is to revisit these events. Reliving trauma and sharing stories of pain, fear and violence takes immense personal strength, and we are all deeply grateful to everyone who came forward to ensure that their lived experience was heard.

I would like to join with Mrs Hermans in recognising Mr McCracken, Mr Galea, Ms Payne and Mr Puglielli for their leadership in this inquiry and how personal it is for them. Certainly I would like to say that we saw the very best of cooperation in this chamber throughout this inquiry, and it was a real honour to be a part of it.

The evidence detailed in this report is confronting. We know that the majority of LGBTIQ+ people report experiencing violence in their lifetime. We also know that rainbow mob, alongside our multicultural and multifaith LGBTIQ+ communities, frequently experience violence compounded by overlapping complex forms of discrimination. But behind every single one of these statistics is a human being – it is a young person who feels afraid to hold their partner’s hand on public transport, a parent constantly worried for their child’s safety or an elder who has lived through decades of discrimination only to see it surface again in new forms. We have also seen the deeply concerning rise of attacks preying on young people on dating apps. Hate crimes do not occur in a vacuum. They are fuelled by rhetoric that dehumanises and online spaces that amplify prejudice. These cause real, lasting harm. Safe and supportive communities are so very important, and that is why last week I visited Affirmation Station and Thorne Harbour Health to thank them for all their efforts in this inquiry, alongside the Minister for Equality and the local candidate for Brunswick. Can I just say in Victoria we are absolutely clear that equality is not negotiable, and I, with great pride, recommend and commend this report to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Select Committee on the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (13:41): Pursuant to standing order 23.22, I table the select committee’s final report on the inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria, including an appendix and extracts of proceedings, and I present the transcripts of evidence. I move:

That the transcripts of evidence be tabled and the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

I am pleased to table the final report of the inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria. This inquiry was in response to serious child abuse allegations levelled against educator Joshua Brown in July 2025. These were some of the most distressing and disgusting allegations ever seen in Victoria committed against young, innocent children. These horrific tragedies exposed systemic failures in systems and this Victorian Labor government’s regulatory failings to keep Victorian children safe. Children had to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases – children younger than five years old – and I cannot even begin to imagine the lifelong harm inflicted on these children and their families as a result of these failings.

The select committee of six was formed after the Greens pushed for accountability and transparency in the sector, eventually leading to this select committee and parliamentary inquiry. The committee received 102 submissions and heard from 66 witnesses over seven days of public in-person hearings, and I would like to thank everyone that contributed to this hearing. We heard about educator shortages, staff working under sustained high-pressure environments, the rise of the for-profit sector and the weakening of children’s safety to profit, the lack of Aboriginal cultural safety embedded in the sector, disability inclusion and system complexity. We also heard the loud calls for greater investment, greater stewardship and support for all those that work so hard to ensure the safety of children.

This report found that the quality assessment and regulation division, the former regulator sitting within the Department of Education, failed to keep children safe because essentially they were marking their own homework. With the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority (VECRA) as the new regulator the committee recommends in recommendation 14 that the new regulator is more accountable and transparent in publishing of data and reporting. This is important to restore parent and carer confidence, which has been severely eroded.

The committee acknowledges that the majority of educators do the right thing day in and day out and yet are not always resourced fairly. A part of the gaps heard in the inquiry was the lack of professional development and workforce strategy to retain and attract workforce to regional or early childcare education deserts. The committee recommends the government ensure educators are paid fairly and have access to these professional opportunities.

One of the gaping holes found in the sector was the lack of public data and information in the sector for parents, and what was available was complex and hard to navigate and understand. Our inquiry recommendations urge the government to ensure that the Social Services Regulator and VECRA work more transparently and collaboratively to ensure safety is always of paramount interest.

We also heard about gaps in Aboriginal-led providers and their partnership frameworks not being fully embedded in sector design and delivery. In the new treaty era the government needs to do more to work with Gellung Warl and Aboriginal community controlled organisations to improve the outcomes of Closing the Gap and centre First Nations ways of knowing when caring for mob.

Recommendation 30 is that it is important to hold large for-profit providers accountable and to be transparent with information to parents about their ownership and financial performance.

Recommendation 1 calls on the government to advocate for a national commission, which is so crucial to really improving the safety and service quality of the sector. This national body is really important to mitigate any risks of the sector continuing to be fragmented and also to close any loops for bad faith actors waiting in the wings to exploit and harm children.

I would like to thank the work of the secretariat and the team: manager Matt Newington, inquiry officer Te Kooanga Awatere, Sylvette Bassy, Frank Fong, Julie Barnes and Monique Riordan-Hill. Thank you so much for your commitment and dedication over what has been a really long inquiry. We really appreciate your patience with the whole committee. Thank you also to the committee members for their continued dedication to ensuring that the recommendations and findings that we ended up with are not going to allow the repeat of these failures and will, most importantly, keep children safe.

We only get one childhood. Good or bad, its impacts last a lifetime. I hope that this government heeds the findings and recommendations of this inquiry and works harder than ever to protect young Victorian learners in early childhood and education settings and ensure that their experiences are positive ones that last a lifetime. Thank you to everyone that has been a part of this inquiry. The circumstances that brought us here are really sad, but this was really, really important work that needed to be addressed, and I commend this report to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:46): I take up where the chair left off and acknowledge her remarkable efforts in this inquiry and those of all members, including Ms Ermacora, Dr Mansfield, Ms Crozier and Ms Bath. I think it is fair to say that while we disagreed at some points, overall we were absolutely united by a common purpose. I see Ms Crozier smiling at me about the disagreements. I could not imagine why. I would also like to particularly acknowledge the secretariat – Matt Newington and team members Te Kooanga and Sylvette in particular – and all of the Council's committee staff who so ably supported our work.

As the chair outlined, this inquiry came about in the aftermath of some horrific allegations, which are still before the judicial system, at a number of childcare centres in Melbourne – an issue that has horrified our state's entire community. At the same time as this inquiry was getting underway of course

there was the rapid child safety review, which was immediately commissioned by the government and headed up by Pam White and Jay Weatherill, and that set out a range of recommendations for state and federal governments to acquit. I am very pleased to see that throughout this inquiry we did have the opportunity to effectively in real time assess the acquittal of those recommendations and to see the very hard efforts, including by Minister Blandthorn and her team, to ensure that all of the recommendations to the state government have been acquitted, including changes to national law, the new independent regulator – that being the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority (VECRA), replacing the former Quality Assessment and Regulation Division (QARD) – and the Social Services Regulator bills which passed through this place last year as well. Indeed stakeholders were very keen to tell us that they viewed the new legislative framework in place in Victoria as the best in the nation and something that, whilst we can always seek to improve further upon, certainly sets that benchmark for other states to follow.

Again, with this short period of time, I do not have enough time to go into every facet of this report, but I look forward to doing so at a future time.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:48): I also rise to speak to the report on the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria inquiry that was undertaken by the select committee on the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria. I want to also acknowledge the secretariat and committee members that participated in this important inquiry.

Let us not forget why we started this inquiry. It was after the horrific allegations, as has been said by other members, about Joshua Brown and the shocking circumstances that many parents and children had been placed in, not knowing if their children were abused. I recall the hundreds of children that had to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases. It was truly, truly dreadful, and at the time there was a lot of concern being raised. I want to also acknowledge the work of the former Shadow Minister for Education, now Leader of the Opposition, Jess Wilson, who was really pushing this issue very significantly in the public domain.

This report goes into a lot of areas, as has already been covered. I want to go to two findings that I want to make note of. Finding 9 states:

The Commission for Children and Young People, the former administrator of the Reportable Conduct Scheme and Child Safe Standards, failed to maintain its responsibilities under the various child safety schemes. It had repeatedly called to the Victorian Government for increased funding, but did not receive additional funding.

That is under this Labor government. Finding 12 states:

In September 2022, the Victorian Ombudsman identified several issues with the Working with Children Check framework in its report *Investigation into a former youth worker's unauthorised access to private information about children*. The Victorian Government failed to act on these recommendations to strengthen the Working with Children Check framework until 2025, and after the Rapid Child Safety Review made similar recommendations.

I also want to make some comments around the former Department of Education secretary Tony Bates, who has been sacked by Labor –

David Davis interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, correctly, because of the serious and concerning conduct that was found against him. *(Time expired)*

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (13:50): I too want to make a contribution. I would just like to start by thanking the secretariat, the chair and fellow committee members. This was, as has been said, a really important inquiry. As a parent who had one of my children still in long day care when some of these stories were breaking about horrific allegations at childcare centres across Australia, including in Victoria, I shared in that collective shock, fear and guilt that I think so many parents experienced when these stories surfaced. While I have to say we have been so lucky with

wonderful educators – and there are brilliant educators and services right across the system – stories like this really create doubt and make us question the trust that we place in these institutions. I mean, how on earth could such horrific things happen to so many children without anyone noticing? We trust the systems as well as the oversight and the regulation. We trust that they will keep our kids safe. It is one of the most important duties of government. What these cases and the subsequent gaps identified through this inquiry have shown is that the government failed. They failed to do this properly.

This inquiry heard that there are particular issues in the for-profit private sector. There are opaque governance structures, incentive schemes and obligations to shareholders which distort priorities, and the government has allowed those centres to proliferate on the assumption, it seems, that any service is better than none. There is a lot more detail in this inquiry that is worth looking into. I would like to say my heart really goes out to all the children and their families who have been harmed as a result of these failures. Nothing can undo the damage, but I really hope that the findings and recommendations of this inquiry will be implemented in full to prevent future harm to children and babies.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (13:52): I just want to reiterate all of the congratulations and thankyou that the previous speakers made. Thank you, Chair, as well for the work that you did. It was a really challenging inquiry because it was a devastating incident that triggered the inquiry. I would also like to thank the witnesses that came forward, particularly the peak bodies who gave data and evidence around the prevalence of childhood sexual assault, not just with children and youth but also across our whole community. I came away feeling that it was still a challenge that we face, and that is something that I hope the outcomes of this inquiry will assist with.

In closing, I just want to thank Minister Lizzie Blandthorn for responding so quickly with the rapid review, pursuing that without wasting any time, and then responding with reforms to the regulatory environment. That is going to strengthen the early childhood sector and the workers in that sector in their ability to identify and prevent abuse of children in education settings.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:54): I would just like to add my voice to thank the chair and the secretariat, Matt Newington and his fabulous team, but also my colleagues and the witnesses and submitters, many of whom were from regional Victoria, which I was very pleased to see. The report makes clear that child safety must be paramount in all considerations across the entire sector, whether it be public, private, short or long day care or after-school care.

One of the things that we heard, indeed it is in finding 12, related to the fact that the rapid review occurred only after the Ombudsman three years previously had provided a great context and alarming examples of how the working with children check was not functioning and the framework was not supporting children and needed to be overhauled. Now we are four years later, and this report has been tabled with some good work in it – not that I agree with all of the recommendations.

We saw fragmented accountability. We saw that, particularly in terms of Aboriginal children, there was a gap between participation rates, which had improved, and actual developmental outcomes, which had not improved over the last many years – and this is a concern – and that there is a need for genuine collaboration and funding that serves those workforce shortages, in particular in rural and regional Victoria where there are childcare deserts. Retention of those staff is challenging and compliance can be challenging, but also, in terms of the added burden of bureaucratic workload and paperwork, we want to see better outcomes. We want to see better services there. We want to see happy and well-funded staff and safe children. I think there are lots of lessons to be learned here. I do think all governments, including ours when we get in on 28 November, should take note of this report.

Motion agreed to.

Electoral Matters Committee*Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility*

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (13:57): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table a report on the inquiry into voting centre accessibility, including appendices, from the Electoral Matters Committee, and I present the transcripts of evidence. I move:

That the transcripts of evidence be tabled and the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

I am not going to speak for long on this inquiry, but I would just like to say that I think this was a really important inquiry undertaken by the Electoral Matters Committee. We were looking into the accessibility of voting, particularly for people who may have different impairments and people with disabilities. We identified that although a lot of improvements have been made over time, there is still a long way to go. It is feedback that we have had even throughout this term. We have had a number of by-elections, and following the 2022 state election there are still significant barriers for many people in our community to exercising what is a fundamental right in a democracy. I think it is one of the most important things we do – to go and vote – and we should all be able to do that. I think it is assumed that it is something that we all have ready access to, but what this inquiry uncovered was that that is not always the case.

It can be to do with the physical accessibility of a venue and the ability to find parking and to navigate the actual site and location, and we know that it is an increasing challenge for the Victorian Electoral Commission to identify lots of different polling places, particularly with the rise in early voting, and for those venues to be properly accessible for people of all different abilities and potentially with different mobility aids and accessibility requirements. But then there were also things around the written information and how it is conveyed and other supports around the election itself that are really important for accessibility that were identified. I think that it is really heartening that the VEC has already taken a lot of the feedback on board, and I am quite confident that they will do their very best to implement some of those changes. But this inquiry I think has made recommendations that indicate that there are still further improvements that need to be made. I would really like to thank all of the different witnesses who provided evidence to this inquiry, and I would also like to thank the secretariat and my fellow committee members.

One of the things that I think was interesting about this inquiry was that even in the way we conducted it we were more mindful of the accessibility needs of different witnesses, and what it made me question is how we conduct inquiries more generally and how this is not perhaps a default stance that we have. There are lessons to be learned I think for the Parliament around that for future inquiries on other matters where maybe accessibility is not the question we are looking at, because I think what it showed is that potentially there are barriers to participation in things like inquiries because of the way that we set them up and the assumptions that we make.

Another point that I think is worth noting is that the final report will actually be made available in different versions to make it more accessible for people. There will be an HTML version, a plain-language and easy-to-read summary and also an Auslan summary. Again, this is not something that is standard practice, and I found it quite interesting that we do not automatically make the reports from these inquiries accessible to more people. I think it is something that we should make standard practice. Hopefully what we learn from this inquiry and actually going ahead with doing this and publishing accessible versions of the report is something that can be rolled out across all of the work that we do. There are real lessons for us I think as an institution about how we make the work that we do much more accessible to all members of our community. Being able to participate in democratic processes

is absolutely fundamental to them working properly, and if we systematically exclude people from that participation because of the way those systems are designed, then I think our democracy is much poorer for it.

I commend the work of this inquiry and commend the report, and I really hope that in the upcoming state election we will see a much more accessible election for more people in the community.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:02): I do want to acknowledge all of the members of the committee who worked on this report. Importantly, it was about all-abilities access to voting centres in this state. There were a number of staff that worked very hard on the report, which was fantastic, and I thank those people as well. There were three main principled identifications coming out of the report, and those were whole-of-journey accessibility, the diversity and intersectionality of disability and making sure that the entire building is accessible as well. It ranged from physical accessibility through to mental and neurologically diverse accessibility, and it was fantastic to hear from all of the witnesses who came in and made a huge effort to tell their experiences and give us their advice. That was an extremely positive experience. Some of those witnesses were very personally and emotionally impacted by retelling their stories. On behalf of the rest of the committee and the staff, I want to thank those witnesses for their contributions.

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Auditor-General's Office – Report, 2025–26.

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission – Report to the Attorney-General, 1 January to 31 December 2024, under section 464ZP of the Crimes Act 1958 (*Ordered to be published*).

Major Events Act 2009 – Major Sporting Event Order for the National Football League game between the San Francisco 49ers and the Los Angeles Rams on 11 September 2026 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, dated 1 September 2026, under section 22 of the Act.

Melbourne Cricket Ground Trust – Report, year ended 31 March 2026*, together with an explanation for the delay.

Planning and Environment Act 1987 – Notices of approval of the –

Alpine Planning Scheme – Amendment C65.

Cardinia Planning Scheme – Amendment C289.

Gannawarra and Swan Hill Planning Schemes – Amendment GC218.

Glen Eira Planning Scheme – Amendment C279.

Greater Dandenong Planning Scheme – Amendment C252.

Greater Geelong Planning Scheme – Amendment C484.

Hobsons Bay and Maribyrnong Planning Schemes – Amendment GC276.

Melton Planning Scheme – Amendments C244 and C256.

Mitchell Planning Scheme – Amendment C155.

West Wimmera Planning Scheme – Amendment C37.

Whitehorse Planning Scheme – Amendment C268.

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Birth, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1996 – No. 117.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022 – No. 116.

Spent Convictions Act 2021 – No. 118.

Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous) Act 1983 – No. 119.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 116 and 119.

Victorian Local Government Grants Commission – Allocation Report, year ended 31 August 2026.

** together with the Minister's reported date of receipt.*

Petitions

Responses

The Clerk: I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: Minister for Roads and Road Safety response to petition titled 'Maintain 100km speed limits from Traralgon to Churchill'.

Papers

Department of the Legislative Council

Overdue government responses to standing committee reports

The Clerk: I have received the President's report on overdue government responses to standing committees as at 31 August 2026.

Production of documents

Data centres

Bushfire recovery

The Clerk: I table two letters from the Attorney-General, both dated 7 September 2026, in response to resolutions of the Council on 12 August 2026 relating to AI data centre developments on the motion of Dr Mansfield and on 26 August 2026 relating to the western Victoria business bushfire recovery grant program on the motion of Mrs McArthur. The letters each state that the date for production does not allow sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a final response to the orders as soon as possible.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, these are recent documents motions in the chamber and these are very precise and narrow documents motions. They could be provided quite quickly. The government has this material to hand. This is an abuse, and this has become a pattern now. I think the minister should give some explanation as to why the government is blocking the release of these documents.

The PRESIDENT: I think the avenue you have, Mr Davis, is to move a motion to take note of the AG's letters on the next day of meeting, if you would like to do that.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:07): I move:

That the letters received from the Attorney-General in relation to the AI data centre developments and western Victorian business bushfire recovery grants program documents motions and the failure to provide them be taken into account on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

General business

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:24): I move, by leave:

That the following general business take precedence on Wednesday 9 September 2026:

- (1) order of the day 1, second reading of the Sale of Land Amendment (Property Developer Integrity) Bill 2026;
- (2) notice of motion 1618, in an amended form, standing in David Davis's name establishing a select committee to inquire into the Auditor-General's report *Delivering the Suburban Rail Loop*;
- (3) notice of motion given this day by Jeff Bourman on the achievements of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party; and
- (4) notice of motion given this day by Georgie Purcell on native forest logging.

Motion agreed to.

Standing and sessional orders

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:24): I move, by leave:

That so much of standing and sessional orders be suspended to the extent necessary to allow the following order of business on Wednesday 9 September 2026:

Messages

Formal business

Members statements (up to 15 members)

Private member bills – moving second readings of bills for which precedence has been ordered

Short form documents motions (up to 2 motions)

General business

At **12 noon** questions

General business (continues)

At **5:15 pm, or after 300 minutes of general business has elapsed (whichever is later)** statements on tabled papers and petitions (30 minutes)

Petitions (qualifying for debate) (30 minutes)

Government business (60 minutes)

Valedictory statement made by Harriet Shing

Valedictory statement made by David Ettershank

Adjournment (up to 20 members).

Motion agreed to.

Petitions qualifying for debate

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:25): I move, by leave:

That this house authorises the petition titled 'Remove the Eastern Section of the Central North REZ from the 2025 Victorian Transmission Plan', tabled by Wendy Lovell on 11 August 2026, be given precedence over all other items listed under petitions qualifying for debate on Wednesday 9 September 2026.

Motion agreed to.

Members statements**Warrnambool rail line**

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:26): I am delighted that six-carriage VLocity trains will soon operate on the Warrnambool line, delivering much-needed extra capacity on our busiest services, which are Fridays and weekends at the moment. It is terrific news for the whole south-west

region, including Portland, Heywood and other communities. As demand grows on the service, since we capped regional fares to the equivalent of city fares, with savings of up to \$70 for a return trip for many adults from Warrnambool, for example, we are adapting the services being provided. Passengers on the Warrnambool line will also now be able to tap and go, which is a wonderful thing, bringing us again in line with all other regional and city communities. Testing and regulatory approvals are underway, with six-carriage trains expected on the busy Friday and weekend services later this year. With more carriages, cheaper fares and easier payments, it is a great outcome for south-west Victorians. I would like to thank former minister Gabrielle Williams for putting up with my advocacy and the current minister Vicki Ward for providing a fantastic outcome for the Warrnambool line.

Southbank police station

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:27): Today I want to draw the chamber's attention to the Southbank fiasco that is occurring with the police station. On 4 October the government will close the doors. People will not be able to access the Southbank police station. This is another example of how seriously things are deteriorating in this state. Noting Southbank covers both Port Phillip and Melbourne, it is interesting that the number of crimes reported in Melbourne over the last three years has increased by 32.63 per cent to 45,560 and in Port Phillip by 22.94 per cent to 15,986. These are significant increases in the amount of crime in the area, and yet the government is closing the doors of the police station. It is shocking that they are doing this. Southbank itself has had in the last year 3425 crimes reported. It is a hotspot for serious crime, car offences, robberies and burglaries. These are very serious offences, and this government's response is to close the police station down. We say the police station should be reopened. It should not be allowed to close on 4 October. People in Southbank are entitled to protection and entitled to safety, and it is outrageous that this government, as a cost-cutting exercise, is closing the police station. It should be reopened from the 4th.

Dental services

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (14:29): Everyone should be able to afford to see the dentist, but a third of Victorians do not go to the dentist until it is an emergency because it is too expensive. That is a recipe for more emergencies and for chronic health problems that spread well beyond the teeth and end up making it more expensive in the long run. Victoria has a public dental system, but it is so underfunded and inaccessible that most people are forced to visit expensive private clinics or just grin and bear it for as long as they can.

Half the dental chairs in the system we have are unused because there just are not enough staff. Labor has had 12 years to fix these issues, but getting them to fund public health services outside of election time is like pulling teeth. Labor's recent announcement will do nothing to fix these systemic issues. In typical Labor style, it is a veneer, and it does not fill the cavities. The Greens will address the root of the problem. We will rebuild the public dental system, growing the workforce by boosting wages and conditions and increasing training and placements. We will open an initial 20 dental clinics across Melbourne and regional Victoria to expand that well-resourced care to new places, and we will pay for it by taxing the gambling companies that extract so much money from our community.

Transport infrastructure

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:30): I rise to celebrate a massive public transport win for Melbourne's outer east, a transformation that is directly delivering safer roads and modern infrastructure and getting families home sooner. The complete removal of the dangerous level crossings at Coolstore Road in Croydon and Dublin Road in Ringwood East marks a massive milestone for our community. For decades local drivers were trapped at boom gates down for up to 23 minutes every morning peak. Today those boom gates are gone for good. The Belgrave-Lilydale line is now entirely level crossing free all the way to Ferntree Gully, and instead communities now have brand new modern transport hubs at Croydon and Ringwood East, complete with upgraded station facilities, better bus interchanges, better accessibility and safer pedestrian connections. The benefits do not end at making local roads less congested. The opening of the Metro Tunnel has

fundamentally shaped our entire rail network. By untangling the city loop and untethering the Sunbury, Cranbourne and Pakenham lines, we have freed up loads of extra rail capacity. For passengers on the Belgrave–Lilydale line this means more frequent, reliable services. We have removed bottleneck delays and expanded capacity, ensuring commuters spend less time stuck on platforms or waiting in traffic and more time at home with their families. The Carroll Labor government promised to slash congestion, rebuild our transport infrastructure and get Victorians home safer and faster. For the people of Croydon and Ringwood East, I am pleased to say that that promise has been delivered.

Rural and regional health services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:32): I was delighted to be with the Leader of the Opposition Jess Wilson, the candidate for Bass Rochelle Halstead, who is doing a terrific job in her area, Ms Bath and Mr Farnham to make an announcement on something that has been missing for a long time: a health workforce incentive scheme for rural and regional Victoria. For far too long Labor has ignored the needs of rural and regional Victoria, and in the area of health care it is a very significant issue. I really want to just make a note to those stakeholders that I have spoken with who have consistently told me that this is a barrier to being able to provide health care in rural and regional communities. That is why we did make the announcement that doctors, nurses, midwives and allied health professionals will be offered an incentive of \$10,000 to fill critical jobs in rural and regional Victoria and to have a retention scheme and to offer those payments for those areas that are really hard to fill. That is why it has been so widely supported and recognised. I want to thank those people that have spoken to me over the last 3½ years in relation to these barriers, and I am looking forward to implementing this policy under a Wilson-led government.

Seymour Cricket Club

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (14:33): Last week I had the pleasure of being invited to visit one of the oldest cricket clubs in Victoria, the Seymour Cricket Club, which was established in 1854. I was greeted and shown around by Mitch and Braidon and got a good run-down of the club's history and plans for their future. The club boast a growing membership, currently standing at 150, and they are aiming to establish a women's team as soon as possible. Being a keen supporter of our community sporting clubs, I was delighted to see such dedication from those involved to ensure this club is maintained and growing for future generations.

Transport Workers' Union

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:34): I would like to acknowledge the successful strike led by the Transport Workers' Union at FedEx a couple of weeks ago. On Friday 28 August TWU members across Victoria and the country walked off the job in a show of strength against FedEx's attack on their job security. But while workers were exercising their legal right to take protected action, FedEx disgracefully locked out workers from their worksites. I stand in solidarity with all those workers who took industrial action, and I will continue to support members of the mighty TWU fighting for the respect that they deserve and in their fight for fairer protections against AI and automation. As a former secretary of the Victorian and Tasmanian branch of the TWU, I understand the necessity of fighting for fair conditions and the importance of industrial action in this process. I would also like to acknowledge Michael Kaine and Sam Lynch for their hard work and organisation in facilitating this nationwide strike. I will always back the TWU as they fight for fairer and more just conditions here in Victoria and across Australia.

Peter Katsambanis

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:35): I was deeply saddened to hear of the passing of Peter Katsambanis, a friend and former member of this place. Peter was a warrior of the Liberal Party who dedicated much of his life to public service and to his own beloved Greek community. He leaves behind an incredible political legacy defined by his rare distinction of serving in three different chambers across two different states. From his early days representing the Monash

province here in the Legislative Council to his continued service in Western Australia across both the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly, Peter was a tireless advocate for his community and a champion of liberty and freedom. It is fitting that his last post on Facebook was sharing a video by Jess Wilson. He loved this state. He was determined to see a change of government in November, and we are determined to make that happen for him. He was a great mentor of mine and always so generous with advice. Peter's standard greeting was always to call you 'legend', 'champion', 'patriot', 'winner' or 'solid citizen'. A standard 'How are you?' was not in Peter's vocabulary. It was always 'Are you winning?' His positivity was contagious, and he will be missed dearly by many. The outpouring of grief from those who loved him has been a fitting tribute. My deepest prayers and condolences are with his wife Karalee; his beautiful children, including my good mate Ross as well as Andrew, Angelica, Zoe and Nikkie; and his friends and former colleagues during this difficult time. May God bless him and keep him always. Vale, Peter Katsambanis.

Climate change

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:37): Last week the UN published a report titled *Limiting Overshoot*, conceding Earth is hurtling past the 1.5-degree climate tipping point accepted in the Paris agreement. It is now a question of how far over we go. It is no longer just data or hypotheticals; we are already living the climate crisis. Our oceans recently hit a record high average temperature of 21.1 degrees Celsius. We are heading into the worst El Niño event in recorded history, and two weeks ago apocalyptic flash floods tore through Nepal and Tibet as a result of glacial collapse, killing over 1300 people, with approximately 5000 still missing. Five days after this event Anthony Albanese flew into Palau to meet with Pacific Island leaders whose countries are existentially threatened by fossil fuel driven climate change. Yet back at home his Labor government was signing off on the BHP Grevillea pit continuation project – the 37th coal, oil or gas project approved since coming into office – and Minister for Resources Madeleine King was being snapped gleefully turning on the tap to extract the first gas in the Beetaloo Basin project. It honestly makes my blood boil. Labor are climate criminals betraying us, our children and our fellow humans all over the world who are living and dying because of their unapologetic and unrelenting embrace of fossil fuels. They do not deserve to be in government, and it is up to all of us to stop them.

Australian flag

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:39): 125 years ago, on the dome of the Royal Exhibition Building, our national flag was unfurled and streamed over the new Commonwealth. Britain did not give us that flag; Australians did. Some 30,000 designs poured in, one from every 100 people in the country. Five almost identical entries won, two from Melbourne and Prahran. In its corner sits the Union Jack, reminding us of the unity of our Commonwealth, the stability of our Crown and the fairness of our laws. Beneath it is the Federation Star: six colonies becoming one. On the fly is the Southern Cross, watching over this continent and reminding us of our place in the world. Men carried variations of that flag onto the Western Front. Arthur Hull planted it on a German pillbox as our forces broke through the Menin Road, where a former president of this place, my father-in-law, lost his leg. Prisoners at Changi prison hid one, at risk of execution, and flew it the day Singapore was liberated from Japanese occupation. A country that hates its symbols hates itself. We are not that sort of people. The overwhelming majority of us are one-flag Australians. We reject those who divide us, the revisionist historians and the cultural Marxists. We unite under our flag. We respect our history, and we love our land.

Police resources

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:40): Facts matter more than narratives, and the Allan, Andrews and Carroll government continue to falsely state that the Liberals and Nationals never funded a single additional police officer during their period in government between 2010 and 2014. But that is just not the truth. Not only did we deliver, we overdelivered, because compared to November 2010 there was a net additional number of sworn full-time equivalent police officers funded by the

government. They had increased by 1975. That is 275 more than we promised. Not only that, there were an additional 1020 protective services officers, or PSOs – an additional 80 to what we delivered. We have done it before, and we will do it again. What we will do is make sure that Hastings has a 24-hour police station. That is what Frank Schiefler has promised, and that is what we will deliver. We will make sure that PSOs return to Tacoma and Upwey. That is what Clare Fitzmaurice has promised, and that is what we will deliver. The same in Officer and Cardinia Road stations – that is what Radmila Dyson has promised, and that is what we will deliver.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:42): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1597, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Jaclyn Symes:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:42): I rise to speak to the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. Before I commence I want to acknowledge the work of my colleague and good friend Cindy McLeish, the Shadow Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence, who has been working on this area for many, many months and introduced a private members bill. When Jess Wilson first became Leader of the Opposition, the first announcement that Jess made, alongside Cindy, was around the coercive control component and what we would do. Cindy has done a huge amount of work in this area, as I mentioned, and at the time I understand that the government was very critical of her stance and then soon after took up this challenge – and here we are today. We have got this bill before us, and we are debating what could have been done.

I am pleased that the government took note of what Ms McLeish had put forward and the work that she had done. We are leading the agenda on so many things, like the royal commission. There was deep division and deep criticism about a royal commission into the corruption in this state, and yet we have a new Premier, after the last Premier was knifed, and he has decided that, yes, a royal commission is needed, although he stood beside the former Premier and rejected that notion. We are leading the ideas together with other solutions that we have put forward, like fixing the potholes. That seems to be a late epiphany for the Premier as well, that the roads need fixing, even though we have been crying out for years –

Bev McArthur interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: That is true. Ms Terpstra does not think so, Mrs McArthur. She thinks that people do like potholes. She said that, and we have seen it and her ridiculous comments on social media. I think it just shows the extent of the depth of the government and what their views are on important matters that are impacting everyday Victorians. Potholes are dangerous, and they are causing a huge amount of distress and cost when hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands, of vehicles have to run off the road. The machete ban – we have led the way on the machete ban.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Ms Crozier, you do have wide latitude as first speaker, but I would ask you to return to the bill, please.

Georgie CROZIER: I will get to the point. I do take your point, Acting President, but I am just making the point, as Ms McLeish did, that we are leading the way in terms of coercive control, and we are debating this. I was just about to make the point about machete bans and that the government then comes in and says, ‘We need to do that.’ Labor are really struggling. The government is a tired, old, desperate government, and it has run out of steam; that is clear. Nevertheless it is good to see that the issue at hand around this important legislation is being debated today.

What this bill does primarily is prioritise safety for victims of family violence by introducing new crimes, tackling the efficiency of justice processes and holding perpetrators of family violence more effectively to account. Family violence has been a shocking scourge on our society, and far too many women are being horrendously assaulted and murdered across the country. We know it is a massive issue. Daniel Andrews held the Royal Commission into Family Violence, and at that time I was the Shadow Minister for Prevention of Family Violence. I have to say I had an excellent relationship with the former and late minister Fiona Richardson, who did a lot of work in this space. We spoke on and off around the reforms that the government were looking towards achieving at the time. I thought that more could have been done and brought in through the time that I was shadow minister on a number of issues, and I think Ms McLeish has also worked on things around Clare’s law and other issues around family violence. So there is widespread support for ensuring that we do address these issues.

Despite the royal commission, as I said, the statistics are very alarming. In Australia, in 2024–25, 32 women were killed – it is a shocking statistic – by an intimate partner, and in Victoria in 2024–25 there were a record 106,427 incidents of family violence. For 2024–25 we have got the stats, but we do not actually know what happened during lockdown – the lockdowns were shocking – with the family violence and the abuse that occurred when we were locked down. We cannot forget the shocking policy decisions of the Labor government in this state. They will not even mention COVID – you have not heard them mention COVID or the lockdowns at all – but we were the longest locked-down state in the world. We have seen the detrimental impacts of so many of those decisions, which were just shocking. They have led to a large degree of mental illness and economic ruin and a whole range of issues that have accumulated over that time, and one of those that occurred in lockdowns was family violence. We know that, but the government turned a blind eye. They did not want to know about it, because in their hearts –

Members interjecting.

Georgie CROZIER: While I am on COVID, because there are interjections across the chamber, even the former chief health officer has come out and said that things that happened in COVID were not of his direction. They were government direction; they were not based on health advice. It is quite shameful.

This bill, as I said, does follow Ms McLeish’s private members bill to criminalise coercive control, and the government has felt the pressure from what we were putting forward to the community. I think everyone agrees that family violence does not discriminate. It does not matter what age, sexuality, gender or culture you are; it is happening right across society and right across our communities. But in the main women are largely impacted – far too many women are impacted – and, sadly, far too many children. Those who are impacted by family violence too often have to listen in court as their perpetrator is described as being of good character. This bill goes to that point, and I have got some questions I want to raise around this.

I will go back to the main points around coercive control. According to Relationships Australia Victoria, ‘coercive control is a pattern of controlling and manipulative behaviours within a relationship’. There are 12 signs of coercive control:

Isolating you from your support system. –

I am reading this from the website –

An abusive partner will cut you off from friends and family or limit your contact with them so you don't receive the support you need.

Monitoring your activity throughout the day.

...

Gaslighting, where the abuser makes you doubt your own truth, experience and sanity, by insisting that they are always right, and instils their narrative of a situation even if the evidence points against this. Gaslighting in essence, is based on lies and manipulation ...

Name-calling and severe criticism, as well as malicious putdowns, which are all extreme forms of bullying

Limiting access to money and controlling finances. This is a way of restricting your freedom and ability to leave the relationship. Financial abuse is listed above as a specific form of abuse but, within the context of coercive control, financial control is a tactic to keep the person disempowered, by utilising strategies such as:

placing you on a strict budget ...

limiting your access to bank accounts

hiding financial resources ...

preventing you from having a credit card

rigorously monitoring what you spend

This point is terrible in what happens with elder abuse. I have to say that a lot of this does switch over from family violence. Elder abuse is often part of family violence – just awful behaviours. It goes on to say:

Coercing you, to take care of all the domestic duties ...

Turning your children against you. If you have children either with the abuser or someone else, they may try to weaponise the children against you by making comments that are critical of you.

Controlling aspects of your health and your body. The abuser will monitor and control how much you eat, sleep, exercise, or how much time you spend in the bathroom.

These are terrible examples, but I am putting them on the record because of the depth and extent of them. How anyone could do any one of these, let alone a number of them, is beyond me. It goes on:

Making jealous accusations about the time you spend with family or friends, either in person or online, as a way of phasing out all your contact with the external world, except for them.

We have seen the terrible instances, the public instances of some high-profile people where they have been in shocking situations. I do not need to reference it all, but it has made for interesting reading and is still playing out amongst husbands and wives and in certain photographs that end up on the internet for all to see – just shocking behaviour. It goes on:

Regulating your sexual relationship ...

Threatening your children or pets as an extreme form of intimidation ...

When I was a shadow family minister there was a terrible story, and I will never forget it, of a woman who was quite incredible. She wrote about it; she did her thesis on family violence. She described the violence in her family – about her father and what her father would do abusing their pets, just taunting them with the abuse of their pets. It was just so cruel. I have drawn a blank on her name, but she was from Ballarat and was quite extraordinary. She told her story very publicly. I have never forgotten the terrible situation that she was placed in, with her father taunting them with the abuse of the family pet. He ended up killing the family pet.

I just want to go to some other issues around family violence. It reminds me: I met with Brendan Nottle in the Salvation Army precinct last week. He was talking about the numbers. He was talking about providing 500 or 600 meals a day. A lot of these are for women with children. They are a cohort they have not seen. A lot of these women are also homeless or on the verge of homelessness. Too many of them are fleeing situations where domestic violence is paramount. They are very sad situations indeed.

I acknowledge the work of Brendan Nottle and his team in caring for some very disadvantaged Victorians and others.

Another component to the legislation includes good character, and the bill basically stops courts from giving offenders a lighter sentence because of their previous good character while still allowing relevant personal circumstances and criminal history to be considered. It also tightens the rules around character references and applies similar changes to children sentenced under the Youth Justice Act 2024.

With the changes to the Equal Opportunity Act 2010, family violence will become a protected attribute under the Equal Opportunity Act to ensure that victim-survivors of family violence should not be disadvantaged because they have taken steps to keep themselves or their families safe, and these changes will make it unlawful to discriminate against someone because they have experienced family violence, whether at work or when seeking accommodation, accessing education or using services.

The personal safety reforms put victim-survivors first by reducing the need to repeatedly return to court and relive the trauma simply to maintain their protection. A stronger aspect of this is looking at where courts will have a greater ability to extend or strengthen intervention orders while taking into account what the victim-survivor believes they need to remain safe. Far too often victims have to go back into court to get those protections in place, and it just makes them relive that trauma. I know that when I had to go to court because I had a stalker, I was sitting in the outer area of the court, and I did not know who the guy was. It really highlighted to me some of those pressures in our courts and the stresses that people have to go through having to understand who the abuser or whoever the individual is. That can be very difficult, particularly for these victims of family violence having to relive that and go through aspects of that just to keep them safe.

On grooming, the bill will also allow personal safety intervention orders to be used against adults engaging in grooming behaviour, helping to protect children and stop predatory behaviour before it escalates to sexual offending. This reminds me of the work that we did – the Parliament did – when I was the chair of the child abuse inquiry under the Baillieu and Napthine governments, and we did significant work on that. The grooming aspect and the grooming of adults have such a damaging ripple effect. Children are so vulnerable, and the modes of what these perpetrators would do and the various lengths that they would go to to groom these innocent children and then abuse them are just quite horrific. It was just so shocking to see exactly how these perpetrators would groom children and use props to get these kids – very vulnerable children – and sometimes the family members were secondary to it. It might have been a mother who was just seeking safety or assurance from some of these hideous people, and they were being groomed too and then that was leading on to this dreadful sexual offending. That grooming behaviour is a very important aspect of this bill.

On the criminal court variations, what the bill does is it introduces own-motion powers and allows, with the consent of the victim, the court to then extend or vary a FVIO, a family violence intervention order. Ordinarily the criminal court does not deal with civil applications, but if a perpetrator is in the criminal court for assault, for example, the judge may see it necessary to extend those intervention orders, and that is what this part of the bill does. I am sure Mr Mulholland will speak to this because he is representing Mr Newbury, but we know that our courts are overflowing. The government has bungled the IT problems – the courts are having IT problems, and they have bungled that as well as bungling many other things. But hopefully this will streamline the process and save victims the time and stress of fronting up to court on multiple occasions or on additional occasions. There are many issues within our court system. There is a real problem with how the government has managed our courts and managed all of these issues. Other areas that this bill goes to are addressing just a few minor things like electronic signatures for intervention orders and the like.

I want to again say that Ms McLeish has been listening to many, many women who have contacted her to share their stories – very dreadful stories, awful stories, heartbreaking stories – and have been calling for the introduction of coercive control as a standalone crime. I want to again place on record

my thanks to Ms McLeish for leading the charge in this way and to the government for bringing this bill to the house. I should say I have just listened to Ms Payne with her instruction order too, and I will listen more to what she has to say around her amendments, but the opposition will not be supporting those amendments.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:01): I rise to make a contribution on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. I want to set the scene before I turn to what this bill is about and just remind the chamber and anyone who might be watching along at home that it was the Andrews Labor government that committed to Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence back in 2015. As a consequence of that royal commission there were 227 recommendations. The role of the commission was to find ways to prevent family violence, improve support for victim-survivors and hold perpetrators to account. These amendments and reforms are obviously still part of this Victorian Labor government's commitment to continuing to work on driving down rates of family violence, because it is really important and it really matters.

I just want to thank Ms Crozier. I listened to her contribution quite closely, and I want to thank her for sharing her personal experience of having to navigate the courts when she had an experience with a stalker. I thank her for that. However, most of everything else she had to say I found pretty underwhelming and really a very poor effort when we are talking about something so important as family violence. I might just point out to this chamber – because people in here try to rewrite history and talk about how people are leading and the like – what Ms Crozier said back in 2018 under the Liberals, when it was Matthew Guy who was their leader. They have had many iterations of leaders, but this was at the time when Matthew Guy was the leader. Ms Crozier was the prevention of family violence spokesperson for the Liberals, and she said the opposition would consider the recommendations' 'financial impost' and whether 'there are efficiencies that can be realised':

We need to understand the full detail of those 227 recommendations, understand if there can be efficiencies and improvements.

That was reported in the *Herald Sun* on 17 October 2018. There you have it. There you have laid bare and in full exposure what the Liberals think family violence is about. Keeping women and children safe is not a financial impost, yet those opposite want to treat this matter as though it is some kind of financial impost on them. We know they have already indicated that they want to cut \$40 billion from the Victorian budget, and we know that family violence services will be on the front line of those cuts. This bill is important because it goes to continuing the work on family violence.

Renee Heath: On a point of order, Acting President, I believe that the member is knowingly misleading the house, and I would ask you to bring her back to the bill.

Sonja TERPSTRA: On the point of order, Acting President, Dr Heath has been in this chamber long enough to know that she is abusing the standing orders by making frivolous points of order. If she has an allegation to make about a member in this place, she should do so by moving a motion. Otherwise, I should be allowed to continue my contribution, being relevant to this bill, in silence.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): There is no point of order.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I ask you to take note of any frivolous interjections as a mechanism by those opposite to take time away from my clock. If it continues, I will ask to have my clock reset.

I will continue and talk about how important this bill is in the context of the continued work that this Labor government does in driving down rates of family violence. We heard Ms Crozier talk about her shadow minister and the amazing work they have done – no work. It is this government who established Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence. They were nowhere on this. As I said, Ms Crozier, who was the spokesperson at the time, said they wanted to see which efficiencies could be realised out of the recommendations. They see this as a financial impost. It is disgraceful. We

know that cuts are in their DNA. We know they will cut \$40 billion out of the Victorian budget, and we know frontline family violence prevention services will be first to be cut. We know that.

Let me talk about some of the things that we have funded and continue to fund, because those opposite just see it as a financial impost and a waste of money. Let me talk about this: it is Victorian Labor and the Victorian Labor government that has built the Orange Door service. We delivered 15 crisis accommodation refuges, with more under construction. We have legislated the only information-sharing scheme in Australia so services can track family violence risk and keep perpetrators in view. We also established Respect Victoria, a dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women in Victoria. We also funded the nation's first saturation model in Ballarat, supporting projects in schools, sporting clubs, early childhood services, new parenting spaces and workplaces to promote respect and equality. We are also funding and teaching Respectful Relationships in schools and in classrooms. We have also committed, at a minimum, 10 per cent of family violence funding to Aboriginal community controlled organisations, and we have also invested over \$41 million into men's behaviour change programs. We have also commenced a landmark perpetrator study and put highly specialised social workers into police units across five locations in Victoria, which is also known as the Alexis model.

I have heard nothing from those opposite about any announcements or plans they have to continue to fund these very important initiatives, which have been spoken about to our government by victim-survivors and driven by the royal commission and the 227 recommendations that were handed down. We have heard nothing from those opposite. There is no commitment. There is nothing other than \$40 billion in cuts.

The next term of a re-elected Carroll Labor government will amend the Open Courts Act 2013 to limit the use of suppression orders by convicted rapists. We will give sexual assault complainants the choice to prerecord their evidence so they do not have to wait to give evidence at trial or go through cross-examination in front of the accused. We will strengthen protections so counselling records and health information cannot be used in court without the victim-survivor's consent. That is important because what it does is give some level of control to victim-survivors in an adversarial court process. That is important, and that is what victim-survivors have told us that they want.

In terms of this bill, this bill is about listening and responding to the voices of victim-survivors, as I have said. It contains a number of significant reforms to prioritise victim-survivor safety, improve the efficiency of justice processes and ensure perpetrators of all forms of interpersonal violence can be held to account. We are going to criminalise coercive control as a standalone offence. The offence will apply to adults, with a focus on coercive control and intimate partner relationships. These reforms will commence on 1 March 2028 to allow time to educate the community and for family violence response services, including police, to prepare and be ready to implement them. Then, following on, a statutory review of these reforms will also take place to see whether they are working as intended or whether we need to tweak them.

We are also abolishing good character references, because obviously, the concept of good character on its own is generally only about someone's reputation, and it is really of no relevance to what they may be before the court for. Also, there is going to be reform of the Equal Opportunity Act 2010, which will make it unlawful to discriminate against someone because they have experienced or are experiencing family violence. This new protection will apply to areas of public life, including employment, education, provision of goods and services, disposal of land, accommodation, clubs, sport and local government. We are also going to bring in reforms that will allow the criminal court to vary a family violence intervention order on its own motion, which is important. This will assist, with the consent of a victim-survivor, with extending or varying a family violence intervention order when sentencing a perpetrator for relevant family violence offences. And there is more; there is a lot in this. I am probably not going to get through it all, but I know there are other speakers.

Another thing that the bill will also implement is that the courts must ensure that they give more consistent prioritisation to victim-survivor views when extending a family violence intervention order and encourage longer extensions when a perpetrator is serving a term of imprisonment for related family violence offences. The bill will also allow personal safety intervention orders to be expanded to include grooming. This is to protect children and families by enabling these orders to be made against adults engaging in such behaviours. This is important because we do know that perpetrators will often use systems as a means of financial abuse as well. Fines and infringements reforms will mean that anybody who is experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage can be supported. The scheme will expand to include excessive speeding fines so that victim-survivors can access relief in these circumstances. The work and development permit scheme will also expand to apply to court fines where it is currently only available to infringement fines, because we do know that perpetrators will often use financial abuse and these sorts of fines as a further mechanism for inflicting family violence.

There are so many reforms. It is a bit sad that no-one on the opposition benches is here. The care factor over there is probably zero on this, and it is demonstrated by the fact that there is one person on the opposition benches, which is actually disgusting really, because this is such an important bill. As I said, it is only a Carroll Labor government that has consistently demonstrated its commitment to continuing to do important work on reducing rates of family violence against vulnerable Victorians. We know it is not just a financial impost to keep women and children safe; it matters, and it is critically important.

We have done loads of work on this. Contrary to what Ms Crozier said, that someone in the Assembly had done loads of work, they have done no work. For example, I can talk about stakeholder engagement on this. We have done extensive work in talking with stakeholders on this matter. I want to thank all the stakeholders across all aspects of family violence – the services, the sector, the justice sectors and others – for their valued input, and of course victim-survivors.

We acknowledge that there are very understandable concerns around misidentification, particularly misidentification of First Nations women. Consequently, the Attorney-General has set up an expert body to advise on the implementation of this offence in regard to intervention orders and the like and certainly monitoring these risks. The offences focus on intimate partner violence in terms of coercive control as a start, because this is the most well understood area of coercive control. We know that misidentification forms a part of the suite of ways in which perpetrators can try and attack and continue family violence on intimate partners and others. Again, our track record in this area is very long and extensive.

I know there are plenty of other speakers on this bill, but I just want to focus, again, on what would happen in Victoria if we were very unfortunate to have the situation where we had a Liberal–One Nation coalition. We already know what Ms Crozier has said about family violence, but I also know what One Nation has said about family violence. One Nation has basically made comments such as family violence is a ‘two-way street’ and women should ‘just leave’. Those comments are unacceptable. If you combine that comment and the views of One Nation on these matters with the views of Ms Crozier when she was spokesperson for this, which I went into detail about earlier in my contribution, you can see there would be no commitment to family violence prevention in this state by a Liberal–One Nation coalition should they ever have the privilege of being elected.

On the Liberal Party, I have already talked about the \$40 billion in cuts that is going to be coming our way. What we know is what they already did. They ripped a billion out of schools and axed the educational maintenance allowance and the School Start bonus. They slashed \$1 billion from TAFE – campuses were closed and 2400 teachers were sacked. They cut \$1 billion from our hospitals. They hurt patients and doctors. So it was ironic to hear them talking about this today, saying that they have some kind of –

Renee Heath: On a point of order, Acting President, it is literally the member that is talking right now that goes on about scope. I would ask you to bring her back to the bill.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Further to the point of order, Acting President, the first speaker was talking about COVID and completely unrelated matters to this. I have a similar right to respond, so I would ask you to dismiss the point of order. Again Dr Heath is standing up with an irrelevant point of order, trying to run my clock down. I would ask you to dismiss the point of order and allow me to continue.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): There is no point of order.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Cutting 400 staff from Victoria Police, including essential forensic experts – again, you can see that that is a critical matter that goes to assisting police with gathering evidence. So we know it will be an utter disaster if a Liberal–One Nation coalition government is ever elected. I commend this bill to the house.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (15:16): I rise to speak on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. This is a substantial omnibus bill, and it contains a number of practical and overdue reforms that respond directly to advocacy from victim-survivors, community legal centres and specialist family violence organisations. I want to recognise that advocacy at the outset, because these changes do not emerge from nowhere. They reflect years of people, particularly victim-survivors and the stakeholders who have worked directly with them, identifying where our laws are failing and proposing practical solutions.

I have a number of comments on the justice elements of this bill, and my colleague Ms Gray-Barberio will speak further about the context of family violence issues in which this bill occurs. The changes to the Equal Opportunity Act 2010 are an important example of a practical measure that will improve experiences for those who are escaping family violence. Making subsection to family violence a protected attribute recognises that the consequences of abuse can follow a person into their workplace, into their housing and into other parts of their life. The legal sector has advocated for this change after seeing clients performance managed, denied reasonable adjustments or even losing their jobs after their disclosure of family violence. This is a significant protection, and the Greens are supportive of this move.

The fines reforms contained within this bill are also significant. Community legal centres (CLCs) have particularly welcomed the expansion of the family violence scheme to excessive speed infringements because they regularly see circumstances where a perpetrator has incurred an infringement in someone else's vehicle and the victim-survivor is too frightened to nominate them. The bill also expands access to work and development permits for court fines. These changes can remove real financial and legal barriers for people trying to escape violence. The Federation of Community Legal Centres has described these as practical reforms that it has long advocated and that will have a meaningful impact. There are other practical improvements, too. Electronic signatures for family violence intervention orders are enabled, and existing intervention orders are to be included on charge sheets. Community legal centres have specifically welcomed both of these changes, subject to appropriate safeguards.

We are also supportive of the way that this bill expands the Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010 to recognise grooming. Grooming is often gradual and difficult to identify when individual acts are viewed in isolation. Giving the law a clearer capacity to recognise that conduct is welcome, and it is another reform that legal stakeholders have advocated for.

Because this is an omnibus bill, there are also provisions that deserve some scrutiny. I will have questions around these two areas in the committee stage of this bill: the standalone criminal offence of coercive control and own-motion powers. On coercive control I want to be clear: coercive control is real, it is dangerous and it is devastating. The question is not whether the justice system should recognise it; the question that some community legal stakeholders have definitely put forward is whether a new standalone criminal offence is the safest and most effective way to respond to this.

The family violence working group has put its position to us very directly. The group includes Women's Legal Service Victoria, the Law and Advocacy Centre for Women, Djirra, the Victorian

Aboriginal Legal Service, Youthlaw, Fitzroy Legal Service and many other organisations working with victim-survivors every day, and they oppose the standalone offence. The concern is that coercive control is highly contextual. It can consist of conduct that appears innocuous or may be lawful individually when looked at one incident at a time but becomes abusive when understood as a pattern of domination over months or years. Our criminal justice system remains heavily incident focused, and the working group says that that makes coercive control inherently difficult to investigate, evidence and prosecute. They also warn that victim-survivors may be required to assemble extensive evidence of a pattern of abuse, endure long investigations and court proceedings and then face the uncertainty of a criminal standard of proof. Where a prosecution fails, is withdrawn or results in an acquittal, that process can itself cause further harm and leave a victim-survivor feeling that they have once again not been believed. I will have questions in committee for the minister about what evidence the government has relied on to conclude that this offence will improve safety outcomes and how it has weighed the concerns of specialist services with frontline experience that could inform the approach to eradicating this insidious behaviour.

I will also have questions around misidentification, which I understand has been a topic that the Attorney-General's office has received a lot of correspondence on in relation to concerns that advocates have about how this law may be applied. Misidentification is not a hypothetical concern. The legal sector, and community legal centres in particular, have been warning the government for years that victim-survivors are being wrongly identified as predominant aggressors, particularly when they have used force in self-defence or violent resistance when police respond to a single incident without context of the history of the relationship and previous behaviours, or in circumstances where perpetrators are manipulating systems. In their briefing on the previous family violence reforms the CLC family violence working group specifically warned against language and processes which prematurely decide who is the victim and who is the perpetrator before the context of a relationship has been properly assessed, and they pointed out that self-protective actions can be misinterpreted as family violence, particularly in an incident-based pro-arrest and pro-charge policing environment. They also urged much more prescriptive recognition of groups that are disproportionately at risk of misidentification, including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTIQ+ people, culturally and linguistically diverse people, people with disability, people with mental illness, temporary visa holders, and children and young people. That matters enormously when a bill is creating a criminal offence that does depend very heavily on context and competing accounts of a relationship. The bill contains a defence where the accused proves that their conduct was reasonable in the context of the relationship as a whole, which may, we acknowledge, be intended in part to protect victim-survivors who have been misidentified. But a basic question is: should a victim-survivor have to be arrested, charged and prosecuted before a system properly understands that their actions have been in self-protection?

The CLC working group argues that Victoria's existing civil intervention order framework is better equipped to deal with coercive and controlling behaviour. Because it is preventative and safety focused, it can respond earlier and can consider patterns of behaviour without the same evidentiary and procedural barriers as criminal prosecution. I will explore some of this in committee with the minister. I know that there has been discussion with the stakeholders who have been raising these concerns, and I look forward to hearing clarification around the government's intent and safeguards that are available to address some of these concerns.

I will have questions for the minister about the expert advisory group that has just been referenced in Ms Terpstra's contribution and the training that will occur before commencement, the role of specialist family violence organisations and Aboriginal organisations in designing that training, and the three-year statutory review. Three years, I just remark, is a long time if the new offence does go to producing unintended harms, so I would like to understand from the minister what monitoring will be occurring, what data will be published and if Parliament and the sector will be able to see rates of charging, withdrawal, acquittal, conviction and misidentification prior to the statutory review.

Turning to other aspects of the bill, the Greens support removing the use of good character references to reduce sentences for sexual offences where a person's reputation or standing in the community should not be used to diminish the seriousness of the harm that they have caused. However, we do note concerns from the legal sector that extending this restriction across all offences may have unintended consequences, particularly if it limits the court's ability to properly consider rehabilitation, personal circumstances and prospects of reoffending.

On to another point that I know has been the topic of much discussion between the minister's office and stakeholders: own-motion powers. There are important changes in this bill to the way family violence intervention orders can be dealt with in criminal proceedings, and I do note that it is an objective worthy of support. However, stakeholders have raised with my office severe reservations around how this will operate in practice. A victim-survivor should not necessarily have to commence another proceeding, return to court and retell their story simply to ensure that an intervention order continues to provide protection. Giving criminal courts greater capacity to deal with an existing FVIO at the conclusion of proceedings has the potential to reduce that burden and provide greater continuity of protection.

However, the proposed own-motion powers do raise some important questions about how those decisions will actually be made. The specialist legal sector has raised a particular concern about proposed section 125F and the information a court can consider when assessing future family violence risk. I will be asking the minister to explain the limits proposed section 125F places on the court in receiving new evidence, including updated risk assessments, safety planning information and other new material that is relevant to current risk levels. The Attorney-General has said that a court may inquire about changed circumstances, such as living arrangements and ongoing family law or child protection proceedings, but it does remain unclear what material the court can actually receive and rely upon when making its decision, which seems particularly important when the court is being asked to make a decision about future risk levels.

Circumstances can change substantially between the offending that gave rise to the criminal proceeding and the point at which that proceeding is finally resolved, so there may have been new threats or behaviour or there may be changes involving children or relevant information arising in family law or child protection proceedings after the criminal offending and proceeding. The government says that where further evidence is required, the court can decline to exercise the own-motion power and leave the matter to a separate civil proceeding, but that raises an obvious question about whether the reform actually achieves its stated purpose of sparing victim-survivors another proceeding. I will be exploring with the minister the policy rationale for restricting the material that can be considered by the court and where the line is drawn between current circumstances the court is permitted to inquire about, the new evidence that proposed section 125F prevents it from receiving and how the court can make a reliable assessment of future risk if relevant contemporary evidence falls on the prohibited side of that line.

There is also a direct connection here with concerns I have already raised about misidentification and systems abuse. One of the lessons that specialist family violence lawyers continue to emphasise is that family violence cannot be safely understood by looking at a single incident or a narrow slice of a relationship. The Attorney-General points to safeguards, including the respondent's opportunity to be heard and the court's discretion not to exercise the power if misidentification is raised. But that does again leave a fundamental question: how will a court identify misidentification if nobody raises it and the broader history of the incident was never before the criminal court? The power itself can be exploited by a perpetrator engaging in systems abuse, particularly where the magistrate does not have the full history and current context before them.

This raises a broader implementation issue that runs through both the own-motion provisions and the new coercive control offence, which is capability. I note that the bill provides an 18-month implementation period for the own-motion provisions, specifically so that the operating model can be developed. What this actually involves, though, is significant new responsibilities for different parts

of the justice system. They require people to understand patterns of family violence, coercive control, predominant aggressor identification, systems abuse and the particular risks faced by different communities, so I will be asking the minister about the capability uplift that is necessary and whether that is going to be accompanying this legislation.

The purpose of these reforms is a vital one and one the Greens support. If Parliament is giving decision-makers greater powers, it also has an obligation to make sure that they have the information, expertise and safeguards necessary to exercise those powers effectively. The Greens are supporting this bill. As I said, we have heard some of the misgivings that specialist organisations have raised about particular parts of it, and we will be exploring those further in committee.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (15:30): I rise to speak on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. Victim-survivors deserve a justice system that reflects the reality of family violence and sexual offending today and one that gives them greater protection, greater dignity and greater confidence when they engage with courts and justice agencies. The Liberals and Nationals have consistently supported reform that moved Victoria towards a more contemporary justice system, and indeed on coercive control it was the member for Eildon that sought to introduce a private members bill in the other place last year that would have seen action taken almost a year earlier.

I just want to go to the point Ms Terpstra was making with her extraordinary slurs, saying that the member for Eildon and the Liberals and Nationals had done no work on this issue and did not contribute to the coercive control debate at all. I just point to the fact that it was Jess Wilson and the member for Eildon that called for coercive control to be considered a standalone criminal offence. The response at the time – and I can take Ms Terpstra back to some media reporting from her Labor government – was that:

... the government maintained existing legislation included coercive behaviour in its definition of family violence, meaning it already was a criminal offence.

That is what the government said then, but Ms Terpstra just said the opposition did not add to this debate and did not bring forward this debate or have anything to do with it. I would just like to spell out the facts and point out how she was obviously wrong or not paying attention at the time. I will point her towards the headline in the *Guardian* on 3 December: ‘Victorian Labor to introduce standalone coercive control offence in backflip to match opposition policy’. I would ask Ms Terpstra to perhaps go and have a look at the *Guardian Australia* website and that headline to see where she obviously has clearly misled herself in her contribution.

This is because we recognise then, as we do now, that coercive control is a serious and insidious form of family violence and that our laws need to properly recognise the pattern of behaviour that can trap victims in abusive relationships long before physical violence occurs. This bill seeks to prioritise the safety of victim-survivors and improve the efficiency of justice processes. In a number of respects it does that, and the Liberals and Nationals support those measures. The bill makes amendments relating to family violence intervention orders and criminal proceedings. It enables greater information sharing, makes changes to electronic signatures and creates the new offence of coercive control. It also makes changes to the use of good character in sentencing, introduces a number of fines reforms and prohibits discrimination on the basis that a person has been subjected to family violence. I also note the provision that will recognise grooming as a prohibited behaviour, although that reform will not commence until August 2027, a full year after the passage of the legislation.

Although these are worthwhile changes and we do support them, this bill could have been much better. It represents a significant opportunity to deal with a number of serious problems in our justice system that victim-survivors continue to encounter, including reforms that the government itself has previously committed to delivering. Unfortunately, that opportunity has been missed. There is a broader set of changes that needs to occur if we are serious about the experience of victim-survivors and about ensuring our justice system operates in their interests. One of the most pressing is the use of

suppression orders. Victoria has become the suppression order capital of Australia, and there are legitimate concerns about the frequency with which they are being made and the circumstances in which they are being used.

For months the Liberals and Nationals have been calling for reform in this area, and eventually the government agreed the system needs to be reviewed. We have committed to ending the abuse of suppression orders because the current system is capable of producing outcomes that are deeply damaging to victims and their families. We have proposed reform that would restrict suppression orders to circumstances where there are genuine physical safety concerns and would severely limit the use of mental health grounds as a broad justification for preventing publication. There will always be circumstances where the suppression is necessary to protect a victim, a witness or another person from genuine harm, and that protection must remain. But suppression should not be easy to achieve. It should certainly not operate in a way that conceals serious offending or prevents victims from speaking openly about what has happened to them, and a Liberals and Nationals government led by Jess Wilson will reform Victoria's suppression order laws, because this situation cannot continue.

I want to touch on another important topic in this space. Clare's law was introduced in the United Kingdom following the tragic murder of Clare Wood by a former partner with a history of violence. The principle behind it is straightforward: it gives a person the right to ask police whether their current or former partner has a history of domestic or family violence while also giving police the ability to proactively disclose that information when they identify that a person may be at risk. It is commonly described as 'Right to ask, right to know'. A version of this scheme is already operating in South Australia, and since its introduction at the end of 2024 thousands of applications have been made and more than a thousand disclosures have occurred. These figures demonstrate the very real demand for this kind of information. People entering relationships should not unknowingly be placed at risk because important information about a violent history is sitting somewhere within a government or police system that cannot be disclosed to them. The Liberals and Nationals have committed to introducing Clare's law in Victoria, and it is another reform that could have been considered as part of this broader package through legislation.

We have also committed to allowing sexual assault victim-survivors to prerecord their evidence. Giving evidence in a sexual offence proceeding can require a victim to relive the worst experience of their life in an adversarial environment, sometimes years after the offence occurred, so giving victims the option of prerecording their evidence can reduce the trauma while preserving the integrity of the judicial process. After the Liberals and Nationals announced our commitment, the government subsequently matched it, yet the reform has still not been delivered. It could have been introduced as part of this legislation today, but it was not. That delay is causing understandable frustration and distress within the sector, because this is not an abstract policy debate. Every month that reform is delayed is another month in which victims are going through the existing system. I would just say we, the Liberals and Nationals, have taken leadership, and I have walked people through it on a number of these issues. Despite what Ms Terpstra was claiming earlier, we are clearly taking a leadership role in these matters, and we are serious about implementing them in government where this current government has failed.

There are other issues worthy of consideration. A recent University of Melbourne round table raised concerns about pseudonym or concealment orders, which while technically distinct from suppression orders, can operate as de facto suppression orders. There is also legitimate concern about whether courts should be required to publish reasons when suppression orders are made. Greater transparency would allow the public, the media, legal practitioners and legislators to better understand how these powers are being exercised and whether the law is operating as Parliament intended. There are also questions about access to court documents and whether Victoria can learn from approaches taken in other jurisdictions, including Queensland, where there are legislative provisions dealing with access to certain court materials.

Further issues remain with the operation of the Family Violence Protection Act 2008, including questions around victim consent and the interaction of intervention orders in circumstances where an adult victim remains in a relationship with the respondent. There can be situations where the operation of the law produces unintended consequences for the very person against whom an order has been made. Those are difficult legal questions, but they are precisely the sorts of questions Parliament should be prepared to confront when we are undertaking a substantial reform of family violence law. I also want to acknowledge the recommendations made by the victims of crime commissioner in September last year concerning safety within our courts. Court safety is fundamental. A victim-survivor should not come to court seeking protection or justice only to find themselves exposed to further intimidation, fear or confrontation within the justice system itself. All of these come back to the same principle: victim-survivors deserve a justice system that is modern, responsive and built around their safety and dignity.

The measures contained in this bill are important, and that is why the Liberals and Nationals support them. We supported action on coercive control before the legislation was introduced, while the Labor government was still saying that coercive behaviours were already part of the Crimes Act 1958 and coercive control did not need to be a standalone offence. I know those on the crossbench remember a time when the Attorney-General was still saying that coercive behaviour was already part of the Crimes Act and coercive control did not need to be considered as a standalone offence. We knew that it needed to be, which is why we took the leadership on this issue, and I want to acknowledge Cindy McLeish and Jess Wilson. I also want to take a moment to acknowledge my friend the member for Mildura for her very raw and real contribution in the lower house.

As I mentioned, there was an opportunity to go further. There was an opportunity to deal with suppression orders, to introduce Clare's law, to finally deliver prerecorded evidence for sexual assault victim-survivors and to address other outstanding problems that continue to undermine our justice system. Some of those reforms have already been promised by this tired government with only a few sitting days left, and others have been put forward by the Liberals and Nationals and subsequently matched by this Labor government. But no legislation will be introduced by the end of the term. Jess Wilson is serious about this policy area. We as the Liberals and Nationals are serious about this policy area, and as I mentioned in my contribution, we will introduce a number of measures in government in this space. This bill takes some worthwhile steps. It leaves others unfinished. The Liberals and Nationals believe Victoria can and should have a more contemporary justice system – one that protects victims, gives them a stronger voice and ensures our laws reflect the reality of the violence and abuse they have experienced. That is the standard we should be working towards, and it is a standard a Jess Wilson-led Liberals and Nationals government will deliver.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (15:44): I too rise to speak in support of this bill before us today. It is an enormous bill with several significant and complex reforms. It is going to be a challenge to speak about each of them, but I want to cover off my views on a few of them and then speak about something very important at the end. Many people have spoken about the criminalisation of coercive control in this piece of legislation. Coercive control is a defining feature of family violence, and I am grateful to hear the conversation that we have been having about the impact that it has on so many people's lives. Coercive control involves patterns of behaviour that intend to isolate, dominate, control and instil fear in another person, often over extended periods of time, causing profound and often lifelong harm. There is truly no denying that this is a fact, and this is a reality for so many people not just across our state but across our country. But there have been a few of us – well, many of us in fact, including many stakeholders – who have questioned whether criminalisation of coercive control is actually the right response. That is not because people do not need protection from coercive control; it is about whether criminalisation of coercive control and defining it in legislation is the best way to protect people from this very serious form of harm.

The Federation of Community Legal Centres has said:

A standalone coercive control offence is a blunt instrument for responding to a complex and highly contextual form of family violence.

I understand that there is a view that criminalising things, in this case coercive control, sends a message to victims and perpetrators, but it is important for the government and for all politicians in this chamber to know that it is questionable whether this reform will be effective in serving its purpose, particularly because many people who participate in coercive control do not know that they are participating in coercive control. Sending a message about a new crime to people who have been participating in such a slow and perverse form of violence and harm is not going to make them heed those warning signs. But there are a range of other ways that unintended risks can come with this and be created for survivors. These include the way in which evidence is collected to present to police, noting that there are concerns around privacy when it comes to that as well. Misidentification is the really big one, and a coercive control offence is particularly vulnerable to this because allegations of coercive control depend heavily on interpretation, context and the competing narratives that exist within relationships.

Experience both in Australia and internationally shows that criminal coercive control offences produce relatively low charge and conviction rates. However, they can result in really high rates of misidentification. When prosecutions fail, are withdrawn or result in acquittals, victim-survivors can be left also feeling disbelieved when they have in fact experienced family violence. Any of these would obviously result in further traumatisation as victim-survivors are harmed by the system that they turned to for protection. When we look at the ways in which we can reform our family violence laws and better protect victim-survivors, one of the things we need to focus really heavily on is not just preventing family violence but protecting those who have experienced it from retraumatisation, which is a very common story – far too common a story – for so many who do report their experiences.

The family violence intervention order system is civil, preventative and focused on safety. Unlike the criminal law, it is designed to respond to patterns of behaviour, intervene earlier and prioritise protection rather than punishment. There are also incredibly different perspectives among victim-survivors. Some do not want to engage with the criminal system in any way whatsoever, while some do, and it is important to remember that we need to build a system that everyone feels they have a way to engage with. Building on the effectiveness of the current system and ensuring it actually responds to those experiencing coercive control would probably have far better outcomes. We need to take initial concerns and breaches of FVIOs seriously, even when those are not necessarily violent, and importantly focus on ensuring that this does not happen in the first place. I have really great concerns about the effort that we are putting into prevention in this state, which I will speak to more later on, but investing in supports to address these underlying behaviours creates a situation where we do not have to address the problem and create new crimes in the first place, because we can change the attitudes and the culture that exist within our country that are resulting in so much violence, largely against women and girls, particularly, and even more so from marginalised communities.

This bill also creates own-motion powers, a new power allowing courts to extend or vary family violence intervention orders on their own motion in criminal proceedings at the point of sentencing. This is another reform which, although being based in a commendable goal, just like stopping coercive control – to simplify the process of extending an intervention order – many fear could lead to the opposite of that. We have heard that it is likely to generate additional hearings, adjournments, appeals and procedural complexity while offering limited practical benefit over existing extension mechanisms.

As I have already mentioned, Victoria's civil family violence system responds to risk in a very complex way, but it is a complexity many have fought very hard for as it lays the foundation of our attempt to recognise the complexities of family violence within the law. Judges will be asked to grant an extension to an order made by another magistrate who had all of the information presented to them. There is a clear risk of either the court not engaging with this or inaccurate orders being made. It relies

on the police to be the key mechanism to represent the interests of victims, and victims will be forced to consider the serious ramifications of extending an FVIO on the fly at plea. It also seems the government, in their attempt to address again what is a real problem, have set up a system that some have said could be difficult and complicated in terms of an appeal mechanism.

This bill also does something that a friend of mine has worked on for quite some time now, and that is ending good character references. I want to acknowledge the tireless work of my friend Harrison James for his really inspiring work behind the Your Reference Ain't Relevant campaign. I was so proud to stand with Harrison a few years ago when he shared his story of childhood sexual abuse to launch a report alongside me and Emma Hakansson from the Australian Childhood Foundation. He turned his experience into a national campaign to abolish good character references in the sentencing of crimes such as rape or assault. We all know that people who commit sexual violence are not good people and we know that rapists are not good people, and the fact that these references could be used in proceedings to lessen penalties or sentences is not only galling and unacceptable to the community but incredibly traumatising to the victims that are part of this process. Hearing someone that has caused such significant harm that can potentially affect you for the entirety of your life being described as someone who is good and someone who deserves to have a reduction in whatever the outcome is of the case is incredibly upsetting.

In speaking to this, I want to acknowledge all of the many people across our state who have gone through this experience and who have heard the people who have harmed them and been violent to them be described as of good character. I am pleased to see that this will no longer be the case for so many people moving forward, which will again play a part in reducing some retraumatisation. These character references were largely used by people in a position of privilege, largely men, to demonstrate their standing in society to get away with or reduce their sentences for not just crimes but serious crimes.

This change here in Victoria has followed on from reform in New South Wales, the ACT, Tasmania and Western Australia. It has been really inspiring to watch Harry do this incredible work and hear him find his voice and speak truth to power and take what was once one of the hardest and darkest parts of himself and tell his story to change the future for other people. In speaking to the success of his work, I want to acknowledge and congratulate Harry for a really exciting part of his life. He and his partner Bella are expecting a baby within the next few weeks. So it has been an incredibly exciting time for him with his advocacy and also for his family.

This bill will also make some changes in relation to fines – really welcome and important changes – including adding excessive speed infringements to the family violence scheme in the Fines Reform Act 2014. This means that victim-survivors, who are often unfairly penalised for excessive speeding offences that they did not commit and are unable to nominate the driver for due to fear of violence or retaliation, will be addressed. Notably, however, this bill does not resolve the impending issue of imprisonment for unpaid fines, which is why I will be supporting Ms Payne's amendment relating to imprisonment because of unpaid infringement notices and fines and, similarly, supporting her amendment to decriminalise begging. These laws are very literally designed to punish those who are struggling and need our help the most. Putting financial pressures and excessive fines onto a person who is already experiencing significant hardship often results in the very opposite of what is desired to be achieved. The people most affected by these laws – those with mental ill health and those facing hardship – are the people that this bill aims to help, the victim-survivors of family violence, and the concept that while we are passing legislation to better protect them they could still go to prison for begging or not paying fines is pretty disheartening and pretty sad, particularly when the department already have significant powers to collect unpaid fines. I am hopeful that others too will see the strong link to reducing pressures, stress and traumatisation for victim-survivors of family violence and will also support Ms Payne's very sensible amendments.

The final reform that I want to speak to is one that I am incredibly excited about and very pleased to see in this bill, and there is a bit of a story as to how we got here today. I was contacted by the community legal centre Westjustice, who are watching the debate in the gallery, and they spoke to me

about the problem of discrimination against victim-survivors of family violence and a gap or loophole that existed in our laws. They reached out to me at the very start of this year. Westjustice were dealing with far too many clients who had experienced real and significant discrimination in the workplace but could not seek claims under the Fair Work Act 2009. This is because while protections exist within our federal laws, they do not exist within our state laws, meaning that victim-survivors of family violence have been legally sacked for disclosing or sharing their experience or asking for accommodations because of their experience. Not only could that happen in theory, it has happened in reality, and Westjustice really saw this up close. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been for them to look at someone and tell them that there was nothing that could be done to help them because of a loophole that existed in our state laws, despite having a protection within our federal legislation. In my adjournment in March I spoke about the story of K, who worked alongside her previous partner, and after disclosing her experience of family violence and asking for adjustments in the workplace to ensure that she would not be subject to ongoing violence and harm she was told that she should find somewhere else to work.

There was also the story of Lee. Lee had been working for her employer for five years, and over the course of her employment Lee consistently received positive feedback about her work and about her output. But after several years of employment Lee told her manager that she had been a victim of severe family violence and had been required to spend some time in the hospital. Shortly after notifying her manager of this experience and the impacts of it, Lee's manager started to performance manage her and started picking on Lee in the workplace. Her manager directed her to complete an independent medical assessment because of her disclosure of family violence and the impacts that came from it. Lee was then directed to take unpaid leave. She felt threatened by her manager's behaviour and understood that the reason she was suddenly being performance managed was because her work perceived her to be a problem in the workplace due to her experience of family violence. Lee's experience also shows some of the complexities of how discrimination against those with experience of family violence can present. In order to simply explain the issue, we focus on the very real issue of workers being sacked for disclosing their experiences, alongside the advocacy and case studies from Westjustice. But the truth is discrimination in one way or another is sadly an incredibly, I guess, normal, if you can say that, part of the victim-survivor experience.

We cannot legislate prejudice away in its entirety, but this reform is an incredibly significant and meaningful step that will also have real, positive implications on the lives of so many. These protections, importantly, do apply not just to the workplace but to all areas of publicly protected life, in housing, in education and in the provision of goods and services. Equal Opportunity SA, where this protection already exists, has published some examples of what discrimination can look like in other aspects of life, which I am going to very briefly touch on. In education it could be when a school required both parents to agree for a child to attend school camp. Student A experienced domestic abuse committed by one of their parents, and they have no contact with this parent for their safety. Student A could not get permission from this parent to attend camp, so the school refused to allow them to attend. Accommodation: person A needed to find accommodation due to domestic violence and applied for a rental property. The property manager became aware that person A was receiving money for a bond from a charitable organisation that assists victims of domestic violence. Their application was rejected, and when questioned, the property manager said that person A would not be a reliable tenant. Person B was subject to domestic abuse in their home, which resulted in some damage being caused to their rental property. As the lease was in person B's name, the landlord listed person B's details on a tenant blacklist. When person B applied for subsequent rental properties, the applications were rejected due to their rental history. For goods and services, person A left a financially abusive relationship and discovered their partner had accrued debts in person A's name. When they went to the bank to try and rectify the situation the bank refused to provide information or otherwise deal with person A as they did not know the passwords or other security information relating to the accounts.

These are some examples that are forms of discrimination that could have previously occurred in our state and will now be protected as an attribute under these important reforms in the bill today. The

implications of that are really significant. Just as has been the goal for so many recent reforms, protecting victim-survivors against discrimination helps to alleviate the very real fears surrounding leaving a violent situation. Knowing that you can be discriminated against while also applying for housing or sharing your experience in the workplace only exacerbates that. Nobody should fear systemic discrimination because of leaving or disclosing their experiences. In fact it should be the very opposite: they should be receiving as much support as can be given to them. By enshrining subsection to family violence as a protected attribute under the Equal Opportunity Act 2010, as this bill does, not only does it provide protections against discrimination, it also means the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission will be able to ensure workplaces are adequately preventing discrimination in the first place and that the public is aware of the intricacies of how discrimination can actually present.

I really want to thank the incredible crew at Westjustice for first coming to us with this and putting their trust in us to work on this reform and advocate to the government for the change. It is such an incredibly important piece of reform that we became very, very committed to and very determined to see in this piece of legislation, particularly my adviser Ethan, who just would not take no for an answer, and I just really want to thank him for his hard work and advocacy on my behalf and for speaking to so many stakeholders to show the importance of this reform and to get their support so that we could communicate that message and ultimately get to see it in the bill today. I also want to acknowledge the Working Women's Centre Victoria, the Women's Legal Service Victoria and so many others who have been advocating for this change because they have seen it in real time, up close, being applied, with no ability to intervene. It is through all of their incredible work that they will finally be able to ensure real support for their clients but also for all victim-survivors of family violence.

In closing, I just want to touch on a few things. I know that it has already been spoken about in this debate, but I want to put on the record that the government has made some really important commitments in the justice space that are not seen in this bill today. In speaking to this I want to acknowledge my good friend Brittany Higgins and her advocacy to secure a commitment off the government to see prerecorded evidence and protections around victim-survivors, confidential communications and counselling notes. This reform was not in this bill, and I think it is really great. I appreciate that the government have reiterated their support for these reforms and certainly that the opposition have signalled their support for prerecorded evidence once again, as they previously committed to.

These reforms in sexual violence cases are so incredibly important, and they cannot wait. The fact that so many victim-survivors are having to front up to a courtroom and face their abuser and tell their story all over again or that victim-survivors are having their counselling records and private conversations subpoenaed as part of a case when they often do not know when they report that this is even possible is incredibly distressing, and it is contributing to retraumatisation in a really big way. While I understand that there is a huge workload ahead of the government, I call on whoever is in government post November to make sure that this work is prioritised, because there are far too many people who will still be experiencing real harms without this change in policy and without seeing it in this legislation. I am grateful that the Attorney-General and the Shadow Attorney have committed to seeing it through, but now we need to see that work prioritised and we need to see it legislated. That commitment from both parties has been a public commitment, and the work needs to get underway. I really want to reiterate the work of not just Britt but also the many different stakeholders, including Fair Agenda and Sexual Assault Services Victoria, who have worked really hard to see this commitment and are dedicated to seeing the reform through the Parliament and prioritised and in effect as soon as possible. I really encourage, in the lead-up to the election and after the election, all MPs from all parties to continue to engage with these stakeholders because their lived experience is the best way to shape this policy, to ensure that it is done right and to ensure that we create a justice system that actually does that – serves justice to survivors and ensures that they are the ones supported and protected, not the perpetrators of abuse or the people that have caused them harm.

I also just want to touch on the importance, when making these changes, of adequately supporting and funding the people who then deal with these changes. It of course is often our community legal centres who do so much heavy lifting, not just in consulting and engaging on legislation before it comes to this place but also in supporting clients who come through their doors and require assistance and help. They need secure ongoing funding for their services – not one-year funding, not two-year funding, but four- to five-year funding that allows them to plan and that allows them to know that they can take on cases which can often go over a significant period of time and that they can support the people who need them and continue their important work.

The government must also not follow through with their commitment to abolishing the victims of crime commissioner but rather in fact strengthen its role and deliver an updated victims charter of rights. We are doing so much work to protect victim-survivors and to ensure that they feel safe and supported in our state, and the commissioner is a really, really important part of that.

When faced with a problem like family violence, it can be tempting to want to conduct further inquiries, try new things or send big messages, but we actually know what works. We have heard from the experts; we have heard the evidence. Often it just requires the political will, it requires the funding and it requires acting on recommendations that already exist, and I am glad to see a number of those in this bill today. But more broadly, we are facing a really big problem in our country where we are having to pass laws and reforms like this to address a worsening problem where women and girls do not feel safe, whether that be in public or within their homes. I do have a great fear that, while we of course need to implement legislation or update legislation for when crimes occur, we need to be putting so much more into prevention. The rise of the manosphere and the really harmful attitudes that are coming through, even in kindergartens and primary schools, of young boys and men about women's and girls' place in the world and the roles that they should hold and the relationships that men and boys have with them, is a critical part of the equation. This problem that we are trying to address today is only going to worsen unless we shift those attitudes – unless we create a culture where men and boys see women and girls as equals. Certainly everyone has an important role to play in that, but being very heavily engaged in the sector, when it comes to family violence or sexual violence or gender equality, it is largely women doing that work, and it is not just our problem to solve. We need to see more blokes, more men, more boys speaking out against the harmful attitudes that are gripping our country, the ones that we are not addressing quickly enough, which will result in a crisis, if in fact it is not already a crisis. The state government and federal government have a really important role to play in that. The federal government made an important announcement today in relation to our algorithms and the feeds that we see. But there is so much more that needs to be done. I am hopeful that we reach a period where we no longer have to change these laws because we have addressed the problem in the first place, but until then I commend the bill to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:14): I am very pleased to rise to speak to this very important bill before us today – that is, the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. There are a number of things I would like to touch on in my contribution, the first of which in many ways actually dovetails with where Ms Purcell ended.

I have been reflecting, in sitting and listening to this debate, on why these reforms are so critically important but also reflecting on the fact that they do address one perspective. They address the legal consequence side, which is very important to do. I will touch on in a bit more detail what some of those legislative changes are and how they will actually make a difference, but the bill does also leave open the question of what you could call the cultural element – the very need for these laws in the first place. In an ideal society of course we would not have that need. We have come a long way in our journey of responding to and adequately dealing with family violence in this country and in particular in this state, with the trailblazing royal commission and all the various reforms and recommendations enacted through that. But as far as we have come, it is blindingly, painfully obvious that we have so much more to do. The fact that we cannot go a few days in this country without seeing the latest victim

of family violence, almost always a woman or often children, murdered at the hands of the people who are supposed to love them the most shows us that we still have a very long way to go.

Legislative reform is critical, and I will touch in more detail on it momentarily, but I do also want to touch on the cultural reform that we need to collectively, as a society, undertake. That is not something that any one legislature in any one jurisdiction can fully achieve. It is something that we need to work on as a community and as a society, and it needs to come in at every level. It needs to be considered at our sporting clubs, in our community spaces and in our cultural and religious spaces, where we gather and connect as communities. It does need to be an essential element of our education system as well.

That is why, in talking about some of the behaviours that Ms Purcell was referring to in those earlier years, programs such as Respectful Relationships are so critically important, because they are about teaching respect. Many, and I dare say most, parents raise their children to have and to show respect and to display that in society. But we do have this issue, and there is a critical need to have this apply and to be taught to as many young children and young people as possible. Respectful Relationships is really about those age-appropriate lessons in understanding consent for oneself and understanding respectful behaviours towards others, and in a graduated way it escalates in accordance with the age that they are at. It is especially important when we consider some of the things in the toxic online environment. Mr McCracken, some others and I had a discussion earlier today in relation to our tabled inquiry report into anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes. It is the same toxic source that drives some of these attitudes, particularly in terms of the way that some men think about women. It starts from a young age, and it is why those interventions are so important. This government will always continue to support that, always continue to invest in that and always fight against any efforts to undermine or undercut those really effective and powerful programs.

This bill addresses a number of areas of our justice system as they relate to victim-survivors of family violence. The bill includes coercive control by listing it as a standalone criminal offence. This will apply to adults, with a focus on coercive control where it operates within intimate partner relationships, and it has a commencement date of March 2028, in order to allow appropriate time for the police, the judicial system and of course for others in the sector such as the community legal sector to be fully prepared and resourced in order to respond in this way. It is important to start in a relatively focused sphere and in a space such as intimate partner relationships, where we know the greatest amount of harm is occurring. There will be a statutory review as part of this bill within three years of its commencement, which will then evaluate the bill, evaluate these measures and see what needs to be reformed and improved upon and how it can be most appropriately expanded to other types of family violence situations.

This bill will also abolish good character references. This is something that I have put notices of motion in the notice paper on and have spoken about previously in this place. It is an important thing because it is something quite inconceivable to imagine – to go through a horrific assault, sexual assault or another horrific act of violence against your person and then to have to sit in court and listen to all the subjective virtues of the person who attacked you. What is more, we know that the information that is provided in a good character reference has very little if any relation to that offender's prospects of rehabilitation or reform. I could perhaps reluctantly understand an argument for keeping the references if there was that nexus and if there was that relationship that you could demonstrate, but there is no demonstrable relationship between someone having good character references and reform. That is what the data shows us, and that is also what guides this reform today.

It will, as Ms Purcell has also covered off in her contribution, make it unlawful to discriminate against someone because they have experienced or are experiencing family violence, and that is through amendments to the Equal Opportunity Act 2010. I do wish to acknowledge Westjustice, Ms Purcell and indeed Ethan from Ms Purcell's office for their advocacy on this matter. I also do wish to note that, as she outlined, this was raised in an adjournment matter in March. We are now here in September, six months later, and I do wish to acknowledge the very rapid way in which the Attorney-General and her office have taken this issue, have considered it, have evaluated it and have responded.

That short timeframe alone underscores the sincerity and the passion of our Attorney-General and of this government more broadly in doing what we can to ensure that all victim-survivors of family violence are given the best possible supports.

That is the guiding principle of course that underlies all of the reforms in this bill, including the variations of family violence intervention orders, allowing criminal courts to do them of their own motion and the requirement for courts to consider the victims in family violence intervention order proceedings – which sounds, as a matter of fact, obvious, but is something that does need to be clarified for those few cases where victim-survivors have found themselves falling through the cracks of the justice system. Indeed there is also the expansion, as others have talked about, of personal safety intervention orders to include grooming. This does fit within the broader framework of personal violence protections that this government has been focusing on, whether the workplace protection orders that we debated and passed in this place last week or these very important reforms regarding those intimate relationships today. As well, there are reforms to fines and infringements, which will support people who are going through extreme circumstances so that as much as possible they will not have to find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

I have had the benefit of being in the chamber for all of this debate so far, and I have appreciated the contributions of each speaker. I do reflect on the fact that success – or in this case successful reform – does indeed have many parents. In acknowledging all of the members across both sides of the aisle and across both chambers who have spoken so passionately over a period of years and who have genuinely cared about and raised these issues over a number of years, I do acknowledge each and every member from every party who has raised this, because it is an important thing for us to be united on. I also acknowledge the tireless dedication of the Attorney-General Minister Kilkenny and her team in acknowledging and taking the laws which did already cover coercive control in a number of ways and finding, through the reforms before us today, ways in which we can improve them through the explicit criminalisation of coercive control from March 2028.

It does tie in with other measures as well, like the Orange Door. Those prevention and response measures – it is so important that they are well resourced and funded too. I think of not just the Orange Door in Dandenong in my electorate but the one in Cranbourne as well, opened under this government, and how we are expanding those services because, very regrettably, there is that increasing demand. This of course takes me back to the very start – to the cultural aspects that we still as a government, as a Parliament, as a state, as a nation and as a society have so much more work to do on. There is so much more work to do to address that cultural element. But as we do that, and as we cannot let that go, we must also continue the work in the legislative space. That is exactly what this bill before us does today and why I commend it to the house.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:24): I am just going to start by talking about this important bill, which criminalises coercive control, speaks about family violence and talks about good character references, risk assessment and other matters. But I am going to start by saying Ms Terpstra made some pretty wildly inaccurate claims, and ones that I believe are dangerous. The truth actually matters, and it matters most when we are in a crisis like we are today. Let me read you a few headlines that we have seen this year. Here is one from 21 July: ‘Every 11 days a woman in Australia is killed by someone she trusted’. That is unbelievable. Here is another one: ‘4 women and girls gone in 4 days. 3 men and 1 boy charged with murder’. Here is the description of these people: Layla Jeffery, 13 years old; an unnamed 17-year-old young girl; Lavanya Chappa, 39 years old and a mother of two; and Jana Armstrong, 30 years old and a new mum. This is unbelievable. We are at a crisis point.

There are so many things that I want to talk about, so I am going to try to keep this in a linear and organised way, but we have to be careful that we do not just come in here and spread misinformation like ‘The Liberals and the Nationals are going to cut this’. That is absolute rubbish. I am proud of our leader, a 36-year-old female whose very first act as the Leader of the Opposition was to stand with Cindy McLeish and say that we are going to make coercive control a standalone offence. This is something that we are serious about, and I will not let the likes of Ms Terpstra say otherwise, because

it is quite frankly wrong. The truth matters, and coercive control matters. In New South Wales there was a review into domestic violence that leads to death.

There are some little ears in here, so maybe I will go to a different area while they are in here. What this bill does is it stops the courts giving offenders a lighter sentence because of their previous good character. I wonder if there is a way to communicate that maybe there is a nicer bill somewhere else. Is there is a text somebody can send? I want to speak about this, but –

Harriet Shing: On a point of order, Acting President, just given the very delicate nature of the subject matter here this afternoon, which is talking about some environments and concerns that may give rise to worry or anxiety for anyone in the gallery, I was just wondering if perhaps there might be any messages that can be conveyed by the attendants for the purpose of some guidance there.

They are leaving now.

Renee HEATH: Wonderful. The reason I brought this up – and thank you very much for understanding – is I want to talk about this honestly, and I do not want any little ears hurt.

In New South Wales there was a review into domestic violence, and it found that coercive control precedes roughly 97 to 99 per cent of intimate partner homicides. So there is a clear pipeline that starts with coercive control – it could be intimidation, it could be belittling, it could be that degrading away of who that person is – and it can end up in the most bloody and violent murders that we see reported, like these ones. So it is not a time for scare campaigns and sledging, it is an absolute time for action. And that is not just pointing the finger at one person. All of us as legislators must realise that when we are faced with a crisis we must make sure that we face up to the facts and we are not just talking about the good things that we are doing but the fact that we are here because there is an absolute crisis in this state. Every 11 days a woman in Australia is killed by somebody she trusted.

There are programs in schools that I think are so important, but there are also some other things I want to talk about that were raised by other members in here. One was about men and boys. Men and boys need to see women as equals – yes, that is absolutely correct – but we also have to face up to the point that all of this education in schools that could be perceived as anti-men and anti-boys could be fuelling this fire. Good men have been told to back off so many times, and because of that they have left a vacuum and there are boys that are now looking to guys like the Tate brothers as an example. That is something that we need to realise. There have to be good men that are good role models for young children so they can model respect. You can have a program at school – that is one thing – but the environment at home is going to have the biggest impact on kids' lives. We have to be able to realise that there are some differences between the sexes and that is not always a bad thing. Men are physically stronger, so why isn't it okay and why is it frowned upon if men are then told, 'Well, maybe that means that you have a particular strength, and you can be a protector, you can be an agent of change for good'? These things I think need to be accepted mindsets and accepted thought patterns in a modern society, because otherwise we are going to be left in a position where these things get worse and worse.

Cindy McLeish has done some incredible work on this. It is not performative; she is genuinely passionate and genuinely leading change in this area. On 3 December 2025 – Jess Wilson had been the Leader of the Opposition for a couple of weeks; her first announcement was on the criminalisation of coercive control – Cindy introduced a private members bill which had support from many on the crossbench here, and she is really confident that it is that work that has led us to this position.

We also must realise that in Victoria we are really far behind, because in the UK the Home Secretary – who happened to be Theresa May, by the way – in December 2014, almost 12 years ago, announced plans for new criminal offences targeting coercive control. At the end of 2015 it became law, and they have been leading the way for decades. But here in Australia, somewhere where we should be miles ahead, across this nation it is estimated that around 42 to 45 women and girls will be killed by a male partner or by an intimate partner this year.

I would also like to shout out to Jade Benham, who I just think is incredibly gutsy. She has stood up and has been incredibly vulnerable but she has led on this with such strength and such compassion. She also in her speech said that in her first act as Leader of the Opposition Jess Wilson promised that she would introduce criminalisation of coercive control in a standalone bill, which we tried to do. I am very proud of the women in our coalition party that have led the way in this.

I just want to go to the second-reading speech of the member of the government, and I want to point out some things which I find upsetting. If I find it upsetting, I wonder how the family of people that have lost daughters and mums would feel about this. She said:

This Government has done more than any other Government in history to better protect women and children, and hold perpetrators to account.

That is just not true. It has been for over a decade that in the UK coercive control has been a standalone crime. Also, she failed to mention that she rejected entirely the private members bill that was put forward by the coalition, particularly Ms McLeish, in this area. She said:

This Bill is about listening and responding to the voices of victim-survivors.

That is just not true, because I have sat with many victim-survivors who have spoken about how they have felt so disregarded.

I will once again raise the story of Katie Haley, because it directly corresponds to this bill. She was killed by a very coercively controlling partner. This had been going on for a long time. When women leave relationships, that is the most dangerous time for them in their life, and Katie Haley did not survive this. She said to her partner that she was leaving. Their little, beautiful girl Indie, who is the most outstanding young little girl – just a fantastic little girl, who is 10 years old now – was sleeping in the bed there as Shane, Indie’s dad, bashed Katie, Indie’s mum, to death with a barbell in the room next door. This has been extremely, extremely traumatic for the family because this guy has got 427 days off his prison sentence – despite the court saying he has a very low chance of rehabilitation and is probably at high risk of reoffending – because he was locked up during COVID. That is not listening to and responding to the voices of victim-survivors, because if you were listening and responding to the voices of victim-survivors, when we amended that piece of legislation just a few weeks ago, you would have gotten rid of that. We would have gotten rid of the ability for violent and high-risk offenders to receive these discounts, yet we did not.

This is another thing from the minister’s second-reading speech:

Currently, there is no criminal justice response available for victim-survivors of coercive control unless there is a family violence intervention order ... in place or a physical criminal offence has taken place, like assault or a sexual offence.

This could have been a standalone offence months and months ago. She went on to talk about how:

The Bill will abolish the concept of good character, including its use as a mitigating factor, at sentencing for all offences.

Currently, victim-survivors are having to sit in court and hear that the person who harmed them is a person of ‘good character’. This can compound the trauma and diminish their experience.

That is so true, what Minister Kilkenny said. I want to take that further. One area we absolutely must see change in in this state for both the perpetrator and the victim is around victim impact statements. I have spoken to many, many mums – it actually has all been mums that I have spoken to about this – about when it has come their time in court to talk about the impact that the offending of these murderers has had on them, they have had most of it struck out. I will give you an example of that. If somebody has a home invasion and there is, for instance, a child sleeping in the next room, the mother or the father – but for the sake of the argument we will say the mother – can be so terrified that that person inside the house is going to find their child that they have trauma afterwards. They have nightmares. They cannot sleep because they were worried that that person was going to get their child. It is a

possibility that when they write their victim impact statement and they talk about that psychological trauma, that is struck out because it did not happen and therefore it is not relevant to the case.

This, in my opinion, does two things. The first thing is the victim is never heard. The victim never has the ability to talk about it, and being heard is a bigger part of healing than the financial compensation and these things. Most of these mums say to me, 'I want the law changed so it will never happen to another person.' The next thing they say is, 'I wanted to be heard. I wanted the true impact of this crime to be heard so that person understood.' It is like their healing stops there because it never happens. That is a tragedy. The second reason is because it is not good for the rehabilitation of the perpetrator. I love reading all the interviews and the podcasts that that young guy Judo gives. His was the classic school-to-prison pipeline. First it started with disengagement from school. Then he just started mucking around and nothing was done. Then he started pushing over kids his age on the street, then it was petty theft, then it was robberies, then it was carjackings and then it was home invasions. He said the moment that it actually hit home for him and he realised that there was a way out was when somebody sat with him and said, 'Get your act together. You are better than this. You've got people at home that love you, and you can do more with your life.' He actually had to sit there and visualise, yes, what it was like for him doing the home invasion. Then he had to do an exercise where he imagined what it was like for the person in the home, and then he had to sit there and imagine what it was like for his mum hearing about these things – the impact of that crime and how it affected other people. That was the one of the first steps in him getting free and having a path to a different life.

If we want to have true safety in our community and true rehabilitation for the people that perpetrate and the people that are at risk of perpetrating, there has to be some honesty. I believe one of the best places to start with that is the impact statements of victims and making sure that they are uninhibited, they are truthful and they talk about the true impact of offending.

I think that it is wonderful that we are finally getting rid of the good character references, because I think this acknowledges that groomers and people that perpetrate this sort of violence are often expert manipulators: they can come across very well, they can spin a very good story and they can then wriggle their way out of responsibility.

I think that, and everybody has acknowledged it, there is so much more to be done on this. There need to be more victim-centric approaches and processes across law and order in general in the state of Victoria, but I think this is a fantastic start. I wish it had been done months ago. In closing, I just want to commend Cindy McLeish, Jess Wilson, Jade Benham and everyone who has – (*Time expired*)

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:41): I also would like to say a few words on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. I will start by saying that the Libertarian Party will not be opposing this bill. However, I do have some concerns about it.

This bill is seeking to address something that is absolutely a real problem in Australia, and that is around family violence. Among other things, it addresses the issue, which has been spoken about, of coercive control, which is a real issue, but for a long time it has been a problem to legislate on because of its complex nature. Coercive control in the bill is defined as an offence where someone is an adult, they are in a relationship with an intimate partner, they engage in a course of conduct – on more than one occasion or where there is protracted specified conduct with a continuity of purpose – they intend by that course to coerce or control person B and ought to understand in all the particular circumstances that the course will probably cause harm to B.

Libertarians have a clear view on coercion – that coercion is wrong – and therefore this is definitely something that we want to stop. However, I do recognise one thing that does concern me about this: 'harm' is not very clearly defined here. Indeed there would be many cases where the government would have a definition of 'harm' that is very different to what I would consider harm. Nevertheless, I do note that the government has acknowledged the complexity in introducing this sort of legislation

with the very long introduction period, which I think is necessary in the case of laws like this, because it is so complex. I do have real concerns about the enforceability of this and the amount of work and trauma that may be required to actually prove criminality in cases like this, because it is not just a one-off thing – a pattern of conduct needs to be demonstrated in order for a criminal offence to be committed. It means that a large amount of evidence would be required for this sort of thing, and that would be difficult, I would imagine, considering the circumstances under which that evidence would be obtained and presented before a court. So I do have concerns about the enforceability of this. I note that creating the laws is one thing; implementing them and making them effective is another thing altogether. As far as the law is concerned here, in this particular case, although I do have some concerns about the coercive control component and I think there is a real problem, I do acknowledge that the government is trying to do something about it here, and I hope that it works the way that the government intends it to work. That is what I would say on that.

Another thing that this bill does is abolish character references. I have heard arguments from both sides on this, but I do acknowledge that this can be a very traumatic thing for people. There are some carve-outs here that the government has catered for for specific purposes, so despite my concerns with that, I do not see that that is something that is a red line that would cause me to necessarily oppose it. Similarly, with the intervention order changes, again there are things here that seem very good in theory and good things that the government may be trying to do. I have very serious concerns about how they might be implemented. Again, it is going to require some very, very careful work by the department to implement this successfully and actually have it result in the changes that the government is hoping for.

I have got some other concerns which I will raise in committee, some questions about the bill, but suffice to say that I do acknowledge that this is trying to address a real problem and that the government is trying to address that problem through this legislation. My main concern here is not necessarily about the laws but the implementation of these laws and the unintended consequences of some of these laws. I am concerned about that. I am happy that the government is taking its time with the implementation. I think that that will be necessary, and I am concerned about whether or not these laws will ever result in prosecutions. I hope that there are legitimate cases where they are used to good effect, but the amount of work that would be required to result in some sort of prosecution does concern me. Maybe the existence of the laws in itself will have some effect in discouraging this type of behaviour. But nevertheless I know from talking to people in my own electorate that family violence and the sorts of things that surround it are a very, very serious problem. It is not just a problem for society. It is a problem for the police, it is a problem for our justice system and it is a problem for this Parliament, frankly. We have to do our best to try and make the laws and to scrutinise the laws that the government is coming up with on whether or not in our judgement they will result in something that we think is going to be of benefit and actually help the situation.

As I said, I hope that these laws work the way that the government intends. I do have some scepticism about how they might be implemented and will work in practice. Too many times in this place I have seen things work in theory and not work in practice, and that is what I have concerns and severe hesitation about. But on principle I do not see a reason to oppose this bill in its entirety.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (16:48): I am pleased to speak on this bill, the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. I will make only some brief remarks. I have spoken in this chamber on many occasions about the need to address family violence and sexual assault, and it does remain the single most common crime in Victoria. I do not think our society has really calibrated itself to recognise that – certainly not in media reporting.

Our Labor government has led the nation in its response to family violence. In our most recent budget we have provided \$100 million for prevention of and response to sexual assault and family violence, building on \$3.8 billion invested since the Royal Commission into Family Violence, which we initiated. Just to give a little summary of what we have delivered, Labor has delivered trauma-informed

counselling; referral services – the Orange Door; legal assistance for victim-survivors; a landmark study on perpetrators to find the most effective interventions; stronger laws against stalking; streamlined family violence intervention orders; specific funding for Aboriginal community controlled organisations; \$41 million invested in men's behaviour change; and specialist family violence investigation units and training, technology and risk assessment tools to support Victoria Police to respond appropriately. Certainly community feedback is really positive in the Victoria Police space around their sensitivity and the actions that they take in that space. We have done this in consultation with victims and survivors and those that support them.

This bill continues that work, and it responds to key areas of concern that have been raised by victim-survivors. As all of my colleagues in this chamber have already raised, the bill introduces a new standalone criminal offence of coercive control. Coercive control is an insidious form of abuse used to intimidate, humiliate, surveil, gaslight or isolate another person and strip them of their sense of autonomy and self-worth so as to have control over them. This can have devastating impacts. It increases the risk of victims becoming homeless, suicidal or unwell, sliding into poverty and committing offences themselves. The new offence of coercive control covers physical, sexual, economic and emotional or psychological abuse or threats, and it also captures any other conduct that coerces or controls an intimate partner and causes them to feel fear for their or another person's safety or wellbeing. Unfortunately, the data shows it is still the case in relation to family violence and also in relation to coercive control that a large proportion of the perpetrators are male and the victims are usually female, so this is a gender issue as well. We cannot pretend otherwise.

The new laws against coercive control will apply to adults who engage in a course of conduct against their current or former intimate partner, who intend to coerce or control the victim and who ought to understand that the course of conduct will probably cause harm to the victim. The offence focuses on intimate partner relationships as a start, because this is the most well understood area of coercive control. Thank you to those victim-survivors who have advocated for this change. The Carroll Labor government is listening and acting. We acknowledge the very understandable concerns about misidentification, particularly of Aboriginal women, and the Attorney-General has set up an expert body to advise on the implementation of the offence, including monitoring the risks.

I will just make a couple of remarks about good character references. This bill also abolishes the use of good character references for all criminal offences. My experience of the use of these was as a sexual assault counsellor, mostly, but of course it is broader than that in this bill. In my regional community, where I worked, I had a client whose father was the founder of a very, very well known, regionwide, almost statewide-known community initiative, I will call it. During her counselling with me she was very distressed by the impact of so much adulation of her father for the good charitable work that he was involved in when she was seeking assistance for being a victim of his sexual assault. If her case had gone to court, you could imagine the impact that a good character reference might have had on her as a client. It would have been incredibly distressing. If you are guilty of an offence, you are not of good character. The law should not mitigate punishment just because the person who committed it is charming or has a history of donating to charity or can call upon people in high office to provide references. None of these things are predictive of an offender's prospects of rehabilitation or risk of reoffending, which was mentioned by my colleague Mr Galea. And victim-survivors should not have to sit in court and listen to the person who harmed them being praised during a sentencing process.

The bill will enable families to take out intervention orders against adults engaged in grooming behaviours. It makes other procedural improvements to family violence intervention orders as well, and it improves supports for vulnerable people who are facing fines.

I just want to close by expressing some concern about One Nation's position in relation to family violence. These reforms and all the work and investment that have come before them reflect what Victorians expect from their justice system. Victorians want to know that they and their loved ones are safe from the devastating impacts of sexual and family violence, and they want to be confident that

the police and court systems are there to support them should the worst happen. Victorians need to know all of this – everything that we have been able to achieve working with and listening to the victims of family violence. One Nation have been very clear about their cynicism in relation to family violence. Comments that family violence is a ‘two-way street’ and women should ‘just leave’ are unacceptable, and they take us backwards. They do not reflect the current laws in this state. They do not reflect the current sentencing requirements in this state. They do not reflect the values of the community in this state. So I would just express extreme caution in relation to trusting One Nation in this space. I will leave my contribution there.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:58): I also rise to speak briefly on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. From the outset I do note that we will not be opposing this bill. We realise that there is a lot more work to be done and that this is a huge change. Despite the fact that there has been a Royal Commission into Family Violence and a lot of money has been invested in this particular field, we are well aware that the statistics continually show us that we are not making the groundwork that we need to make.

I continually get messages, visits and contact from people in situations of domestic violence. In fact I have one here that is recent from a mother of four who speaks about coercive control and the desperate need that they have for accommodation. Even though they are in contact with places like Wayss and the Orange Door, we still have a shortfall of accommodation for women with children. That makes it very difficult for a lot of people who are seeking a safe place of refuge.

The bill of course is addressing the issue of coercive control, and I thought that I would make sure that I got to speak so that I could speak up and advocate for people like this lady, who I will call Jane – that is not her real name – who is unable to secure a safe place for her family and has had to deal with coercive control and was not even aware that she was in a situation of coercive control until an ambulance worker that came out to the home was able to speak to her and explain that that was the situation that she was in. I think so often people that live in those very controlling environments, which can be very abusive, do not always realise, one, that that is not okay and not normal and do not realise that in many cases, as we have already heard today, it can actually end up leading to one partner no longer being alive.

I know we have heard these stats before – 32 women killed in the 2024–25 year across Australia through domestic violence and family violence in particular. I represent a region that includes places like Clyde North, where the call-outs have been very significant, and at times we have had some of the highest call-outs for domestic violence in the country. I think the statistics just do not lie in terms of the fact that police out in the south-east have to prioritise domestic violence. It is important that they do because they could be saving a life. But of course when a police unit is called out to domestic violence – and it could take the whole shift; they could be there 2 hours, 5 hours or more – that is a unit that is not able to respond somewhere else. So we need to find ways not just to be legislating but also to be looking at prevention, because we have soaring statistics in the area of family violence.

In Victoria in 2024–25 there were a record 106,427 family violence incidents. That is up 8 per cent in five years. We know that there have been breaches of family violence orders and that those have risen and increased by almost 17 per cent to 64,713. I know these figures have been shared already here, but I think it is important to continue to remember that one in four family violence incidents can end up in an intervention order. I need to add, though, on top of this, that whilst I am a huge advocate for these women – and I have met so many women running away from situations or caught in situations that are just horrific – the south-east has a lot of financial issues. People are struggling, and financial pressures can change circumstances in homes as well, so I think that there is an awful lot that needs to be done in support services and also in education.

As has been noted, sometimes the person that is thought to be the perpetrator is actually the victim, and sometimes the person that is thought to be the victim is actually the perpetrator. That mistake can

also happen. It is not always the woman who is the victim, but more often than not it is. In some situations – and this is where it can be really tricky – we have a matter that is misidentified, and that can be a big concern for the sector. But having said that, this is such an important situation that it has become necessary – and the advice has been taken from the Victim Survivors' Advisory Council – to look at having coercive control as a standalone crime. That is what brings us here today to discuss this matter. I just want to put it on record because I have heard from both men and women. I have situations where I hear from men who are in tears, unable to access or see their children or their families and that feel that they have been victims, put on intervention orders when in actual fact they feel that they have been tricked into situations, and I have women who are clearly in very serious situations which could end up being lethal for them or for their children or both. So this is a very complex situation. I do feel that it is really important for us to be able to address these issues and make sure that we are doing everything we can to protect women so that no woman – or man – has to die in a situation where they are constantly under threat because of coercive control.

I still remember very clearly an incident in a local supermarket in Berwick. I had never seen such an aggressive man come in with his wife and daughter. It was before I was in Parliament. It was just one of those incidents that you never forget and you go back over in your mind and think, 'I should've done something different. Why didn't I do more?' I remember the wife and the daughter moving away from this man as he was raging through the supermarket. Everybody was terrified of him. They were clearly there to get something, and they were terrified of making a mistake. They were not in the supermarket for very long and they all left together, and I wondered what on earth it would be like to be in a car with a man that was so angry and so violent and so out of control. They were clearly at risk, and I just wish that, more than a whisper, I had done more and perhaps even called the police or done something. We were all terrified, in the supermarket, of this man, and I just cannot imagine what it would be like to get back into the car with somebody so controlling and so clearly outraged and able to manipulate, not just with his sheer size but with the way he talked.

It is important that we look at some of the aspects in this bill. The bill stops courts from giving offenders a lighter sentence because of their previous good character. I will say that if you are guilty, I do not think it matters whether you have got good character or not; you should be having some consequences for your actions. I did hear the speeches before saying, 'It doesn't matter who you know or where you get your references from; if you're guilty, you should feel the full force of the law.' I agree with that, but I do think that there are times when there might be a one-off situation that is coercive, or seen to be, and you would have a person that may have good character but under certain circumstances is failing. I think that we also need to remember the importance of support. These are very severe penalties, and I do want to see women and men protected in their homes, and their children as well and their neighbours, but I would hate to think we are going to have any injustices take place, so I do hope that all of this will be taken into consideration, along with support services being provided to support both partners in an act so there is an opportunity for change in the lives of everybody.

I think everybody deserves to feel safe. Everybody deserves to be able to go through life thinking that they are safe in their own home and knowing what safety means and what it means to be a victim of coercive control. I think that that comes through education, so I do hope that this will make a positive change in the community, knowing that this bill is aiming to strengthen how organisations and professionals assess family violence risk and how they share the information too. I hope that it will help services better protect victim-survivors and hold perpetrators to account. On that, I will finish up, but I just wanted to share those little bits and pieces, particularly because I had such a recent incident sent to me from a local constituent about coercive control. I just want to thank everybody for bringing this bill before the house to try to make some difference in the lives of those who desperately need it.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:09): I rise to speak on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026 on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria. Family violence is an epidemic in Australia. Intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to ill health and premature death for

women in Australia. This year more than one woman a week has been murdered by a current partner or ex-partner in Australia. For every single one of those women and their children harmed by family and intimate partner violence, I would like to say: you matter just as much as anyone else. Behind every statistic is a person whose life was tragically cut short.

One such life was that of Jessica Geddes, who was just 27 when she was murdered by her abusive partner. She was a bright young woman who dreamed of studying medicine and taught herself to play guitar and piano. I have spoken in this chamber about Jessica's story many times, most recently in October last year, but I believe it is a story that deserves to be heard again. Jessica was experiencing housing instability and was subject to coercive control and physical, emotional and financial abuse. She was forced to beg for food, cigarettes and money, telling neighbours that her partner Robert would beat her if she did not return without what he wanted. Despite this, police received 36 public order reports relating to Jessica. Most of them concerned her begging.

As part of this justice bill I am reintroducing my amendment to repeal the relevant provisions of the Summary Offences Act 1966 to decriminalise begging in Victoria. I will speak to this further in the committee stage of this bill. Despite being decriminalised in Western Australia, New South Wales, the ACT and Tasmania, begging remains an offence in Victoria, punishable by a fine or, worse, imprisonment. For vulnerable women like Jessica Geddes, decriminalising begging could have made a life-changing difference. It could have shifted the focus from punishing her for begging to recognising that she was a woman experiencing abuse and in desperate need of help and potentially helping her connect with the support and safety that she desperately needed.

Importantly, as this bill recognises, family violence and its impacts are not always visible. It can take many forms, including physical and sexual violence, emotional abuse, coercive control, intimidation and financial abuse. This bill contains some important reforms that prioritise the safety of victim-survivors and improve the efficiency of our justice system. Those reforms are welcome, and in some respects they represent meaningful progress in Victoria for victim-survivors.

Progress must be tempered with consideration of unintended and uneven consequences when safety is at stake. Firstly, as many stakeholders have pointed out, the criminalisation of coercive control is real progress, but if it is enacted through a standalone coercive control offence, it may be difficult to apply it effectively; coercive control often involves subtle patterns of behaviour that are difficult to identify, investigate and prove in court. Moreover, this offence may be weaponised by perpetrators. The powerful almost always use the system to their benefit, and there are very real risks that this could be what happens here. First Nations women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and other marginalised women are at a real risk of being on the receiving end of these reforms, unfairly and unequally. The justice system does marginalised women no favours, and protections must be put in place for them. There are very real risks that the system could be gamed by perpetrators with power and privilege.

Another thing to note is that Victoria already has tools to respond to coercive and controlling behaviour through the family violence intervention order, or FVIO, system. Unlike the criminal justice system, FVIOs are focused on preventing harm, protecting victim-survivors and responding to patterns of behaviour before violence escalates. We all know FVIOs are imperfect, but we also know that a tougher, punishment-focused approach to family violence could have unintended consequences. Being tough on crime sounds good, but it almost always results in worse outcomes. These include increased stress, fear and retraumatisation for victim-survivors, particularly where criminal prosecutions are unsuccessful.

Victoria's family violence, health and community legal centres have been calling for something broader for decades: whole-of-system reform. We cannot do this with one piece of legislation. Whether a new criminal offence is introduced or not, we need to fundamentally strengthen how coercive control is identified, prevented and responded to across Victoria's family violence and legal systems. A stronger focus on early intervention, safety and support is essential to better outcomes for

victim-survivors, and this will not be achieved by the introduction of a new law. In other words, sadly, this bill simply does not go far enough. It falls short of delivering the victim-centred justice system that victim-survivors deserve.

I am reminded now of the issue of good character reforms. In December last year I raised this issue in this chamber, asking the Attorney-General to investigate banning good character references in child sexual abuse cases. I argued then and I would argue again that no-one convicted of sexual abuse can be considered a good bloke. Sentencing should reflect the harm caused by the crime and not the public face – the reputation a perpetrator has deliberately and carefully built, in part to protect themselves. People with good character do not enact patterns of violence, coercion, intimidation and control. As with sexual abuse, when sentencing for family violence crimes, the focus should be on the harm caused and the victim's safety, not on what the perpetrator's friends, family, teammates or anyone else thinks of them. They did the crime; that is their character. Removing good character references is essential for victim-survivors of family violence. These changes have already been introduced in New South Wales, and Victoria is now following suit. I welcome this.

We also need protections for victim-survivors against discrimination. One thing we forget in the headlines and the news cycle, which moves so fast, is that family violence affects every part of a person's life: work, recreation, health, parenting, family, friendships, haircuts, dentist appointments, housing, play dates – all of it. A woman who has experienced family violence should never face discrimination because of what has happened to her. If she is brave enough to tell an employer that she is experiencing family violence, she must not be penalised. If she discloses to the school, her children must be helped and not judged. If a landlord finds out, they must not evict or punish her. These things happen all too often. Any discrimination of this sort must be outlawed, and I would like to congratulate and acknowledge my friend Georgie Purcell in this chamber for the work that she has done in this space to make these laws come into effect in this bill. Making it unlawful to discriminate against someone because they have experienced or are experiencing family violence recognises that victim-survivors face disadvantage not only because of the violence itself but also because of how others respond to their circumstances.

The new protection in this bill will apply to important areas of everyday life, including employment, education, housing, access to goods and services, clubs, sport and local government. It will provide legal recourse to a woman who is treated unfairly at work if she needs time away to attend court or access support services or if she is denied accommodation or treated differently when accessing essential services. Family violence can leave women financially insecure, isolated and vulnerable to homelessness. If women are then discriminated against while trying to find employment, secure housing or access education and services, it can make it much harder for them to leave an abusive relationship and rebuild their lives. This bill sends a clear message: women who are experiencing or have experienced family violence should not be disadvantaged because of someone else's crime. Victim-survivors should be supported, not judged.

Another positive reform in this bill is the expansion of fines relief and exemptions for victim-survivors, a significant and long-called-for reform. This change recognises a simple but critical reality: people experiencing family violence should not be further burdened by financial penalties arising from circumstances beyond their control. Often fines are actively used by perpetrators to entrench disadvantage and punish victim-survivors. Perpetrators will literally accrue fines in their victims' names to stop them rebuilding their lives. In other cases, the stress and chaos of surviving leads to the accumulation of fines. What may have started as a relatively small infringement – theirs or the perpetrator's – can and does become a much larger problem when a person experiencing family violence cannot afford to pay. Additional costs and enforcement measures can lead to debt and that debt growing, creating a cycle that is particularly difficult to escape for people experiencing family violence. Expanding the family violence scheme to include fines will remove another barrier victim-survivors of family violence face to both leaving and starting again. Fines reform will help ensure our legal system supports victim-survivors to escape the violence rather than creating further obstacles or

financial burden. Similarly, expanding the family violence scheme to include excessive speeding fines will allow eligible victim-survivors to seek relief from fines connected to their circumstances. The reforms represent an important step towards supporting victim-survivors to rebuild their lives with greater safety, stability and independence, not punishment.

I would like to take the opportunity to speak to our amendments on the Fines Reform Act 2014. Our amendments would cancel old imprisonment warrants issued for unpaid fines under the former fines enforcement regime, before the safeguards introduced by the Fines Reform Act 2014 came into effect on 31 December 2017. This would ensure that people are not imprisoned today under outdated laws and practices that have since been recognised as requiring reform. The amendment would also resolve imprisonment as an enforcement option for unpaid fines by repealing the relevant provisions of the Fines Reform Act. No vulnerable person should face imprisonment simply because they are unable to pay a fine.

I would like to acknowledge the stakeholders that have advocated tirelessly for these reforms, including the infringements working group, the Federation of Community Legal Centres, Financial Counselling Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, Inner Melbourne Community Legal and Justice Connect. However, it is important to remember that legislation alone cannot end family violence. Ultimately, the goal must be not only to respond to violence but to stop it in the first place. We must pause and ask: what on earth is going on when women are more at risk in their homes than on the streets?

Over the last couple of months, I have been calling for the Carroll government to support the extension of the Alexis family violence response model statewide. The Alexis model is something we can do right now. It provides an important early intervention approach that places specialist family violence workers in all police units. It supports the identification of family violence and enables timely, coordinated responses before risk escalates. It has been successfully trialled in three locations and has led to an 85 per cent reduction in recidivism. This is the goal: stop it before it starts, prevent it from happening again and prevent it from getting worse. The Alexis model is tested, and in dollar terms, it is actually really affordable. Incredibly, I had the Parliamentary Budget Office cost a statewide expansion and it would cost just over \$10 million per year to be implemented across Victoria. Supporting the Alexis family violence model is an investment in prevention, early intervention, safer families and communities and a more responsive family violence system for Victoria.

These reforms are welcome and represent meaningful progress for victim-survivors. But when safety is at stake, we must also consider their unintended and uneven consequences. We must continue investing in early intervention and prevention, particularly for people who are most vulnerable, so that we can address risk before it escalates into harm. On behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria, we support this bill, and I request that my amendments be circulated.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:24): I rise to make a contribution on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. I would like to thank the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence for her important advocacy on this issue. This piece of legislation is about listening and responding to the voices of victim-survivors and giving them the support that they deserve. In doing so, this bill seeks to bring reform across key areas of the justice system when responding to sexual and family violence. It aims to protect victim-survivors from further harm through improving court processes to make perpetrators more accountable for their actions. A priority of the Carroll Labor government is a commitment to justice and fairness, and this legislation delivers victim-survivors of sexual and family violence more support as they navigate this. With more support, we should not expect victim-survivors to have to face additional forms of harm after leaving violence, and they deserve to have a justice system that listens, believes and protects them. Equally, perpetrators of this violence should be held accountable for their actions.

Not all forms of violence are physical, and victim-survivors should not have to suffer because of a lack of legislation. This bill will introduce a new offence of coercive control, which will protect the rights of victim-survivors from this form of abuse by current and former intimate partners. Creating a new offence of coercive control will assist both police and the justice system in prosecuting perpetrators for this sort of conduct or behaviour which is so harmful to victim-survivors. Coercive control captures a form of abuse that may otherwise go unnoticed and unpunished and thus allow perpetrators to advance their offending at the expense of victim-survivors. It covers behaviours that include physical, sexual, economic, emotional and physical abuse that causes victims to fear for their safety. It will recognise the collective harm of coercive control and the seriousness of this type of offending, with coercive control often escalating into physical abuse as well. This means the perpetrators are punished accordingly and will face accountability for their actions. The new offence protects victim-survivors' right to privacy and punishes perpetrators who violate this right and infringe on someone's freedom. The reform also acknowledges the effect on victim-survivors and the importance of understanding all types of abuse that occur, not just the physical side. Coercive control can be degrading and cruel, and this amendment aims to address this fact.

Another reform this bill introduces is the removal of good character references as a mitigating factor in sentencing. Perpetrators of family violence should be punished regardless of who they are, their stature or their connections. However, good character references have historically been used by perpetrators to shirk any punishment or accountability for their actions and conduct. Particularly in cases of sexual and family violence, these references provide an escape from punishment in a scenario where justice is just so crucial. Abolishing the concept of good character as a mitigating factor at sentencing is a step towards justice for all victim-survivors and will stop offenders from benefiting from a vague practice. The current use of good character creates a disparity in treatment of offenders in sentencing by the courts due to the inherent subjectivity of the matter. Punishment for offences should be equal, regardless of how good your friends think you are. If you commit a serious crime, you should face the consequences and should not be able to benefit from such a privilege.

These changes also protect victim-survivors, reducing the harmful impact of an offender being described as of good character. A statement like this can lead to distress and retraumatisation for victim-survivors, who should have a justice system that listens to them and does not trivialise their experiences. This ensures that no matter a person's position within the community, they will face accountability for their actions. It also ensures that victim-survivors are more likely to disclose offences and receive justice that is fair.

Protecting victim-survivors and their families is an important part of the justice system, and we need to reinforce mechanisms that allow for this. Intervention orders exist to protect victim-survivors from offenders, keeping them safe from harm. The proposed improvements to family violence intervention orders exist to achieve the goal of aiding victim-survivors and putting their wellbeing first. The new changes will allow courts to strengthen or extend a family violence intervention order after a clear risk of further family violence against the victim-survivors. Victim-survivors must have their concerns and opinions heard by others, and this legislation achieves that. Courts must now consider the views of victim-survivors when determining the application to extend an FVIO, making sure victim-survivors voices are heard and listened to. This change makes sure that protections given to victim-survivors work for their needs.

Trauma associated with the court system should also never be a barrier to achieving justice and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. These changes are aimed at reducing the amount of trauma that victim-survivors experience when seeking stronger or longer orders, which is of the utmost importance. Supporting victim-survivors is non-negotiable, and these changes are a step towards accomplishing that for them. Part of this change includes introducing a default extension length for family violence intervention orders so that protection for victim-survivors extends past an offender's release date. We are extending protections for victim-survivors through a period of heightened risk,

ensuring their safety and security. They will prohibit where offenders may move, protecting the right to privacy for victim-survivors and their families.

The current Labor government also understands the need for the protection and safeguarding of children and how additional measures are needed to do that. Therefore these amendments to the Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010 seek to provide more protection for children under the age of 16, including from grooming, under this act. Grooming is the practice of building an emotional connection or trust with a vulnerable person and then manipulating this trust to abuse this person. Grooming is a precursor to abuse and should be treated as such with prohibition and punishment to match. The changes to this act allow courts and the justice system to stop this predatory behaviour and intervene before other sexual offending occurs. By recognising grooming as a prohibited behaviour under this act, it protects children and families from these perpetrators. This also places grooming in the same category as other serious offences such as assault and harassment. This allows for the courts to make personal safety intervention orders, stopping a perpetrator before any sexual offending takes place. These reforms protect the rights and liberties of the child, thus protecting the family unit as a whole. With that, I will conclude my remarks.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (17:32): I rise to speak on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. This bill comes at the height of a family, domestic and sexual violence epidemic spreading like wildfire all across the state and the country. If you are a young girl or a woman, your levels of hypervigilance and awareness are going off the charts all the time. I cannot blame women for feeling this heightened level of watchfulness. This year to date, as of 8 September, 49 women have been recorded dying at the hands of male violence by Australian Femicide Watch, with 15 women and children from Melbourne. These deaths we know are the most devastating manifestation of a much broader reality: that thousands of women and children across Victoria are simply not safe right now. There is a whole lot of under-reporting of violence because women do not feel safe to report because the systems are not equipped to guarantee or maintain their safety. For every woman whose life is tragically cut short, there are many more women and children living with physical violence, sexual violence, psychological abuse, financial abuse and coercive control, and overwhelmingly that violence is perpetrated by men. So when we stand here and debate another family violence reform bill, we need to ask ourselves: are we actually changing the conditions that allow men's violence against women to continue or are we simply responding after the violence has already happened?

That question has been particularly difficult to avoid in recent weeks. The allegations involving players from the Sydney Swans AFL team have prompted a national conversation about sexual violence and the normalisation of misogyny and male entitlement within the elite sporting class. In this whole debacle, rather than centring on victim-survivors or the club taking accountability, the whole media discussion was focused on careers, contracts, whether they would make it to the grand final and how inconvenient the timing of all of it was. It is absolutely shameful. What does this tell women and girls across Australia? What does it tell a woman who experiences sexual or domestic violence about whose career and reputation will be protected? What does it tell a woman about whether she will be believed if she speaks out? What does it tell men about what behaviour their peers will tolerate, excuse or defend? And what does it tell all of us in this place about the work that still needs to be done to prevent violence before it ever occurs in the first place?

Victoria recorded 106,430 family violence incidents in 2024–25, an all-time high. Specialist services continue to tell us demand is significantly outpacing supply. In other words, they do not have the staff and the resources to meet the need and demand for safety and security for those seeking it. Who knows where these women and children are going? The refuges are full. We are in a housing crisis. Homelessness is on the rise.

The Council to Homeless Persons, in conjunction with Safe and Equal, published the *Bridging the Gap Between Homelessness and Family Violence Services* report in 2025. They found that one in five

women, young people and children who are experiencing family violence and homelessness who present to either a specialist housing service or a specialist family violence service are ultimately referred out to another sector before being referred back to the initial intake point, without having received the crisis accommodation they seek. This is a sign of a broken system that was provided over a long period of time with underfunding and chronic underinvestment in social housing and a lack of information-sharing between systems.

This Labor government does not get it. Family, domestic and sexual violence happen, and the response cannot just be from one government department alone. It has to be a whole-of-government approach. This year this Victorian Labor government allocated just 2.9 per cent of the family violence budget to primary prevention – just \$25.4 million, down from \$26.3 million last year. Equity Economics argue that to fully meet the demand government funding for the sector needs to increase to \$487 million in 2026–27. That is a 62 per cent increase from the \$300 million expected to be spent in the current funding trajectory. At the same time, the current waitlist for people fleeing family violence to access housing is 18.6 months, an increase of 1.3 months from the year before. Equity Economics estimate that each year 3750 victim-survivors seeking help from specialist family violence services will be unable to receive support. When demand goes unmet it is the women and children whose lives are at risk, and this is such an unacceptable reality.

Safe and Equal's 2026–27 budget submission identified \$118 million in family violence funding at risk of being lost. But this Victorian Labor government delivered under \$100 million, leaving a shortfall of approximately \$18 million. I am not sure how this adds up. How do this Labor government expect the sector, victim-survivors, their families and their community to believe anything they have to say when all they do is cut funding at a time when they are on their knees? The sector is expected to perform miracles while this government cuts its funding, which they know it absolutely needs. This is the same government that gives \$100 million in government subsidies to the Australian Grand Prix Corporation and the same government that sold all 44 public housing towers to private developers in secrecy. Meanwhile the social housing waitlist is at more than 60,000 people.

Let us talk about the fact, when we talk about who is on the front line of the family violence sector and what they do, that they do more than just help women and children escape violence. They help them get back on their feet and get back on track. They help them with case management, with counselling, with brokerage funding and with legal advice. There is so much that the sector have to do, and they are completely overwhelmed and completely strained, and what does this government do? It continues to take away. This is not okay.

I am going to talk about the bill in relation to the domestic and sexual violence reforms – and keep in mind that legislation must be matched with investment given the scale of this crisis. This bill does contain long-overdue reforms that respond to calls from victim-survivors, community legal centres, Aboriginal legal services and specialist family violence organisations.

First, the bill makes changes to family violence intervention orders and risk assessments. When an adult has been found guilty of relevant family violence offending, a criminal court will be able to extend or vary an existing family violence intervention order when future family violence is likely. The Greens support reforms that reduce the need for victim-survivors to repeatedly return to court simply to maintain their protection and safety. Someone who has already experienced violence should not have to repeatedly navigate the justice system simply to remain safe but also have to retell their traumatic experiences. There are, however, process concerns. My colleague Ms Copsey will have a number of questions for the minister during the committee stage and hopefully gain some clarity on how those concerns will be addressed during implementation.

Second, the bill removes the ability for a court to reduce a sentence on the basis of an adult's or child's previous good character, reputation, community standing or good deeds. At the same time, the bill preserves the ability for courts to consider matters such as the absence of prior convictions, rehabilitation and the risk of reoffending.

Third, the bill strengthens protections for children by making grooming prohibited behaviour under the Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010. This will allow protective orders to be made to prevent grooming associated with sexual offending against children. The Greens are supportive of legislation providing a pathway for early intervention to protect children from harmful behaviour. Our laws need to be capable of intervening before grooming behaviours lead to abuse. Fourth, the bill makes important reforms to fines that have long been called for by the sector.

Further to this, the bill recognises family violence as a form of discrimination. Being subjected to family violence will become a protected attribute under the Equal Opportunity Act 2010, including in employment, education, accommodation, goods and services and sport. No-one should be discriminated against because they are a victim of family violence.

The bill also clarifies and strengthens timely family violence information sharing – once again, long-overdue reforms after tireless calls from the sector. The Greens are, however, concerned, following advice from Women’s Legal Service Victoria, the Federation of Community Legal Centres, Safe and Equal and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, that this bill brings the potential risk of more victim-survivors being misidentified as perpetrators and Aboriginal and migrant refugee women being on the front line of further criminalisation. This also includes other vulnerable communities failed by the current system, like women with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ women and women in regional and rural areas. It is so important now more than ever that intersectional feminist principles must be at the heart of how we deal with these structural issues.

The Greens are calling on this government to invest in the things that actually prevent family, domestic and sexual violence. They include primary prevention, early intervention and education that addresses the harms faced by young people today with online algorithms. We heard just in the past week that there were education cabinet ministers from across the country reviewing Respectful Relationships, and I think this is very, very timely, because the issues and the challenges that young people face right now are of epic proportions and also present a lot of risk and threats to their safety. We are talking about AI, we are talking about the manosphere, we are talking about misogyny. There is so much more that our young people need right now, and education is such a big portion of that. It is very clear that Respectful Relationships is not meeting the benchmark of what our young people need in schools. As part of this, the Greens are sponsoring a petition calling on the Minister for Education to review the current situation of Respectful Relationships to ensure that it does provide comprehensive tools for young people to be able to deal with the harms, norms and attitudes being spread widely and only being made worse and intensified by social media. The Greens are calling on the government to invest in these sorts of things. It is so important for our young people. It is also important that the government funds specialist family violence and sexual assault services, safe and affordable housing and support for children. Not only are children seeing the violence in their homes, they are actually experiencing the violence. They too are victim-survivors in their own right.

We also need to tackle the broader conditions that enable violence, including gender inequality, misogyny, as I said before, and the harms associated with alcohol and gambling. My colleague Dr Sarah Mansfield introduced an important private members bill not too long ago for the government to review and investigate the proliferation of availability of alcohol across families, because that too is increasing the risk of family violence in families and communities. Violence against women and children is not inevitable; it is completely preventable. Every woman and child hurt or killed by violence matters. Their lives matter. We need right now this new Carroll government to be courageous and do the right thing, to be courageous and be the leader in the country when it comes to prevention of family violence, because legislation without sustainable funding investment is akin to handing out broken oxygen masks – destined to fail.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) incorporated the following:

The Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026 will make important reforms to the law regarding domestic violence and the treatment of offenders and victim-survivors.

It is disappointing that the reforms have taken so long to come to parliament. When Jess Wilson became leader of the Opposition in December 2025, she announced that the Liberals would criminalise coercive control, and the Member for Eildon Cindy McLeish then introduced a private members bill to implement our policy – which was then voted down by the Labor party.

I commend my colleague Cindy McLeish for her hard work in this policy area, and her diligence in continuing to push for these reforms.

This legislation could have been brought into effect much earlier, but it is good that we are finally here, and the Liberals will support this bill even though it is a missed opportunity to take the reforms further.

We know that intimate partner violence and family violence is not only carried out by men against women – violence is also perpetrated by women against men, women against women, and men against men.

Yet the large majority of intimate partner violence is committed by men against their female partners, and to combat this violence we must have regard to those gender dynamics.

It is estimated that around 45 women and girls will be killed by a male or intimate partner this year. That is a horrendous number, and society cannot accept this continuing.

Every woman who dies at the hands of an intimate partner is one woman too many, and all in this place agree that to protect women in Victoria we need a more robust system of support and legal tools to intervene at different stages.

This bill will make several changes to the law to protect victim-survivors and hold perpetrators of family violence to account.

The bill will amend the *Sentencing Act 1991* and the *Youth Justice Act 2024* to abolish the concept of “good character” during sentencing, including its use as a mitigating factor.

It will amend the *Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010* to class grooming as a prohibited behaviour so that courts can make a personal safety intervention order against an adult if that person is found to have committed grooming.

It will amend the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* to prohibit discrimination on the basis of subjection to family violence.

It will amend the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* to allow for the extension of family violence intervention orders during criminal proceedings against the offender, so that victim-survivors do not have to return again to court.

And, perhaps most importantly, this bill will amend the *Crimes Act 1958* to create a new offence of exercising coercive control over an intimate partner.

Fatal violence against a woman rarely comes entirely out of the blue. It is usually preceded by a history of physical violence as well as emotional manipulation, intimidation, threats, and isolation – in short, what we now call coercive control.

Making coercive control an offence will allow victim-survivors to take early action against a domineering and controlling partner before it reaches the stage of physical violence.

Statistics show that more needs to be done. In Victoria there were a record 106,427 call-outs for family violence incidents last year, up 8 per cent in five years.

Rates are particularly high in my electorate which has many small rural communities, as well as new housing estates in growth suburbs.

In both of these places, families are often isolated and find it more difficult to get the support they need to resist a coercive partner, or to stop domestic violence.

I recently met with Mitchell Shire councillors who said that domestic violence was a growing problem in their municipality.

Crimes statistics agency data shows that in 2024–25, the rate of family violence in Mitchell Shire was 55% higher than Victoria’s average rate.

Council officers also told me that in Beveridge in particular, domestic violence was up to four times higher than the state average.

That is unacceptable and more must be done to address the distinct factors that drive family violence in small towns and new estates, where there is often a lack of services, and car-dependent suburbs trap family members at home, unable to access support.

While the Liberals support this bill, it is a missed opportunity to make further reforms.

The Member for Eildon Cindy McLeish has been outstanding in pushing for the implementation of Clare's Law.

This law was introduced in the UK, and named after Clare Wood who was murdered by a former partner.

The law gives individuals the right to ask, and the right to know.

It allows people to request information about a partner's history of violence if they are concerned for their safety, and it puts an onus on police to inform someone if they identify a risk to them.

South Australia brought in this law in December 2024, and since then there have been 2500 applications, and 1064 disclosures.

That is over a thousand people who have been able to access highly relevant information about a partner in order to make an informed decision about their safety in the relationship.

It is impossible to quantify how many lives this has saved, but I am certain it has saved at least one person.

It is a shame that the Carroll Labor government has been unwilling to get on board with this vital reform.

Victorians should know that an elected Jess Wilson Liberal government will take the important step of implementing Clare's Law in our state.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

Feeling safe should not be a luxury.

But for some Victorians, it feels completely out of reach.

Across Victoria, family violence is destroying lives, harming children across generations and destabilising homes, communities and our broader society.

The 2021–22 Personal Safety Survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 1 in 5 adults – 20% of adults – have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a partner or family member.

This horrifying statistic underlines the importance of improving justice system responses to sexual and family violence.

Whilst we understand more needs to be done to prevent family violence, victims already in the system deserve better.

They deserve the most supported justice process possible, and further protections to ensure they never experience the same violence again.

This bill does exactly that.

This bill is about listening and responding to the voices of victim-survivors, improving our justice system responses, and strengthening accountability for perpetrators.

To ensure perpetrators of all forms of interpersonal violence can be held to account, this bill will criminalise coercive control as a standalone offence by amending the *Crimes Act 1958* to include coercive control as an offence.

This offence will ensure adults who use coercive control within intimate partner relationships will be held accountable.

There is currently no criminal justice response for coercive control, unless there is a Family Violence Intervention Order already in place.

We know family violence looks different for every victim, and that it is not always physical or sexual assault.

We know that abuse can come in the form of intimidation, humiliation, surveillance, or isolation.

Coercive control can have devastating impacts, increasing the risk of homelessness, poor health outcomes, poverty, and suicide for victims and their children.

So, this bill ensures these examples of coercive control will be criminalised, and that perpetrators cannot continue to cause harm.

To further support victims of family violence, this bill will expand Personal Safety Intervention Orders to include grooming through an amendment to the *Personal Safety Intervention Act 2010*.

This will strengthen protections for children and families, enabling PSIOs to be made against adults engaging in ‘grooming behaviour’.

The harsh reality is that children are often unable to identify inappropriate behaviours, so including ‘grooming behaviour’ under PSIO’s will ensure no sort of family violence goes unjustified.

To ensure victim-survivors wellbeing is prioritised, and the justice process is accurate, this bill will abolish the concept of good character by amending the *Sentencing Act 1991* and *Youth Justice Act 2024*.

This will not only protect victim-survivors from the compounded trauma of hearing that a person who harmed them is a person of ‘good character’ but also seeks to ensure that courts no longer receive or consider vague, subjective opinions about an offenders supposed moral worth.

This bill also ensures the protection of victims of family violence through several other amendments.

These include; amending the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008*, *Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010 (PSIOA)*, *Infringements Act 2006*, *Fines Reform Act 2014*, *Roads Safety Act 1986*, and the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*.

Victoria is leading the nation when it comes to preventing and responding to violence against women and girls.

In the years after the 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence, I worked as an Executive Director on the Family Violence Response Taskforce in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, a role that allowed me to help formulate the government’s response to the 227 recommendations.

This position gave me insight into the immense impact that family violence has on families.

It showed me the tremendous bravery of every victim-survivor who committed themselves to preventing family violence by supporting other victims.

Their advocacy for the exact reforms that are contained in this bill will not be forgotten and I thank them deeply for their contribution.

We listened to the recommendations of the Royal Commission and built the Orange Door; a support network for adults, children and young people who are experiencing family violence.

We have delivered 15 crisis accommodation refuges with more on the way, currently under construction.

We have invested over \$41 million into men’s behavioural change programs, because we know that investing in the prevention of violence is the only way to stop it.

We have committed at minimum a 10% of family violence funding to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, because we know Indigenous Australians are more at risk of family violence.

Labor is steadfast in supporting victim-survivors of family violence while holding perpetrators accountable and keeping women and children safe by stopping violence before it starts.

Victorians deserve better. Women and children deserve better. Victim-survivors deserve better.

And that’s what this bill will provide.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (17:46): Thank you to all of the speakers on the Justice Legislation Amendment (Family Violence, Coercive Control, Good Character, Risk Assessment and Other Matters) Bill 2026. These are topics that I know a lot of members are very passionate about and have made strong representations about in relation to stakeholders, individuals and community members that have vested interest in our continued advancements and improvements in policy and lawmaking in this space. We know that across Victoria and across the country family violence is the number one law and order issue that is destroying lives, harming children, causing generational damage and destabilising homes and communities, and this has ramifications for broader society, cohesion, the economy – the damage goes on. Listening to and centring the experiences and voices of victim-survivors and doing the work that is critical to changing harmful laws, practices and culture are what this bill is about. The bill contains a number of significant reforms to prioritise victim-survivor safety, improve the efficiency of justice processes and ensure perpetrators of all forms of interpersonal violence can be held to account.

Coercive control is an insidious form of abuse. It is used to intimidate, degrade, surveil, gaslight, control or isolate another person and strip them of their sense of autonomy and self-worth, all in order to exert control over them. We know the devastating impacts that this can have: increasing the risk of victims becoming homeless or suicidal, having poor health outcomes, sliding into poverty or

committing offences themselves. This is an area of law reform that has been discussed, considered and debated for many years. Here in Victoria we were at the forefront of legislation and legal protections for victims of family violence, dating back almost 20 years. Coercive control has always been a part of our family violence definitions. It has always been something that we consider insidious and something that we want to make sure is picked up by modern laws. There have been mixed views on a standalone offence for many years, and with the system maturing we believe we are at a time when we want to ensure that at the forefront we are seeing, hearing and ensuring that the system is on the side of victims.

I want to thank those who have been providing ongoing advice to government, particularly those who are members of the Victim Survivors' Advisory Council. That is a valuable committee that has an ability to speak directly to government ministers, advisers and departments in relation to their experiences, and to workshop and go backwards and forwards in relation to how particular laws would operate here in Victoria, drawing on experiences from other jurisdictions and the like.

I want to touch on the good character amendments in this bill. The bill abolishes the concept of good character, including its use as a mitigating factor at sentencing for all offences. The concept of good character on its own is generally only about someone's reputation, community standing or their past good deeds. It is not an accurate way at all to predict an offender's prospects of rehabilitation or risk of reoffending and without doubt causes trauma to victim-survivors. Thank you in particular to Harrison James and his advocacy through his Your Reference Ain't Relevant campaign.

In relation to discrimination reforms, it is, I think, a unanimous view of this chamber, but obviously the government is passionate about the fact that no victim-survivor should lose a promotion, be performance managed, have to relocate, be denied a rental or lose other opportunities, particularly in relation to accessing support, merely by being a victim-survivor. In fact the opposite should be true. The bill will make it unlawful to discriminate against someone because they have experienced or are experiencing family violence. Thank you to Westjustice for their advocacy on this reform and their work with Ms Purcell in particular.

In relation to other reforms in this bill, I would point to the criminal court's ability to vary a family violence intervention order on its own motion. Reforms in this bill will allow a criminal court on its own motion and with the consent of the victim-survivor to extend or vary a family violence intervention order when sentencing a perpetrator for relevant family violence offences. To encourage earlier consideration of whether stronger protections are needed, the bill will require police to indicate if there is a family violence intervention order in place and if an application to extend or vary that order will be made when filing a charge sheet for a related family violence offence.

Courts must consider victims' views in family violence intervention order proceedings. The bill will also ensure that courts more consistently prioritise consideration of victim-survivor views when extending a family violence intervention order and encourage longer extensions when a perpetrator is serving a term of imprisonment for a family-related violence offence to avoid victim-survivors needing to return to court multiple times. This comes from direct feedback of victim-survivors who have experienced the impact of having to be in court multiple times in relation to facing their offender and talking about their need to feel safe.

The bill is also expanding the personal safety intervention orders to include grooming. We will strengthen the protections for children and families by enabling personal safety intervention orders to be made against adults engaging in grooming behaviours.

In relation to fines and infringement reforms, the bill will strengthen supports for fine recipients experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, and the family violence scheme will be expanded to include excessive speeding fines so that victim-survivors can access relief in these circumstances. When we talk about this particular measure, we have for some time in Victoria had the ability for victims of family violence to make representations that they should not be responsible for fines that

have been racked up by their perpetrator because they are in a family violence relationship. This is, unfortunately, quite a common incidence, and it compounds the devastation that victims have already suffered with potential financial concerns. It has not included excessive speeding fines in the past, but again, this is a system of policy that has matured, and we believe it is time to expand to that cohort of fine to make sure that it is treated equitably with the other circumstances.

Something that perhaps goes a little underrated is the work and development permit scheme. This will be expanded to apply to court fines. Currently, it is only available with infringement fines. This is a program that is particularly beneficial for people who have received fines, but also a lot of community groups benefit from the interaction with people who have perhaps found themselves in difficult circumstances. It goes without saying that a lot of people who rack up fines find themselves in a difficult situation. They are often feeling quite stressed and are not sure how to manage it, and it can be quite a relief at the point in time when the law catches up with them, because it is an opportunity to deal with those fines and in this instance be able to access the work and development permit scheme where appropriate. This is effectively the ability to work off your unpaid fines. There are host employers and organisations who are happy to work with people who have found themselves in this predicament. A lot of programs, such as gardening programs, and some racecourses around the state offer opportunities for people to work off their fines in that regard. It is multibeneficial, and I have spoken to participants in this permit scheme in the past, and that sense of self-worth and the ability to give back and restore the community's faith in you through this system is something that cannot be underestimated. It is not just about clearing your fines and moving on with your life; it often provides the ability to interact in a way that means you can gain skills and work experience. For people that may have had difficulty accessing career paths and the like in the past it is actually a positive intervention at a point in time in their life when they are able to move on and create some opportunities in that regard.

Also, in relation to this bill we will be clarifying some information-sharing obligations under the family violence information-sharing scheme, which we know was a really important focus of the royal commission. We know – and I know through my interactions with Rosie Batty, in particular – that the way there was potential for victims to be put in danger was to do with the fact that systems did not talk to each other or there were particular elements of government services or agencies that had information about somebody's level of risk and the fact that they could cause quite a lot of harm if not supported or put in contact with the right people. That is something that we have continued to improve. We know that information sharing is a way to protect victims because that way there is a clearer picture of those risks that can be responded to. In this bill in particular, ensuring that we are streamlining reporting obligations under the family violence multi-agency risk assessment and management framework, known as MARAM, is an important improvement in a really good area of family violence policy.

Again, this is a piece of legislation that is made up of a range of amendments and changes which are all off the back of interactions with stakeholders. Considerable work has gone into developing the work, and we thank all the stakeholders across the family violence service sector and the justice sectors for their views and valuable input. We acknowledge the very understandable concerns around misidentification, which I am sure we can address in the committee stage. I thank the Attorney-General for her commitment to this area of policy and commend the bill to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Instruction to committee

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora) (18:01): I have considered the amendments on sheet RP25C circulated by Ms Payne, and in my view they are not within the scope of the bill. Therefore an instruction motion pursuant to standing order 14.11 is required. I remind the house that an instruction to committee is a procedural motion.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:01): I move:

That it be an instruction to the committee that they have the power to consider amendments and a new clause to amend the Summary Offences Act 1966 to repeal the offence of begging or gathering alms.

Motion agreed to.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (18:01): I move:

That the bill be committed to a committee of the whole later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Jaclyn Symes:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:02): I rise to make a contribution on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. This is a very important bill. On 11 August the Victorian government introduced this bill to the Legislative Assembly, and it is to amend the Education and Training Reform Act 2006, principally to strengthen protections for Victoria's apprentices and trainees, strengthen the permission-to-teach scheme and ensure that schools remain safe places of learning and work through a range of reforms that will better protect school staff and students against harmful behaviours.

First of all, I will deal with a matter that is of particular importance to me, being a mother of two children who are both apprentices, or one who was an apprentice but is now a qualified tradesperson and my daughter, who is an apprentice and will be a qualified tradesperson in about 18 months. As a parent of two children who have gone through the trade training system, I could not recommend it enough. Our trade training and apprenticeship system is an incredibly important part of our post-secondary education system. The good thing about it is that once you go through the apprenticeship system and become qualified at whatever it is you want to do, it generally is a pathway to well-paid and secure work. I often say to my kids, 'I can guarantee you one thing: basically your jobs will not be replaced by AI.' That is something that I can absolutely guarantee. I cannot see how AI will be replacing plumbers, carpenters, brickies or anything of that note, unless perhaps at some point down the track people start looking at having robots or something like that. But nevertheless, it is pretty hard to have these sorts of jobs replaced by AI. It just makes undertaking a trade and looking at a trade as a post-secondary career choice all the more important.

First of all, 62,000 apprentices and trainees are crucial to Victoria's economy and our society, but the regulatory framework that governs the Victorian apprenticeship system is outdated. The current legislation was established 20 years ago, and it does not provide adequate protections for apprentices and trainees. Over the past few years, sadly, there have been safety incidents in Victoria which have resulted in death and serious injury to apprentices. These accidents and incidents are tragic and are also entirely preventable. The bill before the house today will modernise and strengthen the regulatory framework for apprentices and trainees, making the system safer and fairer for our workers. A robust regulatory framework is particularly important for this cohort of workers, as they are generally young and mostly new to the workforce.

These reforms also deliver on a significant body of work that the Victorian government has been working on, which is to implement key recommendations from the Apprenticeships Taskforce, which was established by the Victorian government in 2023 following an election commitment in 2022. I note the former Minister for Training and Skills Gayle Tierney is sitting in the chamber, and I know this is a matter that is close to her heart. I want to commend and acknowledge the work that she did

when she was minister on these important reforms in working with unions and industry, because one thing we know – perhaps sometimes we forget what the whole point of TAFE and trade training is – is that this is training set up for industry, paid for by government and backed by government. We listen to industry. They tell us what skills and training they need in order to be able to have qualified tradespeople go into the workforce. This is why it is so important we have government-backed trade training, not dodgy independent providers – fly-by-nighters – who end up giving qualifications that are not worth the paper they are written on. It is important when you have young people entering the workforce and undertaking four years of trade training that when they come out of that on the other side they have a qualification that is recognised and is verifiable as good-quality trade training and something the industry has asked for the government to do. This is something that our government continues to deliver on.

Back to the taskforce – the taskforce was chaired by former president of the ACTU Sharan Burrow and also Justice Iain Ross, who was the former president of the Fair Work Commission. He served as a special adviser. The taskforce's membership was extensive and comprised of employer representatives and unions. Its work was also informed by a reference group of apprentices and trainees, and it consulted extensively with key stakeholders throughout 2023 and 2024. The key limitations of the existing apprenticeship and traineeship regulatory system identified by the Apprenticeships Taskforce were that the current laws provide very limited tools that prevent the regulator from acting quickly in response to harms or risk of harm; that the regulatory framework does not enable proper oversight, meaning apprentice and trainee safety and quality training is not prioritised; that the current apprenticeship and traineeship system is complex, with many co-regulators; and that information sharing between agencies is inconsistent and not comprehensive, leading to fragmentation and a lack of coordination across the regulatory system. Therefore, by strengthening and modernising the regulatory framework, the reforms in the bill will address these critical gaps in the oversight framework. The taskforce finalised its report in March 2024, and it made 16 recommendations to reform the apprenticeship system, to strengthen the framework, to improve the apprenticeship and traineeship journey and to enhance collaboration and coordination across the landscape for apprentices and trainees. The Victorian government has accepted all of the recommendations in full or in part.

The most significant reforms in the bill provide for the transfer of the regulation of apprenticeships and traineeships from the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority to Workforce Inspectorate Victoria, given its strong focus on protecting the rights of workers. This made sense, because the VRQA is really a body that is involved in regulating things in our education system, like public schools and secondary schools. It is not really set up as a trade training kind of associated entity looking at trade training, so it makes sense to transfer this oversight to Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. The bill also gives an expanded set of compliance and enforcement powers to the new regulator to be able to respond proportionately and quickly where risks of harm to workers are identified. A new licensing scheme for employers of apprentices and trainees will also help to improve system oversight, and new employer standards will set expectations for the employer's role, with specific oversight arrangements for labour hire providers who engage apprentices and/or trainees.

I have to say I am rather concerned about the number of apprentices who are engaged through labour hire companies and not directly with employers. When I look back over the 30 years of my working life and my working journey, that is something that certainly was not the case. Apprentices were directly employed, but it seems now not to be the case in many circumstances. That is disappointing, but nevertheless there will be greater information sharing between co-regulators and a five-year statutory review of the new scheme to ensure it is operating as intended.

All aspects of the traineeship and apprenticeship reforms are informed by the work of the taskforce, which undertook a comprehensive review, and it undertook extensive consultations with key stakeholders as well. The Victorian government would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the important role of the taskforce under the leadership of Sharan Burrow with the support of the

special adviser Justice Iain Ross, as well as the apprentice and trainee reference group, and to thank the numerous stakeholders from unions, employers, peak bodies, regulators and apprentices and trainees for their ongoing and thoughtful engagement in this process and contribution to the bill which is before the house today.

The default commencement for the new regulatory framework in the bill is 1 July 2029. However, the government has made a commitment to introduce the reforms earlier on 1 July 2028. The implementation period also recognises that key stakeholders need time to operationalise the changes to ensure a smooth transition to new arrangements. This is critical, because whenever we implement reforms the agencies that carry out the reforms need time to massage them through, and there might be some operational changes that they need to make. Also staff need to get across the changes, so it is critically important that we have this extra time to allow for a smooth transition.

The Victorian government will develop targeted communications informing key stakeholders, which will include employers, peak bodies, apprentices, trainees, unions and affected agencies, about the reforms and the new obligations in the lead-up to the reforms being implemented. A range of regulations will be required to operationalise the scheme and key stakeholders will have an opportunity to provide input into this process as well. Small business comprises about 80 per cent of employers of apprentices and trainees in Victoria. If you think about it, there are a range of businesses that employ apprentices, whether it is electricians, whether it is family plumbing businesses, bricklayers or carpenters. Many of these are small businesses, and there are builders and the like. As I said, 80 per cent of employers of apprentices are small businesses in Victoria. Given this scale, the government acknowledged that small business will be impacted more significantly than larger enterprises in operationalising these reforms.

The reforms have been designed and will be implemented in a way that minimises the regulatory burden while making the system fairer and safer for Victoria's 62,000 apprentices and trainees. For example, there will be no ability to charge fees. The government has listened to stakeholder concerns about fees and made the decision not to include in the bill the ability of the regulator to charge fees. This is a critical way in which the potential burden on small businesses and employers will be minimised.

There will be a requirement for an employer to be licensed in order to employ an apprentice or a trainee. This replaces the current legislative provisions where an employer must be approved by the regulator in order to enter the training contract. There has to be a licence. The requirement for annual review of the licence has been designed to minimise the burden on employers, but applicants will only be required to affirm that information and documents previously provided remain accurate and up to date, or if there has been any change to that information the details of this. The Workforce Inspectorate Victoria will use this information in making a decision to renew a licence. These are commonsense provisions: having a licence, making sure the documentation that you provided to the inspectorate when being granted your licence is up to date and then, again, just ensuring that those documents remain up to date, because things change over time. That is not a problem. It is just making it easier and simpler for small business and not charging a fee. That will go a long way when the inspectorate needs to decide to renew a licence or not. They will have the accurate or most up-to-date and timely information at their fingertips to do so.

Additionally, with any new IT system there will be an opportunity to operationalise the scheme in a way that streamlines application and approval processes for compliant employers. It is important to note that the government appreciates that the vast majority of employers will do the right thing by their apprentices and trainees. However, because of their age, the majority of these employees are younger than 25 years old and inexperienced in workplaces generally, and therefore apprentices and trainees are a vulnerable cohort of workers, and their safety must be of paramount importance.

Over the past few years there have been numerous safety incidents in Victoria which have, sadly, resulted in death or serious injury to apprentices. These incidents are tragic, preventable and

unacceptable, so a more robust regulatory framework is critical to protecting apprentices and trainees from harm and to ensuring they receive quality training, improving both apprenticeship and traineeship completion rates and the viability of apprenticeships and traineeships as offering compelling career pathways. This will assist in addressing Victoria's significant skills shortage, including for occupations vital to the pipeline of skills required to support critical growth areas. The reforms will ensure employers will access skilled labour that supports business growth and industry sustainability.

The Workforce Inspectorate Victoria has also specific statutory functions in the bill to inform, educate and assist licence-holders, which of course will be employers but they will also be licence-holders. They will be able to educate and assist licence-holders in relation to their rights but also, importantly, their obligations. There will be extensive consultation with small business during the development and negotiations on planning to ensure small business impacts are well considered in the design of the regs and the scheme's implementation. The clock is probably going to beat me. There is a lot more that I could say about this bill, because it is a very important bill and addresses a number of areas, but at this point I will leave other comments for my colleagues to make. I commend the bill to the house.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:17): Just before I start, thank you to those opposite for being flexible and allowing me to see the first 10 minutes of the member for Croydon's valedictory speech. He was just warming up when I had to leave, and it was very good.

I rise to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. I want to start with a basic fact about how apprenticeships work, because this bill suggests the government has forgotten it. Every apprenticeship in Victoria exists because an employer decided to create it. They looked at the work coming in, looked at the cost of the wage, looked at the pipeline of skills they needed and took someone on. If there is no employer, there is no apprentice, and that is it. If having an apprentice is too hard for any reason, they will pragmatically have to consider alternatives. There is one really useful question to ask of this bill: does it get one more apprentice hired and does it get them hired safely? That is a good test. A new regulator, a new commissioner, a licence – none of that is worth having unless it actually gets one more young Victorian into a trade and completing that apprenticeship or traineeship safely. Before we apply that test, the house should understand how badly Victoria needs a good answer about how many apprentices we have and getting more apprentices in.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research released its latest figures in June. It said that trade apprenticeship commencements in Victoria were down 11.8 per cent – to the lowest number since 2001; non-trade commencements were down 20.8 per cent – the lowest since 1995, when the traineeship system was in its infancy; and over the 12 months Victoria recorded the largest fall in trade commencements of any state or territory in the country. Plumbers were down 15.5 per cent; carpenters, down 16.1 per cent; sheet metal workers, down 18.9 per cent; aged and disability carers, down 16.6; and child carers, down 23.1. They were in the construction workforce and the care workforce, the two fastest growing sources of demand in the state. In 2021 Victoria had 73,350 apprentices and trainees in training. Last year it had 57,015. Commencements overall have fallen 46 per cent since 2021, so they have almost halved. Then there are completions: Victoria finished 11,990 skilled trade apprenticeships last year; Queensland finished 13,265 and New South Wales 14,445. The government's own taskforce found that our completion rates have been below the national average every year for at least 13 years. Now consider demand: the Victorian Skills Authority projects construction alone will need 162,000 new workers by 2035, and about half of all new jobs in the next three years will want a VET qualification. Demand is rising and supply is falling, and the gap has widened every year this government has been in office. Then look at what it does to the labour market. Victoria's unemployment rate is 5.1 per cent, the highest of any state – higher than the government forecast in its own May budget. Youth unemployment is 11.8 per cent, the highest in the country. It was 8.6 per cent in January 2023. For young men it is 13.4 per cent. In Melbourne's west it is 15.6 per cent. In the north-west it is 14.1 per cent.

The Australian Industry Group's assessment is that 'Victoria is sleepwalking into catastrophic skills shortages' – that is their quote. None of this arrived overnight, and none of it was inherited; it is a product of 12 years and 12 budgets in which this government decided what mattered, and skills did not make the list. The government built this shortage, and they have done nothing about it – nothing effective anyway. Now, at the last minute, they want to throw in some random stuff from a 2024 review that they have sat on for two years and that will not be implemented for another three.

What makes this all the more damning is that the taskforce behind this bill was set up because apprentices were being bullied, underpaid and hurt and lives were being risked and, in some sad cases, lost. No-one on this side disputes that the safety of apprentices is non-negotiable, but how does this bill deliver on it? It does not. We have significant concerns with this bill, and we will be seeking to amend it to make it the least worst version of itself we think it can reasonably be, because businesses, apprentices and anyone with a stake in the Victorian economy are entitled to ask a very simple question: faced with the lowest commencements this century, the worst youth unemployment in the country and industry warning of catastrophe, what is the government's answer? Two years after its own taskforce reported, the answer is a licence – a licence that will not be implemented till 2029. Employers already need approval to train an apprentice. It is a one-off approval, and it can be revoked. The government is replacing it with a licence renewed every year, a fit and proper person test, standards to comply with, inspectors to enforce them and an offence of training without one – a licence to hire a kid.

Frankly, Victoria does not need more regulators that are there for box ticking. Victoria needs more apprentices. Consider what this bill requires of an employer who simply wants to train an apprentice. Under new chapter 4A no employer in Victoria may enter into a training contract with an apprentice or trainee unless they hold an employer licence. It replaces the one-off approval employers hold today, so it is not new, it is replacing something that already exists. They will apply to Workforce Inspectorate Victoria, they will make disclosures and they will pass a fit and proper person test. The licence lasts one year. Every year they keep an apprentice they must apply again. Every training contract must then be approved by the regulator. They will then need to comply with employer standards. Those standards have not been written.

At the bill briefing we were told that they will be developed later in consultation, after this Parliament has voted, but what has been written is that if they breach these unwritten standards, the penalty is up to \$25,092 for an individual and \$125,460 for a company. Authorised officers may enter their premises, search them and inspect their records and issue notices to produce and infringement notices. The Magistrates' Court can add civil penalties and adverse publicity orders. Effectively it is the labour hire licensing scheme lifted whole and dropped onto every employer who trains an apprentice. That is this bill. That is what the government is asking of the plumber with two vans and the panelbeater with four staff, and the Housing Industry Association will tell you that small and family businesses like those provide most of the apprenticeship opportunities in the state. So I see a lot of business bashing. I do not see many initiatives to increase the number of apprentices or to make them safe.

Anyone who has run a small business knows exactly what a licence is. It is a cost, sometimes a fee but always time and always the risk of getting something wrong. Consider what the employer is already putting in: wages for someone who is still learning and an experienced tradesperson's time taken off the tools to teach. At the end of it the qualification walks out the door with the apprentice for the benefit of the whole economy. The employer carries the cost, Victoria gets the skilled worker and this government's response is to licence the persons doing the giving. Time spent on compliance is time not spent on the job that pays the apprentice's wage. Every business owner in Victoria understands that, and I doubt it featured anywhere in the drafting of this bill. That is where it gets somewhat absurd, frankly.

At the bill briefing the opposition asked how the regulator intends to process a renewal from every apprentice employer in the state every single year. The minister's adviser said the renewal would most likely be automated – and in its own written responses to the taskforce the government said it would

examine the viability of a contribution model. The reapproval process would be automated. So if the renewal is a real check, then it is a real burden on every employer, every year, in the middle of a skills crisis. But if it is automated, on the other hand, then it is just a rubber stamp, a computer confirming that you are still fit and proper with no actual genuine check behind it, so it protects no apprentice. Here is what the bill itself says about the renewal: while a renewal application is being decided, the existing licence continues, but the employer may not enter a new training contract until the decision is made. So the plumber with a clean record, who has done everything asked of him, lodges his renewal and cannot take on a new apprentice until the regulator gets around to it, however long that takes. That is in the text of this bill. Either the licence does something and therefore puts an onus on employers or it does nothing and it still costs employers anyway. Either way, it gets no-one hired, and it gets no-one protected.

Then there is the question of who pays. There is no fee in the bill, and the minister's office did say that there were no fees. But there is nothing in this bill that prevents it. In its own written response to the taskforce, the government said it would examine the viability of a contribution model. A co-contribution model, in plain English, is a fee – from a government that has added increased taxes and charges 71 times. When the government says there is no fee, it is telling the truth, because at this point in time there is not. But there is nothing in the bill that prevents it from adding one further down the line. In fact, in accepting recommendation 11, it said:

A funding model to provide ... additional assistance will depend on further work to understand the future structure and costs of the regulator.

A funding model will therefore be considered in parallel –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Mr Welch, we are going to break for dinner. You can resume at 7:30.

Sitting suspended 6:30 pm until 7:30 pm.

Richard WELCH: I will try to resume seamlessly. Before the break I was talking about the fact that the recommendations from the taskforce report speak specifically about the likely need for a financial model to fund the new program, a recommendation that was in part accepted by the government. In their response they said:

A funding model will therefore be considered in parallel with developing options ...

And:

A funding model to provide this additional assistance will depend on further work ...

So the posture was that it will require more funding. On the fact that the government has said there will not be funding, well, it is not in the bill; it does not rule it out. One of our amendments will be to make it explicit that there will be no fee or co-contribution charge associated with this licensing program.

Industry read this the same way. The Housing Industry Association has called for this bill to be withdrawn. The executive director said that the existing law already provides a comprehensive framework for employing and supervising apprentices and that no evidence has been presented that a licence would improve anything. If this proceeds, one of its members has said they would no longer employ apprentices in their company. So one peak body was saying out loud what thousands are probably thinking for themselves. The Victorian Automotive Chamber of Commerce (VACC) said the skills shortage 'will not be fixed with licences, renewals and inspectors'.

Master Builders Victoria, the South East Melbourne Manufacturers Alliance and independent training providers said there is more regulation, more cost and not one extra apprentice. Two peak bodies support the bill, and both sat on the taskforce, but the VACC and the Master Builders sat on it too. The VACC said this bill targets the wrong problem, and the Master Builders said it adds costs and does nothing for the shortage.

When people who helped write the recommendations tell you the licence will not fix it, the house should listen. Apply the test. Does a licence hire an apprentice? It does not. It sits between the employer and the apprentice and asks the employer to justify themselves before they are able to give a kid a start. This is the government's habit: faced with a shortage of something, it regulates the people who supply it. With the lowest commencements this century, the response is to make the employers who create apprenticeships apply for permission and renew it every year, and quite possibly pay for it. In the middle of a skills crisis that this government built, it has found a way to make hiring an apprentice harder: a licence to hire a kid. Victoria does not need more regulators; Victoria needs more apprentices.

How did we get here? Consider the process. In July 2023 the government set up the Apprenticeships Taskforce at a cost of \$1.5 million. In March 2024 the taskforce reported with 16 recommendations. In October 2024 the government responded. Seven were supported in full and nine in principle, with a further promise of consultation before anything was done. And then nothing. For two years – nothing. And now, in the second-last sitting week of the Parliament, there are 217 pages, introduced a fortnight before debate, with peak bodies finding out after the fact. Two years of silence, and then two weeks of notice. That is the consultation the government promised. Consider what the taskforce recommended. Its central recommendation, in its own words, was 'a new regulator with a dedicated focus on apprenticeship, traineeship and VET-related regulation' started immediately and 'delivered within this term of government'.

So new, dedicated and in this term. What the bill delivers is an existing regulator with an existing workload to be starting in 2029. Workforce Inspectorate Victoria began life in 2020 as the Wage Inspectorate Victoria, with criminal wage theft powers the government called nation leading. As the member for Evelyn in the other place set out in her speech on this, its first prosecution was withdrawn on the eve of a High Court challenge, most of those powers were repealed and it now looks after child employment and long service leave. This is the regulator now being handed 57,000 apprenticeships and traineeships and something like 37,000 employers who train them. And the minister's own second-reading speech anticipates that the workforce inspectorate commissioner will also be the apprenticeship and traineeship commissioner – the same person, same desk. The dedicated regulator the taskforce asked for has become a second job. And remember too that the taskforce diagnosed fragmentation, duplication and poor communication as a problem. An apprentice employer in Victoria already answers to the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, Apprenticeships Victoria, WorkSafe, the Fair Work Ombudsman and the Fair Work Commission, and the government's cure for too many layers is to add another layer.

Then there is the money. At the bill briefing we asked what the scheme will cost to stand up, and the minister's adviser said that it is still subject to a budget bid. So the regulator is unfunded, the staffing is uncoded and the computer system the scheme depends on does not even exist. The explanatory memorandum also concedes that the new IT system must be built before any of this can operate. That is why the start date is July 2029, or at absolute best 2028, if the government's software development hopes are met. It could not say what the system would cost. But this is the same government that spent \$159 million on a computer system for the Magistrates' Court and left magistrates working with pen and paper.

Please understand what is being rushed through in the second-last week of Parliament. It is a scheme that cannot start for three years, an unfunded regulator and a computer system no-one has designed or coded. The only urgent thing about this bill is the election and quite probably the ability to add a new tax in the new term if they have one. The government will say this bill is about safety, but if you just read it beyond the statement of objectives, there is not one operative provision that directly touches on the safety of an apprentice on a worksite. Workplace safety already has a regulator, and the approval scheme this bill repeals can already strip a bad employer of the right to train an apprentice – the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority has done exactly that. This bill adds instead an automated form.

The government might say the taskforce recommended employer registration, which it did. Risk-based registration was agreed by employers and unions sitting around the same table. The government took that and wrote an annual licence for every employer regardless of record with an offence for training without one. Registration and licensing are different instruments, and the employers who sat on that taskforce knew the difference. The government will say that this bill acquits the taskforce. The taskforce asked for a new dedicated regulator this term. This bill rejects all three. It will say 'free TAFE'. Free TAFE is a course; an apprenticeship is a job. A young person can enrol in a free course tomorrow and still have no employer and no trade. Free TAFE has never hired anyone. We heard them in the other place reaching back 30 years for someone to blame – that is, of course, 'Kennett, Kennett, Kennett'. The government has been in office for 12 years. At some point the record has to be its own.

I have one further point on that because it also highlights how this bill treats Victorian businesses and apprentices. We are being asked to legislate a penalty now and read the rule in 2029. The standards, the fee, the committee, the shape of the scheme – all of it is left to the minister and the regulator after the vote and beyond the reach of any voter. That is a democratic deficit, and it is the government's standard method. I apply a simple test. The scheme does not start until 2029. For this year, next year and the year after, the answer is no. The government's record with computer systems means you probably would not count on 2029 either. Victoria does not need more regulators; Victoria needs more apprentices.

Then there is the other half of the bill, which is the schools half. The government has yet again stitched together two bills into one with scarcely anything to do with each other. It is a licence scheme bolted to a bill about protecting teachers so that a vote against the paperwork can be presented as a vote against teachers. We should not fall for this. We take the school part on its merits. We think there are some merits in there, though there is some overreach as well. If this had been presented as two separate bills, we would support it, but we are not going to be boxed into supporting something that in itself has also not had proper consultation with all parties. I will not go into much greater extent about the education side. There is some merit in there, but we have not really been given the opportunity to consider it on its merits, given the way it has been bolted together with this. For the employer: a licence reviewed every year, standards set by guidelines or authorised officers and a penalty.

I will go back to the plight of our young people. In May this year 8.7 per cent of Victorians aged 15 to 24 were neither in education nor work. That is the group at most risk of becoming long-term unemployed. Somewhere in Melbourne's west, where roughly one in six young people cannot find a job, is a 17-year-old who would make a really good plumber – good with their hands, bored with the classroom and needing a go. Somewhere nearby is a plumber with more work than he or she can handle who took on an apprentice once and is weighing up whether they would do it again. This bill sends him to a regulator for a licence, tells him the rules will be written later, warns him of a \$125,000 penalty for breaking them and leaves open whether he will be charged for the privilege. He does not fill in the form and, frankly, no-one could blame him.

You cannot promise Victorians much if you are going to halve the number of business regulators and then hand one of them a second job, a licensing scheme and a force of authorised officers. You cannot say there is no fee when your own response to the taskforce says you are looking into one. You cannot claim your own taskforce's recommendation when it asks for a new dedicated authority this term and you have delivered none of these. Pick any of these you like – this bill fails all of them. We do have our amendments, and I would ask for those to be circulated now.

The three amendments are fairly simple. The first is we want to ensure it is written into the bill that there will be no fee for the employer licence. If the government has no intention of charging one, it will have no difficulty in supporting that, so we will find out. Second, we would like to change it from being a one-year annual approval to a three-year licence, as it is for labour hire, so the regulator checks properly once instead of pretending or having it automated the other two years. Third, we would like this to be reviewed after two years, not five, because this scheme is, in our view, going to drive employers out of taking on apprentices, and we would rather the Parliament found out before 2034.

The house is clear about what these amendments are. They are to make a scheme less bad. They do not make it a good scheme. The Liberals and Nationals would start from the other end of this problem: the employer. The answer to a shortage of apprentices is more employers taking them on, and everything a government does in this space should be judged by whether it makes that easier or harder. If we form government in November, that is the test this scheme will get. I will finish where we started in this debate. Apprentices – yes. Safety for apprentices – absolutely and always. The employers who train them – yes. Their safety is not negotiable. A licence to hire a kid – no. Victoria does not need more regulators; it needs more apprentices.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (19:48): I rise to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. This legislation does three key things: it overhauls how apprenticeships and traineeships are regulated in Victoria, it seeks to strengthen the safety of our school communities and it makes changes to the permission-to-teach scheme in schools.

I want to begin by addressing the apprenticeship reforms, which are long overdue. I understand the Trades Hall Young Workers Centre operates as a community legal centre dedicated to supporting young people in the workplace. Its laudable work has uncovered a growing number of apprentices' horror stories of underpayment, exploitation and unsafe workplaces, as well as hazing, sexual harassment and assault of female apprentices on the job. When the centre commissioned the McKell Institute to investigate, they found that only around half of Victorian apprentices actually complete their apprenticeship. This is leading to a serious shortfall in the skilled workers Victoria needs right now, including to build the homes to put an end to our housing crisis. The poor working conditions endured by apprentices are a product of longstanding government neglect of young people starting out their careers as apprentices. There is currently no appropriate vetting system for employers to hire apprentices, little to no regulation of employers and no system in place to identify or punish repeat offenders who mistreat their apprentices or commit wage theft. The McKell Institute report found that nearly two-thirds of Victorian apprentices were completely unaware of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, the body currently tasked with regulating apprenticeships, and that complaints to the VRQA by apprentices were in the single digits each year. The system has failed a cohort of workers who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

The Victorian Apprenticeships Taskforce, established in 2023, found that almost half of apprentices are 19 years or under when they start, and many entering the workforce for the first time do so with little to no prior experience to draw on about how to be safe at work. This creates a real power imbalance between an apprentice and the employer, making apprentices especially vulnerable to workplace exploitation. The taskforce was clear about the consequences of insufficient protection for apprentices – the avoidable death or serious injury of apprentices and trainees. The taskforce found that employer-related issues like poor-quality training, poor supervision and mistreatment are the single most cited reason apprentices do not complete their apprenticeship. One in four reported simply feeling they did not belong in their workplace. These systemic shortcomings have the largest negative impact on the apprentices already least represented in the system. We are talking about women, First Nations apprentices, culturally or racially marginalised people, and people with disability.

This bill moves apprenticeship regulation out of the VRQA and into Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. It creates a licensing system for anyone taking on apprentices, with a fit-and-proper person test to stop the kind of illegal phoenixing that has let bad operators walk away from one entity and simply reopen under another. It also establishes a statutory apprenticeship and traineeship commissioner with clear functions and powers sitting inside the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. I know that some in this place have raised concerns about this structure. They point out that the taskforce recommended a new independent regulator with a dedicated focus on apprenticeships and traineeships and argue that folding this function into an existing body falls short of that. But the reality is that what will determine the success of the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria in keeping apprentices safe and supported in the workplace will depend on whether the inspectorate is properly staffed and properly funded. This is

what we will be holding the government to account for, and our expectation is that the government will transparently report on whether the new system is actually an improvement on the old one.

Turning to schools, the Greens welcome the new statutory principle that every Victorian school should be a safe and respectful place of learning and work and the strengthening of the school community safety order scheme, although I will reserve some questions in committee for this particular part of the bill. Special effort is required to make our schools safe for Aboriginal children. It is deeply concerning that the Yoorrook Justice Commission found that schools are too often culturally hostile places for Aboriginal kids, contributing to high levels of student disengagement, absenteeism and suspension. We support the changes to the permission-to-teach scheme, which will bring more educators into classrooms that need them. This 'permission-to-teach scheme' is a name change from 'conditional authority to teach'. I will have some questions regarding this in committee, so I will wait for that.

But let us be honest about the real drivers of staff shortages in schools. Teachers and education support staff have just achieved a long-deserved pay rise that they were told was not possible, but the fight for better working conditions continues. The Greens will continue to push for things like fewer face-to-face teaching hours, so staff have the preparation time that they need, and smaller class sizes, so every student gets the attention that they deserve and so teaching and education support staff positions are a career path of choice and not a pathway to burnout.

The bill will also review digital content school community safety orders, and I will reserve my questions on this for the committee stage. The Greens support this bill and commend it to the house.

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria) (19:55): I am pleased to rise this evening to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. This bill is important as it will improve protections for apprentices and trainees, strengthen the permission-to-teach scheme and ensure schools remain safe places for teaching and learning. Members will not be surprised that my contribution will focus on the improved protections for apprentices and trainees that will be provided through this bill. I will not go through the bill clause by clause, but I will provide important context and speak directly on some of the most important features of the bill.

Before I begin I want to acknowledge each and every Victorian apprentice who is already contributing to our state. I also acknowledge the employers of apprentices and the training providers, mostly TAFEs – 70 per cent of our apprentices are trained at TAFEs – who participate in the system and pass on skills through industry experience and formal training. We do need an apprenticeship system, and we need one that is strong. We need one that supports people to take up and complete an apprenticeship, and we do need more highly skilled tradespeople to build our homes and the infrastructure that our growing state needs. It is only Labor, essentially, that constantly demonstrates its support for apprentices to succeed from day one through to getting their trade papers. Labor has provided better support for apprentices and trainees and improved trade training facilities at TAFEs right across the state, whether it be at Federation University TAFE's new engineering centre in Horsham in the west, TAFE Gippsland's Morwell Trade Skills Centre in the east or the Lilydale trade training centre at the previously closed TAFE campus. Of course it would not be me if I did not mention the number of TAFE campuses that were closed by the previous Liberal coalition government. When the opposition get up and say that the skills shortage was created by this government, I will put to those opposite: 'Can you imagine the state of Victoria if it had not been for the Labor government winning that election in 2014, rebuilding TAFE and making sure that we have modernised and improved training facilities, particularly in the trades area?'

We are not just backing apprentices with great training facilities, we are supporting them on the job, and we are doing that through the apprenticeship support officers. That was an initiative of a previous Labor government, and it provides free and confidential advice and support to apprentices and employers right across Victoria. We have helped hundreds and thousands of apprentices to complete

their apprenticeships, but there obviously is more to be done. I think we all recognise that, and that is why we have had a high level of participation in the taskforce.

I also need to say for the record that I am quite surprised in some ways that the opposition comes in here and criticises Labor in respect to the initiatives that we have put in place when not once did anyone from the opposition come and knock on my door when I was Minister for Training and Skills and raise any apprenticeship issues with me. They have never wanted to entertain a proper conversation about the apprenticeship system, and I think it is a telling point that they come in here and have these headline lines like ‘The skill shortages are created by this government’. It is just testament to how they do not understand the apprenticeship system.

The fact of the matter is that in terms of the funding arrangements for the apprenticeship system, it generally falls on the Commonwealth and the employer. The Commonwealth have done that through a variety of different schemes over a number of different Commonwealth governments. Employers make contributions, obviously, because they understand that providing contributions means that they are investing in their own business. They are investing in the industry in which they belong. But you would hear those opposite basically saying that governments should pay for everything. Of course that is not the reality and never has been the reality of the apprenticeship system.

The fact of the matter is that those opposite have had no real regard for the apprenticeship system. In fact it was this government that had to reintroduce trade papers. We did that in 2019 because they had been abolished by the coalition government – fancy that. The other thing that I was absolutely shocked about when I became the Minister for Training and Skills in 2016 was that when I started talking to people about trade papers, coming from blue-collar work experience in the car industry, no-one knew what trade papers were. I was absolutely shocked that people did not understand what trade papers were. We went about and made sure that we reinstituted trade papers because they are part and parcel of, one, having a national sense of what trade papers and apprentices are. The other thing of course was that we wanted to make sure that trades could be seen as an equivalent to other people that get certifications or degrees in other parts of the economy. So we went about that, and of course the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) has distributed those papers when apprentices have completed their courses.

It was clear to me during my period that more needed to be done, and the taskforce was seen by everyone as a positive step and a timely step, given that we had heard many complaints about behaviours in the workplace, particularly in terms of young workers – and women as well of all age groups, I must say. We formed that taskforce. I established it along with the Minister for Industrial Relations Tim Pallas. Our thinking on the taskforce was clear. We needed to improve the apprenticeship system and workplace experience for apprentices and better support employers. We needed to hear the lived experience of apprentices and trainees, and we did that through the apprentice and trainee reference group. That was telling in itself, in terms of the stories that people came to that reference group with time and time again of the bad behaviour that unfortunately continued to exist in many workplaces. We needed employer representatives, unions and government working together very tightly and closely on that taskforce, and they did. I am very happy with the way that that taskforce conducted themselves. They did great work. It delivered to government a detailed and I think a thoughtful report, with recommendations on improving the apprenticeship system. This Labor government has accepted all recommendations of the taskforce in full or in principle. Again I want to thank members of the Apprenticeships Taskforce – the employer representatives, the union representatives and the public servants – for the work that they undertook. I particularly want to thank the former ACTU president Sharan Burrow for chairing the taskforce and the former president of the Fair Work Commission Iain Ross for his contribution as a special adviser.

As I said, we have provided supports to apprentices and the apprenticeship system and established Apprenticeships Victoria, but we knew that other things needed to work better within the apprenticeship system. We have not just sat on our hands since those recommendations came through. We acted swiftly in setting up an Apprentice Helpdesk. That help desk is there for apprentices to be

able to have their stories heard and to be referred to various supports, but it is also a help desk for parents and employers. We have also established the apprentice employee assistance program. The Apprentice Helpdesk provides information, guidance and support to apprentices and trainees, including on training contracts – that was a major issue that was raised – wages, entitlements, safety and wellbeing. The free Apprentice Helpdesk has benefited over 3000 apprentices since it was launched in June last year. The apprentice employee assistance program provides apprentices and trainees in Victoria with free, confidential, short-term counselling and coaching for a range of health and wellbeing matters – again, a significant topic that was continually raised in the taskforce. Apprenticeships Victoria runs the apprenticeship support officers program and the Apprentice Helpdesk, helping apprentices sort through issues so that they can complete their apprenticeships and receive their trade papers. We established Apprenticeships Victoria because Labor values trades. This, I believe, absolutely contrasts against the position of the coalition and particularly previous coalition governments.

In terms of better regulation, providing additional support to apprentices and employers was the first important step following the Apprenticeships Taskforce. The next step is better regulation and better support for employers. This bill takes that important next step by delivering the improved regulation recommended by the Apprenticeships Taskforce. There is a strong rationale from the Apprenticeships Taskforce for a better framework for regulating apprenticeships after their finding that the current system ‘does not meet the needs of apprentices, employers and other stakeholders’. This was something I saw when I was the minister. I saw a system that was very, very difficult to navigate.

Before I go on, I want to thank Stefanie Veal, CEO of VRQA, and her team for their work supporting our apprenticeships training system within the current legislative framework. Shortcomings in the current system are not theirs but the result of decades-old legislation.

This bill delivers a more modern integrated scheme that will give apprentices and trainees stronger protections while providing clearer expectations and support for employers. The bill will transfer responsibility for regulating apprenticeships and traineeships from the VRQA to Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. This is a practical reform. It will bring regulation to an inspectorate already focused on workplace rights, labour hire, the prevention of exploitation and indeed generally understanding the workplace. More importantly, Workforce Inspectorate Victoria will be provided with the powers of a modern regulator of apprenticeship and traineeship needs. The taskforce heard directly from apprentices and trainees, and their experiences varied enormously. Can I say that the apprenticeship system does need further work. I look forward to further conversations with those that are interested in the apprenticeship system and to sitting down and actually having that conversation instead of walking in and having these polarised positions that are of no use to young people, no use to apprentices and of course no use to the employers or indeed the industries in which they participate.

I will leave it to others to mention issues in terms of commencement rates and completion rates. Those figures that have been provided by the opposition so far are absolutely incorrect. My time has run out, so I will hand my notes over to one of the other speakers that will take this issue on. But can I say a lot of hard work has gone into this. It is not a polarising issue at all. It is about making sure that governments at all levels and employers have got a proper role in making sure that we have a really good, frank, robust apprenticeship system. This government is prepared and will continue to be prepared to support the apprenticeship system. The funding of it is predominantly of the Commonwealth’s and the employers’ making.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (20:10): I rise to make a short contribution on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. Apprentices and trainees are among the most vulnerable people in the workplace. For many an apprenticeship or traineeship is their first real experience in the workforce. They are still learning not only their trade but also their rights and responsibilities as employees.

Apprentices are particularly vulnerable due to their young age and lack of experience, making it difficult for them to speak up about mistreatment. It can also be difficult for them to recognise unsafe conditions, exploitation and mistreatment. Even when they know something is wrong they may be afraid to speak up. They may worry about losing their job, damaging their future career or facing negative consequences from their employer. Others may simply not know where to go or how to report their concerns.

Serious problems include bullying, physical abuse and wage theft. In Victoria, WorkSafe Victoria has taken action against dozens of employers, prosecuting 66 companies and banning more than a hundred employers over five years for harming apprentices. These figures highlight a broader problem. For many years, apprentices and trainees have faced gaps in regulation, oversight and enforcement, despite being among the most vulnerable workers in the workforce. This piece of legislation turns the Victorian government's response to the Apprenticeships Taskforce into a statutory regulatory framework and adopts its recommendations. Apprentices are arguably employees with the greatest power imbalance between them and their colleagues and their employer. This needs to be recognised and have protections put in place. Apprentices should not have to rely on serious injury, exploitation or workplace tragedy before the system intervenes.

One of the key reforms introduced in this bill is the establishment of a new regulatory structure, including an apprenticeship and traineeship commissioner. The bill also introduces stronger requirements for employers, including employer licensing and standards relating to the training and support of apprentices. Importantly, the bill gives regulators stronger monitoring and enforcement powers. This means employers will be held accountable for providing safe workplaces, appropriate supervision and quality training for apprentices. Our apprenticeship system must do more than simply provide training; it must provide a safe, supportive and high-quality experience throughout an apprentice's training or a trainee's entire journey. When someone begins an apprenticeship or traineeship, they should be able to trust that their employer will provide a workplace where they feel safe, respected and supported. Every apprentice and trainee deserves the opportunity to learn, develop their skills and build their future without fear of exploitation or mistreatment.

Our apprenticeship system must be built around safety, support, quality and knowledge. It is a special time for new and often young workers. Apprentices should be mentored and their skills developed. When apprentices and trainees start their journey, they deserve a workplace where they are respected, protected and given every opportunity to learn and succeed. An apprenticeship should be a pathway to a better future. It should be an environment where they are empowered to speak up without fear. This is a critical life skill and work skill; if you see something wrong, you should be able to name it. Every apprentice and trainee deserves to feel safe, valued and supported as they learn. Creating a safe environment is a shared responsibility between employers, training providers and the apprenticeship system as a whole.

Overall the reforms in this bill represent a significant shift toward a stronger and more accountable apprenticeship system in Victoria. The goal is simple: apprentices should be safe, properly supported and given genuine opportunities to complete their training and embark on a successful career. On behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria, we support this bill.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (20:15): I am proud to stand and speak in support of this bill, but it should be no surprise to anyone that the Liberals are not here speaking on this bill tonight. It should be no surprise at all that the Liberals are not here, because while they were at university in their university clubs, studying Reagan and studying Thatcher and how they ripped the guts out of communities, when they were looking at closing the SEC and ripping the pipeline of workers out, ripping the apprenticeships out, I worked with what I call the last of the overall generation – the generation that worked their lives with a company and trained apprentices. And those apprentices went on to have jobs in those companies, in those towns, to service the people that lived in those towns, to service the people that they grew up amongst, to work amongst the communities that they would go on to live in, to raise families and to support the communities they were in. And we know what

happened with them: in the 1990s Kennett and the Liberals got in and slashed it. But it was not just that. Between 2010 and 2014 Victorians talk about Baillieu and Nap Time doing very little, doing nothing. But I will tell you what they did have time to do: they had time to rip the guts out of TAFE. Twenty-two campuses were closed, 15 of them in regional Victoria. They sacked 2000 workers and ripped a billion dollars out of the system. That is what TAFE means to the Liberals; it means nothing. They have no experience of what it means to go to TAFE, they have no experience in working and they sure as hell could not care about ripping money out of it.

Labor, on the other hand, have invested in 45 new and upgraded TAFEs around Victoria. It is that real commitment since 2019 to getting 245,000 Victorians into free TAFE – getting them skilled up, getting them out in the workforce. And you know who benefits? We all benefit. When there are skilled workers in their local communities, we all benefit, everybody benefits, but the Liberals fail to see this. I heard a comment from the other side before, something about that not being what the lawyers think. Well, it is not about what the lawyers think, it is about what communities need. It is about what young Victorians need, which is getting skilled up to get out and work, getting a skill they can go and work in their entire life. That is what this is about. It is also about ensuring that employers who want to do the wrong thing cannot. Young apprentices, particularly in certain sectors and certain industries, absolutely need support. And if employers are going to do the wrong thing, if they are going to underpay, if they are going to steal wages, if they are going to put people in dangerous positions, you know what, they should not be hiring an apprentice. So that is what this bill does; it puts safeguards in to make sure that apprentices are safer. It puts safeguards in to make sure they have got good quality training. And it benefits us all when you have got more apprentices completing their apprenticeships and getting out into the workforce, because then there are more skilled workers in our communities for all of us.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (20:18): I also would like to say a few words on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. There is a lot in this bill, and I will go through a few of the things, but I will say from the outset that the Libertarian Party will be opposing this bill. The thing that concerns me most I will talk about first, and it is this idea of digital content orders from schools. So the idea here is that a principal may see something that parents are saying online or something similar to that and can issue an order which would effectively allow it to be taken down. Now, I see this as a dangerous encroachment on free speech. Parents are allowed to communicate with each other, to have online discussions about things and to have discussions about things happening at the school. And I get that in certain circumstances it may be appropriate for intervention from the school if something is directly harmful, and that is one of the categories here. But actually the bar here is far too low: ‘causes significant disruption to school operations or educational opportunity’. That is a pretty wide definition, and in fact if parents were expressing concerns about the way that a teacher was teaching or conducting themselves, that could easily come under that, you would think. I note that there are appeal mechanisms and this sort of thing. But the chilling effect here I think is dangerous and I think the bar is too low, and therefore we will not support that.

On the issue of apprenticeships, I speak to a lot of employers in the south-east. In fact the south-east, as many would know, has the largest manufacturing area in Australia, in Dandenong South. The thing that I hear a lot is it is very difficult to take on apprentices. It is very difficult to get skilled labour. I also hear that it is very difficult to keep apprentices, because many apprentices end up going and working on government Big Build projects because they pay more money than the apprenticeship. But I think that anything that the government does to make it more difficult for employers to get apprentices will just push them over the edge. It will just make them say, ‘Well, I’m just not going to do it.’ It is already difficult. They already find it difficult to do. I think the government should be providing more incentives to take on apprentices. I have said this a few times. One of the things that many of these employers have been upset about is land tax. Nearly every manufacturer in the south-east pays land tax. I think that they should be getting state government rebates on land tax for taking on apprentices. I think that that would be a good incentive. I offer that constructive suggestion to the

government and maybe they will take it up, I do not know. But there are many ways that the government could incentivise without just throwing money around. I think that a rebate on land tax would be an entirely appropriate thing for a manufacturer that is taking on and educating apprentices. I think that that would be a good thing.

I think there are a lot of things that we could do to encourage apprenticeships, but licensing people to take on apprentices is not one of them. That is not a good thing to do, and in fact I think it will make it so much more onerous that many of these employers will simply just not bother, which is a sad state of affairs. Again, I think we should be making it easier, not harder, and for those reasons I will be opposing the bill.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (20:22): I rise today to speak in support of the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. This legislation really is about the hardworking people who build the future of our state. Our Labor government knows that a strong, thriving economy relies entirely on a skilled, supported and safe workforce. Across Victoria we have got an unprecedented pipeline of work underway, and we need highly qualified tradespeople to build new housing for our growing population, to deliver major transport projects, to construct our massive renewable energy infrastructure and to drive our manufacturing growth. We simply cannot deliver these state-shaping initiatives without the apprentices and trainees who pick up the tools and do the hard work on the ground every single day.

Apprenticeships and traineeships are a vital pathway to stable, well-paid careers. They provide incredible opportunities for young people straight out of high school, for career changers looking for a new direction, for regional Victorians and for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who are seeking a reliable livelihood. If we are going to encourage more Victorians to take up a trade and help build our state, we have an absolute obligation to make sure they are safe and supported in their workplaces. The reality we face is that our current apprenticeship regulatory framework, which was established under the Education and Training Reform Act 2006, is two decades old. In fact many of the relevant components of that legislation date back over 25 years. The world of work, industry standards and educational needs have changed dramatically in that time. The current framework is simply not fit for purpose. It urgently needs modernisation to keep pace with the changing demands of our economy and to properly protect apprentices and trainees from challenges that can completely derail their careers. We promise to fix this.

In January 2023 our Labor government delivered on a major 2022 election commitment by establishing the Apprenticeships Taskforce, chaired by Sharan Burrow AC. This taskforce undertook the most significant wideranging review of the apprenticeships and trainee system in recent history. Can I take a moment to acknowledge the absolute powerhouse of work done in that taskforce by Sharan. I did have the good fortune of meeting with her at a range of TAFEs in the Northern Metropolitan Region, and she did talk a lot about the changes that the taskforce were looking to implement. The core purpose of that taskforce was clear: we wanted expert advice on how to improve safety in workplaces across the state, ensuring that more apprentices and trainees could get a successful start to their careers while also ensuring that industry continued to back and support the system.

In March 2024 the taskforce delivered its final report, handing down 16 recommendations and three supporting actions aimed squarely at modernising Victoria's system. The findings were confronting but entirely necessary to hear. The taskforce highlighted that many apprentices continued to face serious workplace safety concerns, unacceptable harassment, deeply inconsistent training experiences and immense difficulty when trying to navigate the system to get help. These are not minor inconveniences that people should just have to put up with. Experiencing harassment or unsafe conditions on a worksite can completely destroy a young person's confidence and ruin their career trajectory. It directly affects whether someone actually finishes their apprenticeship, whether they remain in their chosen occupation and whether they reach their full potential. The central message from the taskforce was clear: while apprentices are critical to meeting Victoria's future workplace needs, the current system requires far stronger protections, simpler support arrangements and

modernised regulation to ensure that we can complete training of apprentices across this state safely and successfully.

The government listened and supported all 16 recommendations either in full or in principle. We immediately backed this response with a \$9 million package to support the rollout of these reforms. That funding included the creation of a centralised apprenticeship support helpdesk, new dedicated mental health and counselling services for apprentices, additional targeted support for employers and robust measures to improve safety, inclusion and training quality across the board. The legislation builds on that vital work, and this bill will fundamentally reform the regulatory system to provide far greater support, addressing safety, harassment, training quality and fairness at work. It will directly improve completion rates by ensuring quality training provision and enforcing more appropriate workplace environments.

We are completely overhauling how employers are regulated in this space. This replaces the current outdated one-off approval process with an annual employer licensing system. This means an employer's ongoing fitness to employ apprentices or trainees will be actively assessed every single year. Employers will be legally required to update the regulator if there are any changes to the information provided on their initial licence application. This moves us away from the 'set and forget' mentality and ensures continuous accountability. To enforce this we are introducing a practical, commonsense set of compliance tools. The regulator will be equipped with notices to produce documents, notices to comply, infringement notices, official warnings and enforceable undertakings. The bill creates new offences and penalties, striking the right balance between implementing proactive safeguards and ensuring we do not discourage good employers from taking on apprentices. We are also bringing greater information sharing between relevant regulators. This will deliver improved coordination and consistency, ensuring that bad behaviour is caught and addressed swiftly rather than getting lost between departments. This bill also enables regulations to be made that set out clear outcome-based rules for employers. These regulations will clarify the ongoing expectations placed on employers across the entire apprenticeship journey, covering crucial areas like inductions, training progression, providing a supportive workplace environment, proper supervision and complaint resolution.

Importantly, the bill delivers stronger regulation of apprentices and traineeships under labour hire models, including group training organisations. When an apprentice is hired by one entity but placed on a site managed by another, the lines of responsibility can blur. The legislation provides the ability to prescribe specific employer standards for those who act as labour hire providers to ensure young workers are always protected. Furthermore, we are expanding oversight of training programs and introducing minimum content requirements, a formal lodgement process and strict reporting obligations for registered training organisations. To oversee this modernised framework, the regulatory function will officially transfer from the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority to the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. The Workforce Inspectorate Victoria has a strong track record in enforcing workplace laws and supporting workers, making it the right body to take on this responsibility. We are establishing a dedicated commissioner to regulate apprentices and trainees and their apprenticeships and traineeships, which will be a Governor in Council appointment. The bill also provides for a consultative committee made up of between five and 10 members directly representing the interests of employers, apprentices, trainees and registered education and training organisations.

You cannot reform a system without putting in the resources to support the people navigating it. Our Labor government is backing our apprentices. This year's state budget provides \$5.8 million over two years for safer and fairer apprenticeships. This specific funding secures the continuation of the Apprentice Helpdesk, supports the transition to the stronger regulatory framework and funds a vital workplace rights apprentice training program. This comes on top of the \$22.8 million over two years we provided to Apprenticeships Victoria in last year's state budget. That investment ensured the

continued delivery of the priority apprenticeship model, which directly supports apprentices working in housing, construction, the clean economy and other high-priority industry sectors.

On the ground our apprenticeship support officer program is doing invaluable work. These officers provide apprentices with tailored one-on-one support and referrals. They help young workers navigate training and employment issues, address safety and workplace concerns, provide guidance on mental and physical wellbeing and offer critical assistance for those facing housing stress, financial difficulties or personal challenges. In 2025 alone over 21,000 apprentices were contacted under the apprenticeship support officer program, resulting in more than 150,000 individual interactions. The program works alongside the Apprentice Helpdesk, which was formally launched on 10 June 2025 to help apprentices, employers, parents and training organisations navigate the system. Since opening its doors, the helpdesk has handled over 3400 cases, and 90 per cent of those cases have been successfully resolved or closed.

I want to take a moment to reflect on the enormous leadership of Gayle Tierney, the former Minister for Skills and TAFE, who I know has been an absolute powerhouse and a force for apprentices. In fact I often have remarked that the happiest I ever saw Ms Tierney was in the company of apprentices at TAFE, watching them learn and grow and share with her their dreams for their careers and their hopes for themselves and their families. It is an almighty good thing that one of the last pieces of legislation we put before this place is in honour of her enormous work over the years. To you, Ms Tierney, congratulations. I support this bill, and I do it with the express understanding that I came from this sector and supported apprentices before I began my life in this Parliament. I understand just how significant it is to change a system that has been around perhaps a little bit too long without the eyes of a reformer in its wake. They had that with Gayle, so it is without any hesitation and with great pride, in fact, and probably with some phone calls that I will be making to apprentices after the passage of this bill, that I say that this bill establishes the modern standards that are needed for the future of apprenticeships in our state. With great pride, I commend this bill to the house.

Moir DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (20:34): I rise to oppose the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. This bill is supposedly about making sure tradie apprentices are not exploited and making sure that schools are safe for students and staff and teachers, but it just could not be further from the truth. This bill exploits apprentices and the sympathy that we all have for them, and it makes schools less safe for students and teachers and everybody by further undermining parental rights and basically creating tin-pot dictators out of every school principal in the state. This bill is your garden variety communist–Marxist attack on the family and is just another ruse to take over more taxpayer dollars. It is not to pay off debt, not to build a road, not to ensure that apprentices are not exploited and not even to ensure that apprentices are given the skills they need or that are highly valued, but just to feed the bottomless pit of corrupt union Ponzi schemes where they claim there is a problem, demand the government create more red tape to fix it and then just happen to have founded a couple of businesses that can charge government and private businesses to meet their compliance duties. It is an absolute rort, and I am disgusted.

We all agree that apprentices should be safe, properly paid, properly supervised and genuinely taught the trade that they signed up to learn. Teachers and students should be safe at school, obviously. You do not get brownie points for saying something so obvious. Principals need authority to keep order and need trust to make sure that people believe in them. The people who are in that school need to be trusted to educate and look after the children, and we need to make sure that they are competent and accountable. Everybody agrees with all of that. But unfortunately, this bill answers the failures of enforcement by creating more regulation and by doing the exact opposite of making schools safer. This bill answers institutional failure by creating new powers and handing them back to the same kinds of institutions that stuffed it all up in the first place, and it answers difficult human relationships by replacing trust and responsibility with yet another administration process.

I have a different view of what government is supposed to do, obviously, than those opposite. I believe that good government should give people the power to do their jobs. It should hold them responsible when they fail and should get out of the way of honest, hardworking Victorians. A good society is held together by far more than laws. It is held together by relationships, goodwill, agreed rights and responsibilities, trust and enough grace for ordinary people to make mistakes and put them right. Law matters when those relationships break down. We need police when people are dangerous, courts when rights are violated and regulators where safety must be enforced. But the government cannot legislate trust, it cannot legislate goodwill and it cannot replace the millions of voluntary acts of responsibility that make everyday life possible. That is the real community.

Tradies are one of the great strengths of this country. They literally build, wire, plumb and maintain all of the infrastructure that we all rely on. Nobody should ever look down on tradies. In fact we could do with far more tradies and far less academics advocating for paedophilia in our school curriculums – and if you would like to challenge me, you can look up Gary Dowsett, you can look up Steven Angelides and many more. None of them have been renounced by this government. It is pretty insane.

Teaching young people the skills that they can be proud of and that they can use to build a better life for themselves is one of the most fulfilling and meaningful roles in life. In fact that was my main career, and it is the job that I have loved most, apart from being a mum. Learning in the classroom, however, can only do so much. That is why on-the-job training, an apprenticeship, where someone further along the same road passes on the skills and tips and tricks of success from one generation to the next, is so valuable to society. An experienced worker helps the younger one, lets them watch, lets them have a go themselves, and then they are the next generation to build businesses to contribute to society.

Despite the horror stories that usually hit the news and absolutely should be prevented and dealt with, I really believe in our business owners and that these employers who take on apprentices are not just after cheap labour. The truth is they have to give up their own valuable, productive time to teach, supervise and correct mistakes for a youngster who cannot yet produce like a fully qualified worker but just needs a foot in the door and a chance to get the experience they need. Victoria is facing a shortage of skilled workers, so we should be making it easier for small businesses to take on apprentices, not harder. This is so clearly about money and power. It is just another opportunity to rip off businesses and taxpayers with another round of bureaucracy; a licence that, no matter what anybody says, we all know is going to come with some kind of licence fee, renewal costs, bureaucrats patting themselves on the back for creating bigger departments with more processes and boxes to be checked, literally making the system that they say has failed bigger and more expensive without actually fixing the core problem, which was enforcement. If Victoria needs more tradies, then we need to back the people who train the tradies, not undermine them.

The government has pointed to real cases of apprentices being underpaid, bullied, unsafe or just simply not even taught. The example that comes to my mind is the 17-year-old who turned up on a building site for his first day of work wearing a T-shirt of the wrong union, and he was terrorised and locked in a shed and committed suicide – by the people who say that they fight for workers rights. I do not know what this state has come to, let alone unions. But when it comes to apprenticeships, this bill is actually redundant. The only thing it adds is a way to force money out of businesses. That will only make it less likely that they will take on apprentices, which means only big businesses will be able to afford to do it.

Let us go through the issues that this bill claims to fix. Wages and conditions – they are already governed by the Fair Work system; superannuation – that is already regulated under Commonwealth law; workplace safety – that is already governed by our own Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 and enforced by WorkSafe; bullying, discrimination and assault – already unlawful; and whether the employer is suitable and whether the apprentice is actually being trained – that is already supposed to be regulated too. Employers already have to be approved. There is already supposed to be a binding training contract, a training plan, competencies that have to be assessed and officers with power to

inspect. So if a young person reaches their third year having spent most of it sweeping floors or perhaps bullied, sure, we want to know how that happened, but that is why we had the regulator. Someone had to know, and if not, why not?

Before this government asks Parliament for more power and more money, it should account for how they have used the money and power that they have already been given. This is something that the current Labor government is particularly bad at: taking accountability for the results of their own policies. The Housing Industry Association put it well. They said the simplest alternative, the simplest solution, is a regulator that actually does its job. You do not need to reinvent the wheel. They note that the Apprenticeships Taskforce itself found fault with the existing regulator and that government too often answers weak enforcement just by writing more rules which are also not enforced. This bill is remaking the exact same mistake. Why not just make the relevant regulators do their job and work hard to identify employers who have objectively proven themselves unsuitable to take on an apprentice and just prohibit them, rather than finding and punishing every good employer, forcing them to prove their worth by filling out paperwork over and over, year after year.

Then there is the whole issue about the money. As usual, when you follow the money, there is a loop running through these reforms. Union-linked organisations lobby the Labor government about a problem that they want more regulation for. Labor creates the regulation, and the new rules create more demand for taxpayer-funded training, education and compliance services. Government money then flows back to the organisations within the same union network that campaigned for the regulations in the first place. They get the funding, they get the work, they get the taxpayer-funded access to young workers, and then they lobby for the next expansion.

The Young Workers Centre was established by Victorian Trades Hall and affiliated unions. It is closely connected to the union movement, and it campaigned specifically for a licensing system for businesses employing apprentices. It wanted employers vetted before they could take an apprentice, campaigned for stronger regulation, welcomed the government's Apprenticeships Taskforce and celebrated the resulting reforms as a big win. Then the money flowed back to them. In 2024–25 the Labor government paid almost \$800,000 to the Young Workers Centre Incorporated for apprentice workplace rights education. That brought more than advice sitting on a government website; it paid a union-linked organisation to go into Victorian TAFEs and deliver workplace rights training directly to first-year apprentices – in a TAFE full of teachers who could have just done it as part of their ordinary job. That is very convenient, isn't it? They lobbied Labor for greater regulation of apprenticeship employers, and then Labor paid them to operate inside that regulatory environment that they helped to expand – it is ridiculous. The people lobbying government to create more red tape should not then be part of a money pipeline that pays their own network to help people comply with it. It is an absolute rort.

I have got 18 minutes. I could go through every single page, but I will be kind. If the goal is more skilled tradespeople, then you should just incentivise the best businesses to take them on by removing onerous red tape and reducing their tax burdens through rebates for land tax, payroll tax or whatever the levies and fees are that are making it impossible to do business and to hire apprentices so that they can actually train the next generation. With each of these new kinds of legislation and schemes and regulators and licences, we see time and time again the government causes problems to grow while claiming to try and help and charging us for the pleasure.

The only thing that the government actually needs to do is get out of the way. I am a very big Ronald Reagan fan, and I am reminded of his wry humour when he said that the nine most terrifying words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help'. What they could actually do to help is pretty simple. Here are five ideas. First, scrap payroll tax, WorkCover and every other state tax, levy or loading on apprentice wages. If any tax is still there, just pay it straight back to the boss who keeps the apprentice on. Second, put a firm cap on the forms and audits that a small business has to do to take on an apprentice. They are already a registered business. Learning happens on the tools. We need them to do that. They are doing us a service. Third, rebate other corporate taxes on

businesses that keep an apprentice all the way through to qualifying. Fourth, hand back the equivalent of the income tax that they pay on earnings up to 50K while they train. That way they can cover their rent and travel and finish their trade. Finally, tell the truth. Publish how many apprentices start and finish every year. Before any more big announcements or skills summits or other garbage you want to get up to with Trades Hall to pat yourselves on the back, just publish the data. Those are the basics of a state that actually respects workers and the money that they earn.

Now we come to the other part of the bill about schools. This part of the bill they say is focused on schools and families, and I was delighted to read about that because that is my favourite topic. Everyone agrees that schools should be safe. Everyone agrees that teachers should have a safe working environment and they should not be abused. But that authority should exist inside a relationship with families, and the government should never, ever forget that parents do not co-parent with the government. These school provisions are actually insane. I cannot believe that you are giving principals the power to dictate what parents say on social media. I do not know if you can hear yourselves. If some principal tried to tell me that I could not post on social media that trans women are men and they should not be supervising my daughter in her change room on swimming carnival day, I would look forward to seeing if that principal could be brave enough to tell me to take that down. I do not know who you think you are – that you could give a principal or some adult on school grounds that kind of authority over parents saying what they believe and deem it as harmful just so that you can undermine them, attack them and discredit them. That is a total abuse of government power. It is a total repudiation of all the values that this society was set up on – the Western values. I could do the Labor thing where they are like, ‘Why do you hate families?’ every time you bring up a group of people – you know it is true.

That is just the latest. I do not know if people know that principals already have the power to ban parents from school grounds if they decide that a parent is impacting the emotional wellbeing of people on the grounds of schools. We already have laws for that. You call the police if it is that bad. You cannot be giving a principal dictatorship powers like some little embassy cutting parents off from their own children. Why are you trying to have everything secret away from parents and all this authority over their children on school grounds? Why? I do not think there is any good reason.

When you are talking to children about adults that are trustworthy and adults that are untrustworthy, everyone always says that a bad and untrustworthy adult will tell you to keep secrets from mum and dad. That is what the Victorian government has done. As I have said, parents are not a bed and breakfast. If someone believes that any family or any set of parents is unfit and unsafe to know about any kind of information or activity at that school, then they should prove it in a court of law and have the parental authority removed. Until you do that, it is outrageous that you would undermine parental authority, literally transfer medical power of authority and keep secrets from parents without any evidence that has actually proved that there was any justification to do so.

The other disgraceful thing of course is that the school is not going to be there when the consequences fall. They do not keep the name of the adult who declared a child a mature minor, so that if it all goes wrong, the government can say, ‘Well, they made that decision themselves. It’s their own fault that they chopped off their organs. It’s their own fault that they took poisonous cross-sex hormones. That’s their own fault.’ Saying that to a child, to a minor, is putting the responsibility back on their shoulders instead of saying, ‘If you believe in something, be accountable for it. Stand up and take the consequences. Put your name on that piece of paper.’ That is how we all know that it is wrong and that you are putting children at risk. I do not know why you do not rebel against your own party. Some of you are really, really lovely people and you just confuse the hell out of me, because this is an evil, evil law.

When young people get into trouble, people call up radio stations: ‘Where are the parents? It’s their fault. It’s their responsibility.’ Well, the parents have been sidelined and cut out and demoralised and have had all of their authority and their rights stripped from them. You cannot have it both ways. The absurdity of all this is that the government still actually views themselves as a better protector than

ordinary mums and dads, when you could look at basically any of the Victorian Auditor-General's Office reports in the last 20 years and see that every time this government, or any government really, wholesale removes parents rights and takes children away from families, statistically, not only do they not do better, but they do far, far worse. Removing parental authority should be extraordinarily carefully done, absolutely. Not only can a school lie to parents about their own children, it can change their name, change their uniform, change their gender at school, change which toilets or bathrooms they use, change which rooms they sleep in on camps and send them for counselling, which can then send them to other third-party health providers outside of school during school hours – all behind parents' backs and with irreversible and very, very serious psychosocial and chemical interventions on the basis of nothing and with no paper trail, just because a kid might say that the parents might not agree with it – 'I don't think Mum and Dad would like that.' You are damn right Mum and Dad would not like that, because they love you and they are your best protectors. So you have taken away the basics of parental authority, and now you are taking away parents' rights to complain about it, and you are doing it under the guise of protecting children, yet again. It is absolutely appalling. In short, this bill is absolutely a threat to children and parents. It is garbage, and I delight in not supporting it.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (20:57): I am delighted to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. The Carroll Labor government is committed to ensuring the safety of all Victorians. Everyone has a right to go to work, training or school and be safe. This is even more important when we are talking about our young people. This bill amends the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to address the following areas: strengthening protections for Victoria's apprentices and trainees; supporting the safety of students, teachers and others through embedding the principle of safety and respect into the act and through practical reforms to school safety orders; and amending permission-to-teach arrangements to ensure trainee and substitute teachers are well supported and trained.

There are 62,000 apprentices and trainees in Victoria, and they are the future of our workforce. The Labor government has continued to invest in Victorian apprentices and trainees, who are crucial to delivering the skills needed for Victoria's economy. We know apprenticeships are a pathway for young people, people who want to change their career, regional Victorians and those wonderful creative innovators to take up well-paid careers. It is why we are supporting apprentices to complete their qualifications and engage in meaningful work. Victoria needs these qualified tradespeople to deliver housing, transport projects, renewable energy infrastructure – although that will all go if the opposition have their way – and defence manufacturing. We are helping to address these skill needs and encouraging more Victorians to enter an apprenticeship. More than 10,000 Victorian apprentices completed their training in 2025. The number of apprentices completing their training in Victoria increased by 16.5 per cent, higher than the national increase of 8.1 per cent, and more women are qualifying in traditionally male-dominated trades. Only last week I met with a group of young women who were exploring their trade opportunities at South West TAFE in Warrnambool.

This is all a result of the Labor government's efforts to rebuild and reform Victoria's training system after it was left in ruins by the Liberals. They sacked more than 2000 TAFE teachers, shut 22 campuses and ripped a billion dollars from TAFEs across Victoria. I happened to be mayor of Warrnambool at the time that they did that. I popped in to see the chief executive of South West TAFE Joe Piper, and I asked what the impact was of these cuts that the Napthine government are making. He told me a story that in fact Denis Napthine had popped into his office to ask him the very same question. He did not know what effect his own government's cuts would have on his own local South West TAFE. I will tell you what the effect was: 70 staff lost their jobs at South West TAFE, with almost \$10 million cut from its budget and about 30 courses cut in the first year alone. That is 70 residents of Warrnambool, 70 families that could not pay their mortgage and had to make arrangements or could not get a mortgage. Is it any wonder the economy flatlined? Students were warned that they would have to pay between 50 and 400 per cent more for courses in future and that 169 courses would have to be cut over the next two years. That is what they were told.

Only Labor governments support TAFE and public provision of education and training, and we are delivering a TAFE legacy in this state that can never be unwound. In February this year we enshrined the free TAFE guarantee in legislation. More than 245,000 students have benefited from Labor's free TAFE since 2019, and more than 5000 individuals in the south-west alone. It just goes to show that price does matter. Price is exclusionary, just like with access to trains. Now that we have capped the fares so they are the same as in Melbourne, regional Victorians are travelling more than they ever have. It has provided a real opportunity, and free TAFE has provided that opportunity as well for regional Victorians' careers. Free TAFE has saved more than \$816 million in tuition fees, an average of more than \$3300 per student.

This bill is proof of our ongoing commitment to Victoria's apprenticeship system. As my colleague and the former minister Gayle Tierney mentioned, we established the Apprenticeships Taskforce in 2023 to review that system and look for ways to improve it. The taskforce included employer and union representatives and consulted extensively with apprentices, trainees and other stakeholders. It found that regulators cannot respond quickly enough to harms and risk, oversight of training is inappropriate and the system is too complex. Tragically, there have been too many instances of appalling harassment, disregard for safety, serious injuries and even deaths of Victorian apprentices and trainees. The Carroll Labor government is committed to protecting the safety of all workers. The great majority of our apprentices and trainees are young and new to the workforce, so it is even more important that they are supported and protected. The government, as Ms Tierney said, has accepted all the taskforce recommendations in full or in principle. This bill provides more support for apprentices and their employers and addresses the key issues highlighted in the report, including safety, harassment, training quality and fairness at work.

Workforce Inspectorate Victoria will take over as the regulatory body for apprentices and trainees, and the inspectorate will bring a strong focus on protecting the rights of apprentices and trainees, safety and a high level of training. It will be supported by an expanded set of compliance and enforcement powers to enable it to respond quickly and appropriately. We are also introducing a new licensing scheme for employers and new employer standards, as well as specific oversight for labour hire providers.

Before closing, I want to mention briefly the changes to safety at school. Everyone deserves to feel safe at school – students, teachers and staff. The bill introduces a new principle into the act that all schools should be safe and respectful places of learning and work. This will make staff and student safety a guiding principle for the act as a whole, ensuring it has equal importance to the other principles, such as access to high-quality education. We know if we take a trauma-informed approach to education, it is quite relevant in a number of contexts. If a child does not feel safe, they are like a turtle: they hide inside and their shell protects them. But what happens is they are not looking outward – they are not learning and they are not listening to what is happening in the classroom. They are protecting themselves all the time if they feel unsafe. So safety is the primary, first, core responsibility.

It is very, very good that this is an evidence-based approach, and it should always be recognised and elevated as an important cultural achievement in a classroom and a school. An independent statutory review and community consultation found that staff and principals backed the scheme as an important tool for managing harmful and unacceptable behaviours by parents, carers and other adults as well as students. Despite this, incidence of such behaviour continues to rise. This bill strengthens and refines the scheme by streamlining the process for issuing orders and improving social media protections. It empowers principals to issue a digital content order to prohibit someone from using social media or other online platforms to harm, abuse, intimidate or threaten staff members or students. These are basic behavioural expectations that are basically aligned with ordinary social norms. Hiding behind social media can sometimes allow people to perhaps say things that they would never say to the face of a principal or a teacher. These orders can require the adult in question to amend or remove these posts. Those kinds of posts can impact on whole school communities as well.

I will leave my contribution there, but there are also some great changes around formalising and codifying the permission-to-teach scheme, which is for trainee teachers, as well as enabling the institute to monitor compliance and take action where conditions are not met. I want to close by saying a thankyou to former minister Gayle Tierney, who presided over the TAFE sector for a very long time – I think it was almost a decade – and by saying that Minister Gab Williams inherits a sector in fantastic shape compared to when Gayle Tierney picked it up.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

This Bill makes a range of positive reforms to Victoria's nation-leading education sector, but I would like to focus my contribution on the reforms that shall benefit Victorian apprentices and trainees.

Victoria is home to 62,000 apprentices and trainees, who play a crucial role in supporting Victoria's economic growth and sustainability through the development of their skills and their participation in the workforce. Many of these 62,000 are training in industries where their expertise is needed to ensure Victoria's workforce can meet its future skills needs.

However, the regulatory framework governing Victoria's apprenticeship system is outdated, it lacks adequate protections for apprentices and trainees which has led to preventable safety incidents, bullying, and harassment. The Young Workers Centre has reported a concerning increase in the number of apprentices reporting employment issues. These employer-related issues are, unfortunately, a commonly cited reason for non-completion of apprenticeships and traineeships.

That is why this Labor Government established an Apprenticeships Taskforce in 2023 which worked with employers, unions, and a reference group of apprentices and trainees to inquire into how Victoria's apprenticeship system could be reformed to ensure its effective operation into the future. The reforms in this Bill reflect the 16 recommendations made by the Taskforce in 2024, which the Government has accepted.

Before being elected to this place, I served as an Executive Director of the McKell Institute, where I worked on a report in association with the Victorian Trades Hall Council examining how Victoria's apprenticeship system could better support more Victorians to take up an apprenticeship, and see it through to completion. Much of the discussion in that report was reflected in the Taskforce's recommendations, and the Bill before us today.

The regulation of Victoria's apprenticeships system is currently overseen by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, however a majority of apprentices and employers are unfamiliar with the VRQA and the role it plays for apprenticeships. That is why we're transferring those regulatory functions to the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria, allowing the VRQA to focus on regulation on schools and vocational education and training, while the Workplace Inspectorate Victoria can use its existing expertise in industry regulation effectively in this role.

The enforcement mechanisms for these regulations are also in need of modernisation. Presently, the VRQA is limited to enforcement tools such as cancelling an employer's approval or training contract, or prosecuting said employer that are often disproportionate to reported incidents. With these reports of workplace incidents rising, it is crucial that the regulator has tools that can allow it to act quickly, flexibly, and proportionately to complaints. These reforms will introduce infringement notices, compliance notices, official warnings, or enforceable undertakings as tools that the regulator can use where risks of harm to workers are identified.

To complement these new tools, a new licensing system is also being introduced so the regulator can assess the suitability of an employer throughout the course of an apprenticeship rather than the beginning of the process, without increasing the burden upon employers. This gives the Workplace Inspectorate Victoria capacity to manage poorly performing employers throughout the course of an apprenticeship.

Regulatory oversight will also extend to labour hire providers who engage apprentices. In comparison to other employers, apprentices engaged with labour hire providers work for a third party – who have contracted the services of the labour hire provider – often with little oversight.

This Bill is also legislating a minimum standard quality of training for the course of an apprenticeship. Expectations for employers about what makes a successful apprenticeship journey are now being prescribed in regulation for the first time, having not been explicitly listed previously. Further to that, a range of minimum standards for training will also be included in the regulations. These reforms will ensure there is clarity for both the employee and employer about the course and quality of an apprenticeship or traineeship.

The current web of entities that provide advice, support, and regulation to apprentices and trainees is complex with each agency having different areas of expertise and functions. This system can often be confusing to navigate, particularly when apprentices wish to raise issues with their apprenticeship. Given this structure, it is important that there is a consistent and uniform approach for sharing information – as it stands there is not.

That is why this Bill enables co-regulators to share information consistently and comprehensively to create opportunities for organisations to improve their coordination when supporting apprentices and trainees.

This Labor Government understands the importance of Victoria's apprenticeship and training systems, not only to ensure that Victoria's workforce has the skills it needs, but to ensure that Victoria's economy thrives. But for too long the number of Victorians undertaking apprentices has been in decline, but that number is finally starting to increase again.

And that is no coincidence because this government has consistently supported apprentices and trainees. From investing \$5.8 million in this year's Budget towards supporting fairer and safer apprenticeships, to delivering free registration for apprentices using their vehicle as part of their apprenticeship and delivering free TAFE more than 245,000 students saving them over \$816 million in tuition fees.

What the Apprenticeships Taskforce made clear is that the current legislative framework for Victoria's apprenticeship and traineeship system is outdated and is in need of reform. That is what this Bill delivers: more support for Victorian apprentices to navigate work, training, and personal challenges so they can receive a quality apprenticeship and complete their qualifications.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (21:09): I rise to speak today on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Schools and Other Matters) Bill 2026. I would like to thank all members who have contributed to this debate and broadly to the bill. It strengthens protections for Victoria's apprentices and trainees. It strengthens the permission-to-teach scheme and ensures that schools remain safe places of learning and work through a range of reforms that will better protect school staff and students against harmful behaviours. The reforms in the bill reflect a significant body of work to deliver on the government's commitment to implementing key recommendations from the Apprenticeships Taskforce that the government set up in 2023. The bill will transfer the regulation of apprentices and trainees to the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria and strengthen their powers. It will create an apprenticeship commissioner and yearly licence renewal for employers of apprentices.

I would like to pick up on a few points raised, including in relation to amendments circulated. In relation to fees: there are absolutely no fees under the new licensing system. There are no plans to introduce fees. There are no powers to issue fees. On the statutory review: we have included a five-year statutory review. As employers are being supported through an educative process to comply with the new regulator, two years would be too early in the scheme to determine if it is working as intended. Five years provides time for the policy to work and develop and provides a future review with plenty of evidence about what works and what might not. On annual renewal of licences: the annual licensing process was a key recommendation of the Apprenticeships Taskforce. The licensing renewal requirements have been designed so that they are not onerous for the employer; rather, the work to determine the suitability of the employer rests with Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. Applicants will only be required to tick a box to affirm that information and documents previously provided remain accurate and up to date, or if there has been any change to that information, provide details of this. The focus of Workforce Inspectorate Victoria's consideration during the renewal process will be on whether the information submitted with the original application has changed.

The reforms have also been designed to minimise burden on employers. Importantly, this bill intends to make the regulatory framework clearer and more straightforward for employers so they can better understand their obligations. Employers will be given all the support they need to be fully compliant with the new regulator. There will be a 12-month opportunity to apply for a licence and transition their apprentices to the new regulator. Employers will also have greater oversight and understanding of an apprentice's training plan, so they can be confident at the end of an apprenticeship that they have a fully qualified and safe worker.

On the impact of the reforms on commencement and completion rates, these reforms present a critical opportunity to drive up completion rates for apprentices and trainees. The Apprenticeships Taskforce found that the most cited reasons for non-completion of apprenticeships and traineeships were employer-related issues, especially those related to the quality of training and employment. Improving Workforce Inspectorate Victoria's ability to oversee training plans and training contracts, coupled with

measures such as minimum requirements for training plans, will contribute to better quality training and supervision. In turn, this is expected to impact positively on apprentice and trainee completion rates and improve productivity. The new regulator will start by 1 July 2028. The bill states default commencement by 2029 or earlier, but the government has committed to this earlier start.

Turning to the education elements of the bill, and in particular the school community safety order scheme, this implements the recommendations of an independent statutory review of the scheme as well as feedback from the community via Engage Victoria last year. The community's expectations are clear: where all options and interventions in managing antisocial behaviour are exhausted, more needs to be done to protect teachers and students in person and online. The bill also introduces a new type of order called a digital content school community safety order, designed to protect school students and staff from harm perpetrated online using communication platforms and channels, including social media. Let me be clear: this is not about controlling genuine speech made in good faith online, this is about protecting the safety and wellbeing of staff and students and delivering a quality education to our young people. Digital content orders are only able to be made to prohibit a person from using a communication platform or channel to harm, abuse, intimidate or threaten a staff member or student where that content poses an unacceptable risk.

During debate in the other place, the member for Sandringham called on the government to consider retaining a high threshold for orders, procedural fairness and independent review, protecting good-faith parent advocacy and complaints and maintaining a pathway for constructive parent-school communications after an order concludes. The Carroll Labor government shares these interests. My contribution today confirms that the new regime is a measure of last resort and implements procedural fairness for those subject to an order. There are also multiple levels of review of these orders, including internal review and the ability to go to VCAT. In relation to supporting constructive parent-school communications, these orders are specifically designed to support the involvement of parents in the education of their child. Once an order expires it is our expectation that the school will make good-faith efforts to re-engage the parent in the school community so respectful behaviour and engagement can resume. This can be via things like communication plans or other agreements setting out the parameters of respectful communication. Resources like independent conflict resolution resources or mediation are available, including through the government's Independent Office for School Dispute Resolution.

The member for Sandringham suggested these considerations could be facilitated via a ministerial order. I can confirm that the government's expectations regarding the administration of the reformed school community safety order scheme, including advice on maintaining constructive parent-school communications, will be included in ministerial guidelines to be issued once the reforms are enacted. With those clarifying comments, I am pleased to recommend the bill to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (21:17)

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I want to ask a few questions on the functions of the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. With regard to the new legislated functions of Workforce Inspectorate Victoria in relation to apprentices and trainees, I note that recommendation 7 of the final report of the Apprenticeships Taskforce is as follows:

Establish an independent VET, apprenticeship and traineeship regulator with additional immediate support for VRQA ...

Can I ask what the rationale was for why the government has chosen to vest the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria with these powers as opposed to creating a new independent regulator, as was clearly recommended by the taskforce?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The apprenticeship and traineeship regulatory functions complement the workforce inspectorate's existing functions and capabilities and align with the government's strategic agenda on consolidating entities to make the system simpler and more accessible. The Workforce Inspectorate Victoria is already a mature regulator, having been established as an independent statutory body in July 2021 and previously as a regulator within the Department of Premier and Cabinet. Its scope is broad, covering public construction integrity, child employment laws, long service leave, contractor protections and education and compliance advice to employers, and the new functions will complement the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria's existing functions and capability as an industry-focused regulator, with a practical focus on supporting employers. Furthermore, with its strong focus on protecting the rights of workers, including its previous function of enforcing wage theft laws, it is positioned well to take on these additional functions.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: What assurances can the government give that the new apprenticeship and traineeship commissioner and Workforce Inspectorate Victoria as a whole will be sufficiently resourced to take on these new functions?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is intended that staff from the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) who work on regulation of apprenticeships and traineeships will transfer to the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria, ensuring that the expertise and knowledge of these functions will be maintained. It will then subsequently be appropriately resourced, including the necessary financial resources, ICT resources et cetera.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Minister, are you aware of the number of staff that are going to be transferred across?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Almost 30.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: How does the government propose to track the inspectorate's discharge of these functions?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Through the five-year review, Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: What statutory obligations, if any, will apply to Workforce Inspectorate Victoria to report on the fulfilment of its duties with regard to its new proposed regulatory and oversight functions with regard to apprentices and trainees?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The regulator will report in the usual way, as do other regulators, but they will also publish a list of employers that are found not to be suitable, if that goes to your question.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I just want to ask a question about applications for an employer licence. Noting the reported prevalence of bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination endured by apprentices and trainees, must an applicant for an employer licence disclose a complaint, settlement, VCAT proceedings or finding in relation to unlawful discrimination, sexual harassment, victimisation or vilification under the Equal Opportunity Act 2010 or the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001? And if not, why is this?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That would come under the fit and proper person requirements.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Similarly, does this section require the inspectorate to have regard to whether an application for a licence has been the subject of a complaint, settlement proceedings or a VCAT finding in relation to unlawful discrimination, sexual harassment, victimisation or vilification under the Equal Opportunity Act or the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The bill enables employer standards to be made that cover matters such as training, work and support; supervision; and resolution of complaints. It sets out information requirements for licence applications, which the workforce inspectorate must take into account when assessing whether to grant a licence. This includes if they have been found guilty of a sexual offence.

The regulatory framework also complements other existing workplace protections. For example, the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 provides that an employer must, as far as reasonably practicable, provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health for its employees. Health is also defined to include psychological health. The government will further consider how best qualitative and quantitative gender data can be collected and analysed to inform the five-year statutory review, as this is also an important opportunity to assess how the apprenticeship system is working for women in particular.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you for that detailed answer, Minister. New section 31A(4) ‘Appointment of Apprenticeship and Traineeship Commissioner’ provides that a person may hold office as both the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria Commissioner and the Apprenticeship and Traineeship Commissioner. Given the pre-existing responsibilities of the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria commissioner, how is it feasible for both these functions to be held by the one person?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is an extension of the role but will also be supported by a deputy commissioner.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I have just got a couple more questions, and then I will be done. Just in relation to school community safety orders, Minister, who would classify as an authorised person in government schools and in non-government schools?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Each of the following persons is an authorised person: the principal of a registered school; for a government school, the Secretary of the Department of Education; for a non-government school, the proprietor of the school or, if the proprietor of the school is not an individual, a person authorised by the secretary for that school; or any other person or member of a class of persons authorised by the secretary.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Are there any limits to how many community safety orders an authorised person can give out to parents or carers of the school?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There is no limit on the ordinary orders. The immediate orders, which exist for 14 days and can be extended for a further seven, would obviously be limited by time. You could only have so many orders in a given period.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Can I just ask a clarifying question. For an authorised person who makes an immediate school community safety order orally, is that the only way that an authorised person can issue a community safety order or can they also do it in writing? Are there other ways that they can issue a school community safety order?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It can also be written.

Renee HEATH: Minister, have you consulted with the First Peoples’ Assembly on this bill?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There is a statement of compatibility for the bill, Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: The statement of compatibility shows that you have not consulted with them. It states:

The First Peoples’ Assembly was not given an opportunity to advise on and did not make representations on the Bill ...

There is a clear gap between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians when it comes to outcomes in both education and training, so I just want to understand why they were not consulted in this process.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The development of the bill overlapped the period in which Gellung Warl was in the process of being established, and so they were not at that point convened and able to be consulted with on the bill.

Renee HEATH: We are only getting it, though, to the upper house today. They have been running and in establishment for quite some time, so were they at least given a copy of the bill or a briefing on the bill?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: My previous answer stands; it was a question of timing. Obviously the bill in the intervening period was publicly available, and anyone at that point was welcome to examine it, but the point at which the bill was prepared and introduced through the Assembly did not align with that opportunity.

Renee HEATH: I have just noted down exactly what you said: it is publicly available and everyone is free to examine it. Am I correct in saying that for whatever reason, whether it was timing or whether it was convenience, the government has not followed its legislated treaty process with this bill?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I would appreciate it, Dr Heath, if you do not put words in my mouth. I made it very clear it was a question of timing.

Renee HEATH: Okay, so am I correct in saying that the government's legislated treaty process has not been followed with this bill – yes or no?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I have made it very clear: it is a question of the timing.

Renee HEATH: I do not think you are quite answering my question, though. The question is: yes or no, was the treaty process followed in this bill? Not the explanation why, not the reason why not, just yes or no. Was it or was it not?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Dr Heath, you do not have the opportunity to dictate how the questions are answered, just the opportunity to ask them, and I have answered them accordingly.

Richard WELCH: Minister, the Apprenticeships Taskforce completed its report in March 2024. The government then delivered its response in October 2024. According to the government's response, it said further consultation would be undertaken before acting on these recommendations. The Housing Industry Association, Victorian Automotive Chamber of Commerce, Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia, South East Melbourne Manufacturers Association and Master Builders (MB) Victoria all said they had not been properly consulted. Why did the government fail to properly consult with industry stakeholders?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: In addition to the work of the Apprenticeships Taskforce, the taskforce consulted extensively with apprentices and trainees, employers, industry peaks, unions and government representatives. In recognition of the need to make the system safer and fairer for apprentices and trainees, the Victorian government established the Apprenticeships Taskforce, investing \$1.5 million to support its work. MB Victoria was a taskforce member. These reforms deliver on key recommendations of the taskforce, which had an extensive membership, as I said, across employer representatives and unions. The taskforce was chaired by the former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions Sharan Burrow. Justice Iain Ross, former president of the Fair Work Commission, also served as a special adviser. The lived experience of apprentices and trainees was at the heart of the taskforce work, and it was supported by the apprentice and trainee reference group, which provided diverse perspectives and was extensively consulted. The taskforce also consulted extensively throughout 2023 and 2024 to inform its recommendations. It engaged additional apprentices and trainees from priority cohorts, such as women and – Dr Heath may be interested in this – First Nations apprentices and trainees, as well as unions, peak bodies, regulators and employers. In relation to reforms – sorry, I will end it there. The rest is about the next part of the bill.

Richard WELCH: I gave you a list of industry bodies who said they had not been consulted or not properly consulted. I did not hear of any new industry bodies in that list that you provided. What industry bodies did you consult with?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The Australian Industry Group, Apprenticeship Employment Network, Master Builders, Master Plumbers, the Automotive Chamber of Commerce and Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry were all members of the taskforce.

Richard WELCH: Yes, they were members of the taskforce, but were they consulted subsequently, as was your accepted undertaking?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Obviously as members of the taskforce they were deeply involved in consultation throughout. The Department of Job Skills, Industry and Regions consulted on detailed policy proposals in the first half of 2026, and consultations were undertaken with stakeholders and past Apprenticeships Taskforce members, including the taskforce chair; industry representatives; group training organisation representatives and unions; CEOs of Victorian TAFEs; Apprentice Connect Australia providers; industry and union representatives; regulators, including the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria, WorkSafe Victoria, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority and the Victorian Small Business Commissioner; the cross-border commissioner; the Killara Foundation, which provides pathways to employment for First Peoples – again, Dr Heath might be interested in that; as well as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. This is in addition to the taskforce, which had extensive membership, as we have listed. The taskforce was again supported by the apprentice and trainee reference group, which provided diverse perspectives and was extensively consulted. The taskforce also consulted extensively throughout 2023 and 2024 to inform its recommendations, and it engaged with additional apprentices and trainees from priority cohorts such as women, again First Nations apprentices and trainees, unions, peak bodies, regulators and employers. Extensive consultation continued across the issues and across the breadth of stakeholders that I have listed already.

Richard WELCH: I will not re-ask the question, but I will observe that all these industry groups say that since the taskforce and since this legislation has been drafted they have not been consulted. You were not able to be very explicit about who you have had from industry, so industry is pretty unhappy about it. But I will move on. What is the cost of this new framework? What is going to be the cost of this new scheme?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will respond to your observation and putting words in my mouth. As I said, an extensive list of stakeholders was consulted both as part of the taskforce and in the development of the bill, and they will also be consulted within the development of the guidelines yet to come. So I reject your assertion, and if you could repeat your actual question, please.

Richard WELCH: Sure. What is going to be the cost of this new scheme?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government is currently preparing a business case to support a budget bid for consideration by the budget and finance committee, the expenditure review committee. Once the committee has determined the appropriate level of funding for Workforce Inspectorate Victoria's new regulatory function an announcement will be made in due course, and of course reporting will happen in the usual way in accordance with the relevant instruments.

Richard WELCH: Minister, can you explain how the bill will contribute to increased enrolments in apprenticeships and traineeships and how the completion rates will be improved by this bill?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I did speak to this issue in my summing-up, but ultimately I think the reforms will mean that apprentices, and employers for that matter, will have greater trust in the system. Apprentices will feel safer, and ultimately that can only be a good thing for completion rates and retention in the system.

Richard WELCH: In relation to the proposed licensing system, does any form of licensing system of this nature exist anywhere else in the country in relation to apprentices and trainees?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: All Australian states have regulatory requirements in various forms. South Australia has a specific five-year registration period for engaging an apprentice and requires a range of information on registration, such as premises to be used during training and scope of work, to be provided by the business. Tasmania's licensing system is specific to apprentices. It is a one-off and requires a fit and proper person test similar to Victoria's current registration system. These jurisdictions also have trade-specific licensing requirements. In New South Wales registered trade businesses are required to hold general industry contractor licences and register training contracts with an apprentice. In Queensland employers of apprentices in registered trades must meet general licensing, regulatory and assessment criteria. They must also pass an employer capability assessment. Similarly in Western Australia businesses who employ apprentices must hold a trade-specific licence. The reforms Victoria is initiating will result in a more rigorous regulatory framework that will help keep apprentices safe from harms and drive improvements in the quality of training they undertake and the supervision they receive. This will in turn improve apprentice and trainee completion rates, as I was saying in my previous answer, ultimately improving Victoria's supply of skilled workers.

Richard WELCH: But with each of those cases, none of them, as I understand it, are for a year. I am curious about why the employer licence is only for a year. By contrast, the labour hire licences are for three years. What is the reason for such a short period being adopted, especially when you consider the overhead that is going to put on employers?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: To ensure ongoing oversight of apprenticeship safety and quality of training, the Apprenticeships Taskforce recommended a risk-based employer registration scheme with a yearly renewal. The requirement for annual renewal has been designed to minimise burden on employers. Annual licensing addresses a key limitation of the existing system whereby once an employer is approved there is no ongoing requirement for the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority to assess an employer's ongoing suitability to employ an apprentice or trainee through having access to current information about the employer. Annual licensing was recommended by the Apprenticeships Taskforce. Annual renewals enable the currency of information to be maintained to enable the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria to determine an employer's suitability in an ongoing way that a longer renewal period, such as two years or more, would not. The licensing renewal requirements have been designed so that they are not onerous for the employer; rather the work to determine the suitability of the employer rests with the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. Applicants will only be required to affirm that information and documents previously provided remain accurate and up to date, or if there has been any change to that information, the details of such. The focus of the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria's consideration during the renewal process will be on whether information submitted with the original application has changed.

Richard WELCH: I think there is a bit of incongruity in that answer in two parts. The first part of your answer was saying the one-year renewal was to reduce the burden on employers; I think I heard you correctly in that answer. How does annual renewal reduce the burden on employers?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will give you the benefit of repeating myself once, Mr Welch. I went on to explain that the requirements for the work that is necessary and the onus, if you like, sits with the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria's consideration. Employers will be supported to meet those obligations. Their renewal process is about confirming that the details and other information on file remains accurate. If nothing has changed, then it is not particularly onerous for them, but if something has changed, then it is important that the inspectorate understands that. But ultimately, as I said, it has been designed so that it is not onerous for the employer, but rather the work to determine the suitability of the employer rests with the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria.

Richard WELCH: I still do not see how that reduces the burden on the employer. The renewal process might be expedited or automated potentially, but the other part of the incongruity is: if it is

to protect the safety and has that extra rigour – if that is what it is called – then if in the subsequent two years it is just simply an online tick box, where is the rigour? Because there is no detailed check; it is just an automated process. So it cannot be both rigorous and automated and made easy or expedient. I do not understand. Could you reconcile those two positions?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I said, the licensing renewal requirements have been designed so that they are not onerous for the employer. Rather, the work to determine the suitability of the employer rests with the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria.

Richard WELCH: Yes, but that does not answer the question. If it is expedient, then it is not rigorous. And if it is not rigorous, how are you ensuring the safety? That does not make sense. Do you want to have another try at that answer?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: No, thank you, Mr Welch. I will refer you to my previous answer.

Richard WELCH: There are roughly 35,000 employers in Victoria who employ apprentices and trainees. How will this scheme cope and ensure consistency in protections if it is required to assess 35,000 licence applications on an annual basis?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The inspectorate will be adequately resourced, as I indicated to Ms Gray-Barberio, to do that work.

Richard WELCH: The person of good character test will be part of this. Could you just clarify what will be that standard of person of good character – which particular legal measurement is that?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The fit and proper person test, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Yes, but there are a couple of different versions of that, and they have different reporting and submission requirements around them. So there are different levels. Could you clarify which one – what will be the requirement?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The current one-off approval system consists of an employer self-assessment that in many cases is not adequately verified, and identity verification processes are not routinely undertaken. This prevents currently the regulator from effectively assessing employers and puts apprentices and trainees at risk. That is why, as we know, the taskforce recommended an employer registration scheme. There are many factors that contribute to the employer registration scheme, but it would include assessment of employers' suitability to employ apprentices and trainees, as well as more rigorous screening to avoid potentially illegal phoenix companies from avoiding scrutiny. There will be various factors that contribute to this, including a one-off declaration which includes verification of elements by the VRQA and is done through a paper-based self-assessment. In many cases, that information is not adequately verified to ensure its accuracy, and currently there is also the problem with the lack of personal identification. So it is intended that this will mean that we have a greater assessment of an employer's suitability to employ apprentices and trainees.

Richard WELCH: I was not quite clear, though. Does that mean will there be a requirement for submission of financial documents? Let us compare it to, say, the Labour Hire Authority licence: is it the same test or is it a different test?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Whether the applicant is a fit and proper person to employ an apprentice or a trainee in relation to determining this, the regulator, as I have indicated, will have regard to whether the employer has been found guilty of offences, including indictable offences, fraud – an offence under the new regulatory framework – or has been insolvent or under administration in the last 10 years.

Richard WELCH: Minister, the taskforce report states that the regulatory framework proposed will create additional costs to implement and administer, which will require additional funding. I think you might have acquitted the fact that you do not know how much more it will cost at this point.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I have acquitted an answer to a similar question, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Why is it not yet costed, given the time between the taskforce response and now, when the bill is being asked to be passed? It is two years.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As evidenced by the fact we are all here, the bill is under active consideration, and it would be unusual to make a budget allocation or even an announcement indeed for something that has not yet been worked through in the legislative sense. As I indicated in my previous answer, there will be the appropriate submissions made within government to ensure funding for the reforms that will move their way through the Parliament, hopefully, this evening.

Richard WELCH: I am not sure it is unusual to cost something you are implementing before you implement it. Usually part of the consideration of the merits of implementing it is costing it. Are you saying –

Lizzie Blandthorn interjected.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Well, I will not labour the point. The taskforce recommended that the Victorian government engage with industry partners to develop an appropriate and affordable funding policy to support a modern approach to regulation that can support education as well as compliance. The government is supporting recommendation 11 and has said it will examine the viability of a co-contribution model. Isn't a co-contribution from industry code for a new tax via the licence fee?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Firstly, I would not consider a co-contribution to be a tax. Co-contributions were considered, but following consultation, it is not intended that they be followed through with.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Pursuant to standing order 4.08, I declare the sitting to be extended by up to 1 hour.

Richard WELCH: I agree that there is no provision in the bill to say a fee will be charged, but can you confirm there is also no provision that expressly states there must not be any fee or charge for the employer licence?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We have made it clear that we do not intend for there to be co-contributions, and I refer you to my summing-up, which made that clear as well.

Richard WELCH: But there is nothing that will prevent a Labor government subsequently applying a fee in the future if it so chooses?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There is no mechanism to enable a fee to be charged, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: The VCCI does not support recommendation 11 for co-contribution from industry for the regulatory scheme. In fact no industry group does. The government's own recommendation said they would pursue a co-contribution from industry. If they are not going to do it through the licence fee, how are they going to do it?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I refer you to my earlier answers, Mr Welch. The co-contributions have been ruled out.

Richard WELCH: So the entire regulatory framework will be funded from the government alone?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said, co-contributions have been ruled out, so yes.

Richard WELCH: The workforce inspectorate currently has no experience regarding apprentices and trainees and has only very limited experience in the area of regulatory responsibility, being child employment and long service leave. Why was the workforce inspectorate selected to undertake the work? Because that would be a departure in the first instance from what the taskforce recommended, but there are also other bodies with more experience in workplace safety.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Rather than creating a new regulator, as was recommended by the taskforce, the apprenticeship and traineeship regulatory functions, as we are talking about, will be moved to the inspectorate, and this will complement its existing functions and capabilities as an industry-focused regulator. It also enables the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority to focus on its core remit as a regulator of schools and the broader vocational education and training system. The taskforce established by the Victorian government in 2023 following our election commitment of 2022 was designed to address quality and safety issues in the apprenticeship and traineeship system, and they made that final report. But rather than creating a new regulator, the bill will transfer apprenticeship and traineeship regulatory functions to the workforce inspectorate. A range of stakeholders were informed about the government's response, as we have also spoken to previously, and these new functions will continue to complement the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria's existing functions and capabilities as an industry-focused regulator with a special focus on supporting employers. With its strong focus on protecting the rights of workers, including its previous function enforcing wage theft laws, it is additionally well positioned to take on these functions, and it will enable VRQA to focus on its core remit.

Richard WELCH: Minister, you said in answer to Ms Gray-Barberio's question that 30 staff will be transferred across, but what will be the total headcount of the workforce inspectorate when enforcing this new scheme?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That will be subject to government decisions in the future.

Richard WELCH: The bill refers to new employer standards being introduced to provide clarity to employers on what is expected of them when employing apprentices and trainees. Given that it is two years down the track, why have these standards not yet been drafted? When should we expect to see the draft of the standards?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The taskforce recommended employer standards obviously to improve the safety and quality of an apprentice's or trainee's workplace experience. The taskforce recommended outcome-based employer standards be developed to improve the safety and quality of the apprenticeship and traineeship journey. These will be set out in regulations following the passage of the legislation in the following broad areas: induction; training, work and support; access to facilities and equipment at premises; supervision; and the resolution of complaints. There will also be the ability to make as standard the requirements for labour hire providers who employ apprentices and trainees, and this is to reflect that typically there is a host employer who takes day-to-day management and supervisory responsibility for the apprentice or trainee. These standards are a new requirement, obviously, for regulating apprenticeships and traineeships in Victoria. However, they are not new as a regulatory concept. For example, South Australia has 14 standards that apply to employers of trainees and apprentices, and these also include supervision and complaint handling.

In 2025 the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions consulted apprentices and trainees, businesses, unions and regulators on draft employer standards. Their feedback has informed proposed broad areas for employer standards in the bill. The relevant sectors and other key stakeholders such as business and employer groups, unions and apprentices and trainees themselves will be consulted on the design of the employer standards. Regulations are obviously time limited and sunset after 10 years, so there is an important opportunity at that point to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of those standards, with input from, again, the key stakeholders. There is also an opportunity to do that as part of the five-year statutory review.

Richard WELCH: It was a detailed answer, but the detail I did not get was when we would expect to see the draft regulations, assuming the bill passes today.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That will be a matter of how quickly they can be drafted. I would not want to speak for the Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel in that process right now, but

obviously the regulations cannot be drafted until the legislation is passed. We have outlined broad areas. We have said that there will be consultation and then the regulations will be accordingly drafted.

Richard WELCH: This is nearly the last set of questions. The new regulatory regime is not anticipated to commence until 1 July 2029, which is in three years and five years after the Apprenticeships Taskforce report was handed down. Is the only reason for that long delay the design and the build of the IT system that can operationalise and manage the new licensing requirements, or is there another reason?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The new regulator will start by 1 July 2028. The bill states that default commencement is by 2029 or earlier, but the government, as I said in my summing-up remarks, has committed to this earlier start.

Richard WELCH: Just for clarity, though, the lapse in time is still a substantial period of time. Is that because of the development of the IT systems to support it, or is there another reason?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There are a number of reasons, Mr Welch. Obviously when standing up new functions in new or added-to regulators it takes some time to bring those aspects to fruition, including, as I was just talking about in answer to your previous question, the development of the regulations and the standing up and the transfer of employees. All of these things mean these kinds of transitions take time.

Richard WELCH: I agree and can accept that, but what is the outlier date? Which is the last date? Is the IT system the outlier date that actually defines the earliest operational time? Those other milestones probably could be completed much earlier. I am just curious: what is the outlier date that prevents the operation of the bill?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I said, the commencement date, as per the legislation as it stands, is 2029 or earlier, so arguably that is the outlier date. But the government has made it very clear that we intend for the new regulator to start by 1 July 2028, and there are various factors that lead to that date being the preferred date.

Richard WELCH: What is the cost estimate for the new ICT system?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That will be subject to the work that will be done post the passage of the legislation and subject to the usual government processes, as I had spoken to in my previous answers. As I have said, the government is currently preparing that business case to support that budget bid for the consideration of the government's expenditure review committee. Once the committee has determined that appropriate level of funding for all of Workforce Inspectorate Victoria's new regulatory functions, those announcements will be made in due course.

Richard WELCH: Will the ICT build and design be subject to a competitive tender process?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions will undertake a competitive process to procure the ICT solution for the new regulatory framework, consistent with whole-of-government purchasing requirements.

Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (22:11)

Richard WELCH: I move:

1. Clause 9, page 18, after line 31 insert—

“(2A) An applicant is not required to pay any fee in respect of an application for an employer licence.”.

This is where we would seek to make it explicit that there is no fee on the employer licence chargeable.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: The Greens will not be supporting this amendment. The bill as it stands does not enable fees.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will also not be supporting this amendment. The bill does not enable fees, as Ms Gray-Barberio has accurately indicated.

Council divided on amendment:

Ayes (14): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Richard Welch

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negatived.

Richard WELCH: I move:

2. Clause 9, page 30, line 22, omit “one year” and insert “3 years”.

This is where we are seeking to amend the renewal period of the licence from one year to three years. We think an annual licence renewal is onerous for employers and creates yet another barrier to putting on apprentices when we need them so badly.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will be opposing this amendment. As I indicated in answers to questions from Mr Welch, we do not believe that this is onerous for employers. Employers will be supported, but also the onus is really on the workplace inspectorate and not on the employer.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: The Greens will be opposing this amendment.

Council divided on amendment:

Ayes (14): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Richard Welch

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negatived.

Richard WELCH: I move:

3. Clause 9, page 76, line 11, omit “fifth” and insert “second”.

This amendment changes the review period. At the moment it is a five-year review period, which means the first review of this legislation and the efficacy of it would not be until 2034. We propose that that should be after two years. I think that is a reasonable period in which we can assess whether this is the right scheme to improve safety and to improve the number of apprentices.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will be opposing this amendment. The bill includes a review at five years, which is standard and considered best practice, and it allows for enough time for enough evidence to be collected and considered as part of a substantive review.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: The Greens will not be supporting this amendment. I think what has been suggested in the bill, a five-year review, is reasonable, given it is a new scheme and an opportunity to iron out any bumps in the scheme.

Council divided on amendment:

Ayes (14): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Richard Welch

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negatived.

Clause agreed to; clauses 10 to 175 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (22:28): I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (22:28): I move:

That the bill be now read a third time and do pass.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (15): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

The PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Assembly with a message informing them that the Council have agreed to the bill without amendment.

Multicultural Victoria Amendment Bill 2026

Council's amendments

The PRESIDENT (22:34): I have received a message from the Legislative Assembly in respect of the Multicultural Victoria Amendment Bill 2026:

The Legislative Assembly informs the Legislative Council that, in relation to 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Multicultural Victoria Act 2011** to establish Multicultural and Multifaith Victoria, to require certain public

sector entities to acquire interpreting and translating services from VITS LanguageLoop and for other purposes' the amendments made by the Council have been agreed to.

Business of the house

Orders of the day

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:35): I move:

That the consideration of orders of the day, government business, 3 and 4, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Local Government Legislation Amendment (Stronger Communities) Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Jaclyn Symes:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (22:36): Over the life of the Andrews–Allan–Carroll government, the local government sector has been in a state of flux. Since 2015 at least 38 separate local government statutory rules, bills and acts have been introduced by this government. We have seen eight separate ministers cycle through the portfolio, some in this place, some in the other place and one in retirement. Not even one of these ministers made it to three years, and as shadow minister I have seen off two of them. The last minister was elevated from the backbench, then became the shortest serving minister for local government in Victorian history and now serves as the minister for potholes. This bill was introduced by the member for Box Hill in the other place on 17 June, with a second-reading speech delivered the next day. Just weeks later he was gone. As for the incumbent, he is not even present to speak to the bill. Clearly this is a government that treats local government as a junior portfolio at best and a political punching bag at worst.

Before I prosecute the coalition's concerns, I want to outline what we support. We support extending the process for declaring the office of mayor or deputy mayor vacant to office holders elected for a one-year term. We support the procedural safeguards attached to the notice of motion. These include the reasons in the motion requiring an absolute majority to lodge it, providing 14 days notice and affording a written right of reply. Due to the government's woeful communication, some councillors were concerned that the amendment would see mayors removed with an absolute majority. That is not the case. For the motion to pass, a minimum of three-quarters of councillors must endorse it. However, we will support any amendments to improve natural justice, including raising the threshold for a notice of motion to be put.

We support the requirement that a councillor may not chair a meeting dealing with their own conduct. That is a simple way to prevent a conflicted councillor misusing the chair to inappropriately protect their position. We support the prohibition on a councillor with a conflict of interest influencing other decision-makers. That was a recommendation from Operation Sandon and a reasonable mechanism to prevent a councillor enriching themselves. We support annual reporting by the principal councillor conduct registrar. We believe that more publicly available information about arbitration and councillor conduct panels is better than less. We support the change to differential rating for the City of Melbourne. The city should be empowered to reduce the number of derelict or abandoned buildings. They are a blight on what could be the best city in the world, and they attract vandalism and other criminal activity. These measures appear in the coalition's own bill in substantially the same terms. This house can replicate that bill by supporting our amendments.

The bill that arrived in this chamber is better than the version introduced in the other place. When this bill was introduced, it confined the automatic standdown trigger to proceedings commenced by a law enforcement agency but only for the future. Councillors who had already been removed from office

by a private prosecution were to be left where they were. At Hepburn shire, councillors were stood down because of untested private prosecutions brought by an alleged vexatious litigant, and those proceedings were later discontinued by the Director of Public Prosecutions. I wrote to the minister on 12 August and asked him to make the correction retrospective. Less than two weeks later I received a series of amendments from the minister's adviser indicating his support for this change. The minister then moved amendments in the other place to that effect. As a result of these changes, affected councillors would be taken never to have been stood down. They are entitled to the allowances withheld from them, and they cannot be disqualified as councillors for missing the meetings they were barred by law from attending. Those amendments were supported by the coalition in the other place, and they are reflected in my alternative bill.

As far as the coalition is concerned, the most egregious aspect of this bill is part 3, which imposes a Local Government Fair Jobs Code Regulator. Along with the rest of the local government sector, we discovered this proposal when the 2026–27 state budget was handed down in May: \$5.4 million to deliver 'minimising insecure work in the local government sector' initiatives. On the face of it the budget output appears modest and its intention positive, but the reality is the exact opposite. The word 'fairness' in this state is about plundering the hardworking taxpayers and ratepayers of this state to line the pockets of the union bosses and fat cat head boffins. That is exactly what this code will achieve. This funding is allegedly to develop and implement the code and establish a new regulatory body within the Department of Government Services to monitor compliance. Initially the code was supposed to be voluntary, and it was explored by a limited pilot working group in 2023–24. Who was part of that group? We do not definitely know. Did they sign non-disclosure agreements? Allegedly. What were the findings? It is not public. According to a senior council officer, it died a death and was noticeably missing from the subsequent budget.

The wording of the fair jobs code is not in the bill. There is a framework, a regulator, reporting obligations, publication powers and offences, but there are still no draft regulations. We are being asked to create a regulator, arm it with investigative powers and empower it to publish adverse findings against named individuals in relation to a standard that not one member of this Parliament has read. When questioned during the bill briefing, the previous minister's office said the heads of power must be in place before regulations can be consulted on, let alone drafted. That is simply untrue. This is the routine style of this government: legislate first, inform second, regulate third and enforce fourth. We are being asked to sign a blank cheque and take the government on trust. On the record of the last 12 years, all trust has been lost.

Local government employs tens of thousands of Victorians who collect our waste, staff our libraries, run our maternal and child health services and maintain our roads. Like all Victorians, they deserve fair and stable employment, but as anyone in the sector could tell you, council workers enjoy some of the most insecure work in the state. In his second-reading speech the previous minister offered his evidence base for this code, and it is this:

The Australian Services Union has reported that more than half of local government workers have observed a rise in insecure forms of employment at their council over the past five years.

The previous minister is referring to the results of a survey conducted by the same union which has lobbied for this code since 2022 – a union that presumably surveyed its own members and that stands to gain the most from this bill. Their findings are in stark contrast to those of the Municipal Association of Victoria, which is the legislated nonpartisan peak body for the sector. The MAV surveyed 54 councils and found that permanent ongoing staff make up around three-quarters of the workforce. Ninety-two per cent also reported that their proportion of employees with more than 10 years service exceeded the comparable national benchmark. With nearly 70 per cent of councils surveyed, there is no question that this is a representative sample. They are specific, measurable findings, not the perceptions of a few union members. Commonwealth workplace law already comprehensively regulates job security, casual conversion and minimum conditions across every industry in this

country. If there is a local government specific problem that requires a local government specific regulator, the government has clearly not shown it.

The fair jobs code regulator is appointed by the Secretary of the Department of Government Services, a secretary who is appointed by the Premier of the day. The regulator enforces a code written by the minister and reports to the minister. Unlike our integrity and oversight bodies, the regulator is not a genuinely independent statutory officer. Like too many quangos in this state, the regulator will not operate at arm's length from the government. The persons a regulator could investigate are not elected officials; they are council employees – Victoria's 79 local government CEOs. These CEOs are personally responsible, unable to delegate the duty to a senior officer and required to lodge a compliance assessment by 31 October each year. They are liable to having a finding of noncompliance published against their name on a government website and left there for five years. This could conceivably affect CEOs whose councils cannot afford to comply with the code. It could sully their reputations and terminate their career prospects. It is insidious intervention into the operation of councils. If the ASU are to be believed, this code could prove to be the death blow to many councils. Services could be brought back in-house to comply with the local government award rates. Seasonal or one-off work could be unnecessarily conducted by permanent staff. Procurement conditions could narrow the field of tenderers to big businesses that comply with the social agenda of the state.

Regional and rural councils, which already struggle to recruit and retain staff, will feel this most sharply. One council in my area has spoken to me about the difficulty of recruiting suitably qualified building surveyors and their need to use contractors to meet their statutory deadlines. This code does nothing to fix the root causes of this shortage and only worsens their problems. Councils have three ways to absorb the potential cost: cut services, sack staff or apply to the Essential Services Commission to raise their rates above the cap. Perhaps that is why this government is allegedly contemplating changes to lift the rate cap.

Finally, I want to touch on the unfairness at the heart of this. As one council said to me, and I paraphrase: 'We are required to operate with uncertain finances, dependent on grant applications which we may not win. Our revenue is not guaranteed. The only financially responsible way we can operate therefore is to maintain flexibility in our outgoings. It is a fundamental mismatch to require from us onerous ongoing obligations without providing us with funding certainty.'

I turn to the mandatory model governance rules. The previous minister told the other place that these rules will acquit the recommendations of Operation Sandon, which is of course something we would support. But in the same speech he said that the rules are still being developed and that they will be released for public consultation before they are finalised. The working group developing them is operating under strict non-disclosure agreements, so councils cannot see them either. Councils in this state serve populations ranging from a few thousand residents to a few hundred thousand. Forcing councils to adopt mandatory rules that may or may not suit them is simply unworkable, so is requiring them to go out for community consultation to make minor changes. While we are not opposed to model governance rules, councils should not be forced to adopt them at this stage.

The previous minister said that one of the most important decisions a council makes is the employment and performance management of their chief executive. That is exactly why the decision should rest with the elected councillors, who are accountable to their community for it, not with clauses prescribed by regulations which can render a contract void by operation of law. Consider what that means for a council that appoints a chief executive in good faith on a contract that turns out not to comply. Consider what it means for the individual who signed it. Greater consistency in these arrangements is worth pursuing, but it should be done with the sector before legislation is passed.

The technical working group should be appointed and draft regulations released for public consultation before Parliament votes, rather than afterwards. Under this bill a chief executive is placed under a legal duty to report a councillor to the chief municipal inspector, with no obligation to investigate first and no capacity to do so, and with no guidance whatsoever on what to do with an allegation that is trivial,

baseless or made for an improper purpose. We should think carefully about what this does to the relationship between a council and its administration. It places an officer in the middle of a political dispute and requires them to act, whatever they think of the merits. It exposes them to allegations of partiality no matter what they do, and it blurs the line between governance and administration.

I turn to the new power for the minister to require a council to resolve an internal dispute. The previous minister presented this as a moderating measure, a step short of appointing a municipal monitor. But the provision contains no enforcement mechanism. It cannot compel anybody to do anything, and there is nothing stopping the minister from doing this now. All it does is create a standing invitation for a minister to grandstand, inserting themselves into the internal affairs of a democratically elected council, and it delivers a new avenue of complaint for any councillor who has lost an argument and would like the minister to relegate it. This government has appointed monitors on multiple occasions, often on dubious grounds and always at great cost to the ratepayer. Creating this new power will do nothing to stop the government's penchant for interventionism. The government's bill runs candidate leave until the declaration of a result, which differs from seat to seat. A councillor in one electorate could return to duty weeks before a councillor in another for no reason connected to anything either of them has done. Election day is a single known statewide date. It is the right end point, and we will move an amendment to that effect.

I want to say something about consultation, because this government has made an art form of ignoring it. The coalition sought views from all 79 councils, from more than 600 councillors, from every key peak body and from legal, governance and consulting experts across the sector. Most governance and integrity reforms in this bill enjoy broad support, but the fair jobs code, the mandatory adoption of governance rules, the prescribed CEO arrangements and the new ministerial power attracted caution or outright opposition. Not one council and not one peak body was identified to us as supporting this package in full. The one organisation that has publicly championed the fair jobs code is the union that asked for it and demanded it. It is hardly a coalition of the willing. So where does that leave the coalition and where does it leave this house? We have not opposed the good parts of this bill. We drafted them ourselves and brought them to this chamber. We secured an improvement to this bill on retrospectivity that the government did not initially propose. We will move amendments in committee to remove the fair jobs code and the fair jobs code regulator, the prescribed chief executive employment framework and the ministerial direction power. We will move amendments to confine candidate leave to the period from Victorian Electoral Commission nomination to 6 pm on election day, to make CEO reporting of conflicts discretionary and to ensure councillors are not penalised for attending council premises for private or personal reasons. If those amendments are agreed, this will become a good bill and it will have the coalition's support. If they are not, then we will have no choice but to reject it.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (22:58): I am pleased to rise and make a contribution on the Local Government Legislation Amendment (Stronger Communities) Bill 2026. Councils shape the everyday lives of Victorians through the essential local services they provide. It is the level of government that touches people's everyday lives most directly. Whether it is through waste management, the maintenance of local roads, community infrastructure or local library programs, local government has a direct daily impact on our neighbourhoods. Because of this, Victorians rightly expect their councils to operate with strong governance, and the bill delivers on those expectations.

Our reforms respond directly to the recommendations stemming from the IBAC Operation Sandon special report, the Whittlesea commission of inquiry and our government's 2022 commitment to creating a local government fair jobs code and an independent regulator to enforce it. This is a practical, comprehensive reform package aimed at making local government stronger and more accountable. These are the kinds of essential systemic reforms that only a Labor government can deliver. This bill strengthens integrity in council decision-making and fundamentally improves the system that supports good governance at the local level. A key measure we are introducing is a new offence to prevent councils and delegated committee members who have a declared conflict of interest

from attempting to influence others outside formal council processes. Residents expect their local representatives to act strictly in the public interest. When a decision-maker has a private or financial interest in a matter coming before the council, their obligation to step back is clear. This new offence protects the integrity of council decisions and helps –

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Jaclyn SYMES: Pursuant to standing order 4.08, I declare the sitting to be extended by up to 1 further hour.

Sheena WATT: When a decision-maker has a private or financial interest in a matter coming before the council, their obligation to step back is clear. This new offence protects the integrity of council decisions and helps ensure that public decisions are made fairly and transparently. It sends a clear message that closed-door lobbying by conflicted individuals will not be tolerated.

The bill requires council chief executive officers to proactively notify the chief municipal inspector if they become aware that a councillor has failed to declare a conflict of interest. This ensures a much clearer pathway for oversight and guarantees strengthened accountability. It improves any ambiguity and places a clear legal obligation on the administrative head of the council to escalate integrity breaches. To build public trust, the community must be able to see how conduct issues are handled, and within this bill there is a requirement that the principal councillor conduct registrar publish annual data on internal arbitration processes and councillor conduct panels. Providing this data improves transparency and public confidence in the management of councillor conduct issues. We are also improving the operation of the councillor conduct framework more broadly, because clearer and more effective conduct processes support better behaviour and stronger public trust.

Good governance starts with clear roles, proper oversight and consistent administrative processes. The relationship between an elected councillor and the CEO is essential to effective administration. This bill mandates that councils establish a CEO employment matters committee to advise on CEO employment and remuneration matters. This reform guarantees a structured, consistent approach that strengthens governance, improves oversight and supports better council leadership. To complement this, the bill enables regulations to prescribe a standard form of contract for council CEOs, and by standardising these contracts we are promoting consistency, transparency and accountability in CEO employment across the entire local government sector. Ratepayers have a right to know that executive contracts are structured fairly and consistently.

In local government leadership stability is crucial, and the bill gives councils the power to declare vacant the office of the mayor or deputy mayor where the person was elected for a one-year term. This reform gives councils greater clarity and the flexibility required to manage their leadership positions when confidence has broken down. It strengthens local government by supporting continuity and proper governance arrangements, allowing councils to reset their leadership and get back to serving their communities.

Across our state we are incredibly fortunate to have dedicated, hardworking local councillors who choose to take the next step and run for state Parliament. Having local government representatives bring their grassroots experience and community advocacy to the state level is a highly positive part of our democratic process. We want to encourage strong local leaders to put their hands up to serve, and especially in my electorate we see fantastic local representatives seeking to contribute in this way. Can I take a moment to acknowledge all those here in this chamber that have served in local government.

To support this transition the bill establishes a clear, practical framework for councillors contesting state elections. It requires a councillor to take a candidate leave of absence when contesting a state election and provides that they cannot perform the role of councillor during that time. It also requires a councillor to formally notify the council CEO if they are selected as a candidate or intend to be a candidate in the state election. This is not a punitive measure; rather, it is a supportive administrative

framework that provides absolute clarity for the council administration, the community and the candidate themselves. By creating a clear separation between council responsibilities and election campaigning, we give candidates the certainty they need to entirely focus on their campaigns while ensuring that the day-to-day delivery of local government services continues without any administrative confusion.

Furthermore, the bill introduces a requirement that a council meeting must be chaired by another councillor when the question before the meeting relates directly to the conduct of the chairperson. This simple but necessary reform strengthens integrity and ensures that conduct matters are handled impartially and credibly. Further to governance rules, there are some model governance rules that are to be issued as mandatory governance rules through regulation, which will strengthen consistent meeting procedures across the sector. Stronger, more consistent meeting procedures mean stronger public confidence in how decisions are made. We are also introducing measures to encourage constructive conflict resolution, and the bill encourages the Minister for Local Government to request that a council first attempt to resolve an internal dispute or issue through a council's own internal resolution procedures before ministerial intervention is considered. Encouraging councils to resolve disputes internally before escalation is a highly practical reform that focuses on restoring functional working relationships.

I now turn to a reform that is fundamentally important to our values here on this side. You cannot claim to support local services by opposing reforms that support the workforce delivering those services. Local governments rely on thousands of dedicated workers: the people who collect the rubbish, run our libraries, maintain our parks and deliver Meals on Wheels. This bill delivers on our 2022 commitment by enabling a local government fair jobs code to be prescribed in regulations aimed directly at minimising insecure work in the local government sector. For too long the creep of contracting out and short-term employment has undermined the livelihoods of working people. Insecure work makes it difficult for people to plan their lives, support their families and secure housing. It also impacts the councils themselves by driving high staff turnover and loss of skills. This bill requires a Local Government Fair Jobs Code Regulator to be appointed, setting out the regulator's functions and powers to monitor and enforce compliance, investigate and make findings, provide guidance and education and prepare and publish compliance reports. Furthermore, it requires each council CEO to submit a report on compliance with the code to the regulator. These reforms acknowledge a fundamental truth: workforce security directly affects service quality and continuity. By creating a framework to minimise insecure work and improve compliance, the bill strengthens local government through more stable employment settings and better support for essential council services. Our government believes that how councils treat their workers really is everybody's business, and we will always stand up for fair, secure employment. I take a moment to thank the Australian Services Union for their steadfast advocacy that helped bring this bill before us. It is one that I am enormously proud to stand up here and speak to.

Finally, I want to talk about the City of Melbourne Act 2001 and the elements of this bill that make a targeted amendment to that act. They will enable Melbourne City Council to levy differential rates of up to four times the lowest rate while retaining net annual value as the valuation base. This is really a targeted reform designed to encourage greater development in the City of Melbourne. In our central city we should not have vacant and derelict sites sitting idle and contributing nothing to the local economy or the community. This measure gives Melbourne City Council a practical tool to encourage property owners to bring these vacant and derelict sites back into use. The reform is entirely about activating vacant sites and supporting a more productive central city. Whether these sites are developed for housing, commercial activity or community spaces, we need to ensure that the land in our city is being used to its full potential.

Strong local government matters because strong communities matter. Victorians deserve councils that are well governed, transparent, accountable and focused on the public interest. This bill supports those exact objectives. It strengthens the integrity of local government, supports better governance and

advances fairer work in the sector. It ensures our local institutions are better equipped to serve the community while providing clear frameworks for everything from conflict of interest to secure employment. It is with great pride that I commend the bill to the house.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (23:09): I am pleased to rise and make a contribution to this bill. Noting the hour of the night, I will not draw this out any longer than is required. The first thing I would seek to do is circulate the opposition's amendments if that is possible. Mrs McArthur has asked me to do that. I reiterate that the opposition sees some valuable parts to this bill but is concerned about other parts. We will seek a number of amendments, and if the amendments are not upheld, we will oppose the bill. There are some matters that have come through in reports by IBAC and others – Operation Sandon and so forth. Some in this chamber will remember bills brought to this chamber regarding Operation Sandon and other similar matters that have sought to tighten up aspects of local government and ensure that there is a much stronger regime in place.

I should also say that there are a number of points in this bill that we do agree with. I want to start with division 5A, clause 13, in the bill and the insertion of new section 38A, 'Candidate leave of absence'. This section reads:

If a Councillor nominates for election as a member of the Parliament, the Councillor is taken to have been given leave of absence ... from the office of Councillor for the period –

- (a) beginning on the day after the day on which the Councillor nominates for election; and
- (b) ending on the day the election result is publicly declared.

This is important. This counts councillors out once they become a member or become a candidate for election. This has become a matter of significant contention in my local electorate in the City of Boroondara. It is important I think to note that I wrote to the City of Boroondara on 16 July this year dealing with matters precisely located with these issues, and particularly two councillors, Torney and Ibuki, who are candidates in the forthcoming state election. With these candidates I am concerned about their conflicts of interest and the fact that they are, in my view, misusing their approach to council activity, using it as an opportunity to campaign. They are conflicted. My letter drew attention to a number of these significant points, which are in part addressed by this bill. I make the point that there are aspects of this bill that we think are quite helpful. In the case of Cr Ibuki, who is the deputy mayor currently, that has become a matter of contention at council meetings, where in the general business forum the matter of the conflicts and the difficulty of Ibuki's behaviour as deputy mayor have been raised for discussion in that section. There are a number of other councillors, some council officers and members of the community who are concerned about deputy mayor Ibuki's issues with respect to the conflict in the role on those matters.

There is one very specific area where both Torney and Ibuki have run into significant conflicts, which is in part dealt with by that clause that I just pointed to in this bill, which in effect takes councillors out if they become candidates for the state election. In this case Torney and Ibuki received donations each of \$140,000 in aggregate in two donations, one of \$100,000 and one of \$40,000. I see Acting President Berger sitting there, and he is going, 'That's quite a large amount of money to receive as a donation,' and he would be quite right to imagine that is a very large amount of money to receive as a donation in a state election. In fact the Victorian Electoral Commission has made the point that it is the largest donation of which it is aware in the state's history to an individual for a state election – \$140,000 each of those candidates has received. In receiving that money, there was no immediate declaration. Later, when these matters became public, the two councillors repaid the money; they sent it back. I see Ms Watt looking at this. I think many will then ask the question, 'Well, what happened in that interim period?' That was partially the point of my writing a letter to the City of Boroondara. In the interim period those two councillors were sitting there with \$140,000 burning in their pocket, literally burning away, having I am sure some influence on their decision-making at council. I wrote to the council, and

they have written back. With respect to declarations of donations, they wrote back to me in an email dated 30 July. On this declaration, I understand, they said:

... declarations of political donations for state elections are regulated under the *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic).

which is true. They said:

It is not Council's place to comment how those rules affect independent candidates not bound by party rules, but a matter for State Parliament to regulate.

As far as that goes, that is correct. 'Conflicts of interest' is the other heading in the response to me:

Under the *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic), the responsibility to declare conflicts of interest lies with Councillors.

It appears those two councillors did not declare a conflict of interest. They continued:

I am not aware of any requirement –

this is the City of Boroondara's response –

to positively declare either political donations for state elections, or agreements about exchanging preferences.

There are a set of preference issues here too. But my point here is that it is hard to imagine those councillors sitting there at council meetings and voting on items here and items there, including the annual council budget and a whole raft of different matters considered, from local traffic through to electrification of matters – noting the donations were received from Climate 200, so they have got a set of purposes in those donations – and the councillors are sitting there at the council meetings looking at the agenda and trying to make their decisions. They have not at this point declared the donations and have not yet returned the donations, but even after they had returned them, would this have had any influence on anyone? I do not know, Acting President Berger, if you had \$140,000 burning away in your pocket and you were voting at a council meeting, whether that would have any influence on you. I suspect in your case it would not, but in some people's cases it could. There does not appear to have been a declaration at council level about the fact that they had received these very significant donations, and especially about that period before it was repaid and the decisions that have been made. Where does that leave those council decisions and the conflicts of interest undeclared at that point? One thing this bill does is it remedies this conflict that is occurring in the case of these two Boroondara councillors, because when this bill is passed both of them will no longer be able to be on council remaining as council members. They will be out, and the conflict will thereby end. Even though they have handed back the \$140,000 donation each, there is that issue of the lengthy period of time before these matters were cleared up and they repaid the money, and there is the question of what influence it might have had on council.

Some of these teal candidates, teal individuals, talk a high and mighty game on integrity, but actually the high and mighty game appears in this case not to have been met. They seem to me to have fallen short of the standards that the community would expect. The integrity standards seem to have slipped in this case. They held integrity forums in the municipality, and they are always welcome – one of them I attended. But I would say in this matter that two of them had fallen short. This bill will directly address that problem. So to that extent we strongly support that clause in the bill that says you cannot be a councillor and a candidate for Parliament, because there is inherently a challenge or a conflict of interest there. Some of us remember this was first brought to the fore by the Brimbank report by the Ombudsman some years ago, and new rules were put in place then about what roles people could hold and adopt in this murky area. This case was about Labor MPs and their staff who were on council, and the Ombudsman's report and subsequent legislation severed that position. You could no longer have a staff member on council effectively directing traffic on council, as was occurring out in Brimbank in that period before 2009.

The bills that we brought forward concerning a number of the local government issues have still not been addressed in this bill and still require further work, in my humble view. One of them that would

be a concern is those who were on planning authorities acting as consultants but also hawking themselves around for payment to get access on a number of points. These sorts of matters, which were a part of the IBAC reports in recent years, are still to be addressed.

I did want to make those points about local government and about some of the positive aspects of this. Clause 32 on page 27 of the bill also deals with a number of these disclosures of conflicts of interest. It is the spirit of this that I think those councillors in Boroondara have fallen down on. They have not made the sorts of declarations that you would expect those who are particularly interested in integrity to have made.

I think I have said enough on this occasion other than to say that we will be watching the steps with this bill very closely. In the case of those councillors who do have these conflicts and are standing for office, if the bill is passed we will be ensuring that they do step down and that the conflicts are ended. In the case of those two Boroondara councillors, there is still the outstanding issue of the votes that were taken on council in the period after they received the \$140,000, before they repaid it and whilst there was no declaration at local council. There is a genuine concern here. I think people have not always thought about the prospect of these occasions where conflicts of that type can occur. This bill makes a start on that, and to that extent I welcome it.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (23:22): I am very pleased to reflect on local government. I had the privilege and honour to serve on Warrnambool City Council for 12 years, and two of those years were as mayor. I appreciate Ms Watt's comments about people in this chamber that were councillors. You learn a lot about the community that you live in. Of course councils look after some of the issues that impact communities closely and on a daily basis: roads, parks, sporting facilities, libraries, waste collection, maternal and child health, many of the services and facilities our communities rely on, swimming pools – and in our case in Warrnambool, the foreshore, the Port of Warrnambool, an art gallery, there used to be some saleyards, a theatre – and a whole range of things. That experience gave me a real appreciation of both the responsibility that comes with elected office and the importance of good governance.

Councillors make decisions involving significant amounts of public money and issues that directly affect their communities. With that responsibility comes an expectation that those decisions are made honestly, transparently and in the public interest. The bill before us responds to the recommendations from IBAC's Operation Sandon, the special report; the Whittlesea commission of inquiry; and the government's commitment to establishing a local governments fair jobs code. It addresses known weaknesses in the system and provides clearer rules for councils, councillors and senior administrators. Importantly, the bill strengthens conflict-of-interest provisions. I must say that during my time on council I saw councillors operating with absolutely beautiful good conduct, regard for their colleagues, respect and very, very different views on the issues. That was fantastic because that is what it is all about. I also saw periods of time where councillors made power plays and were more interested in control and power than in the issues of the community. It is not an easy thing to get the regulations and laws right in keeping everybody focused on the best way to do things.

The conflict-of-interest changes create a new offence preventing councillors and delegated committee members who have a conflict from attempting to influence others outside formal council processes. That is extremely logical, and I think everybody in this chamber has endorsed the sensible nature of that change. Council CEOs will also be required to notify the chief municipal inspector if they become aware that a councillor has failed to declare a conflict. I think that is extremely important because if that is not compulsory, then CEOs can either inadvertently or explicitly have pressure put on them in relation to declarations that might relate to the longevity of their appointment. It is best to take that out of the dynamic. The principal councillor conduct registrar will publish annual information about internal arbitration processes and councillor conduct panels, and these measures provide greater transparency and clearer pathways for dealing with misconduct when it occurs.

The bill also strengthens governance around council CEOs. From my experience in local government I know the relationship between councillors and the CEO is critical to a well-functioning council, and there must be clear roles, professional relationships and appropriate oversight. Councils will now be required to establish a CEO employment matters committee to advise on employment and remuneration, and that committee must have an independent chair. I do remember that that is exactly what was established when I was on Warrnambool City Council: an employment matters committee with an independent chair, a respected local person – a former academic actually was the first person. I think a former academic was the second independent chair of Warrnambool's employment matters committee as well. The important change in this bill is that it will require all Victorian councils to have an independent chair for that committee, which will strengthen governance. Within this committee regulations will also be able to prescribe a standard form contract for council CEOs – awesome. As someone who has been on a lot of these committees not just at council but on boards as well, that is fantastic. It saves a lot of work, providing greater consistency and transparency around one of the most important appointments a council makes.

The bill clarifies a number of issues relating to councillors themselves. Where a councillor has been stood down, there will be clearer rules about what that means, including an offence where someone who knows or reasonably should know that they are stood down continues to act as a councillor. There will also be a clearer separation between council responsibilities and state election campaigning, as my colleagues have mentioned. I think it is very good that the two need to be separate and that there will be a standdown period, which is most appropriate. The bill also strengthens procedural fairness within council meetings where a matter concerns the conduct of the person chairing the meeting. As has been mentioned already, the chair should stand aside. The bill will also enable consistent mandatory governance rules allowing the Minister for Local Government to request the council to first attempt to resolve any disputes that they might have before seeking external intervention.

Another significant element of this legislation is the local government fair jobs code. Councils cannot deliver quality services without the people who work for them. The bill provides for the code to be prescribed in regulations with the aim of minimising insecure employment across the sector. A fair jobs code regulator will monitor and enforce compliance, investigate potential breaches, provide guidance and education and publish compliance reports. The implication from those opposite that because a union has been consulted, that brings this proposal into disrepute is, quite frankly, absurd. Who does not want a secure job? I do not know anybody who does not want a secure job. And if a secure job can be provided, it ought to be. Council CEOs will also report on their compliance with that code. This is particularly relevant in regional Victoria, where attracting and retaining skilled workers can already be challenging.

I also welcome amendments made in the other place addressing an issue highlighted by recent private prosecutions involving councillors at Hepburn shire. Certainly the councillors in Warrnambool and the south-west region have raised that issue with me, and I am very glad to see it in the bill. They also address standdowns arising from private prosecutions, with retrospective provisions protecting councillors who might otherwise be unfairly caught by the existing laws before these reforms commence.

Victorians deserve local government that is transparent and accountable, with proper processes for managing conflicts, conduct and public decision-making. They also deserve councils with stable workforces capable of delivering the services people rely on. The Carroll Labor government is implementing practical reforms through this bill to achieve those objectives.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:32): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until next day of meeting.

Adjournment

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (23:32): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Road maintenance

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (23:32): (2771) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety Paul Hamer. The action I seek is an update on how the government's additional \$352 million investment in road maintenance will benefit constituents in western Victoria.

Construction industry

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (23:33): (2772) My adjournment matter is for the Premier, no less, and the action I seek is that he table in this house a complete list of Big Build corruption complaints, referrals or investigations that today's Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment Bill 2026 would place beyond IBAC's reach, beginning with Jacinta Allan's July 2024 referral of alleged CFMEU misconduct on Big Build sites. IBAC said it lacked the jurisdiction to investigate that referral because the alleged conduct involved private entities. This bill finally gives IBAC the follow-the-money powers needed to examine such conduct, yet proposed section 203 says those powers do not permit IBAC to reopen a complaint or notification already dismissed or referred elsewhere, or an investigation already completed. That is the central contradiction.

The government insists that a fresh referral may still be considered, but the Special Minister of State would not confirm whether IBAC requested this restriction. The Shadow Attorney-General has already referred the publicly reported Big Build allegations to IBAC under the existing law. If that referral is dismissed before commencement, the government's own provision appears capable of locking it out too. Robert Redlich has therefore sought a guarantee that referrals from the royal commission will not disappear behind the same wall. If the government is confident, it should explain which matters can be reconsidered and which cannot – hence my request.

Victorians waited eight years for Operation Richmond. IBAC called the conduct serious, concerning and contrary to government policy, procedure, convention and codes. The Premier called it intolerable, yet it still took a month for education secretary Tony Bates to be removed. In the week Ben Carroll most needed to prove his government is different, Labor has produced an integrity reform that may protect some of Labor's most serious past controversies from the very powers created to investigate them. What exactly does this Premier have to hide? Tell us that. He of all people should know: if you promise transparency and deliver a stitch-up, you do not look clean, you look guiltier. Premier, table the cover-up list now.

Dingo protection

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (23:36): (2773) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment. The action that I seek is for information sharing on what on-ground measures are being undertaken to protect wilkerr from their likely extinction. A recent report by the ABC revealed that the wilkerr dingoes of the Big Desert are now being considered for critically endangered status under federal environmental law. The wilkerr dingoes are a genetically distinct, culturally significant and ecologically important population, but they are in an extinction vortex, with estimates of as few as 77 individuals or less remaining. What makes this even further distressing is that there have been recent allegations of illegal killing of wilkerr dingoes. In May last year landholders attending a community meeting in Murrayville openly stated that they intended to continue killing dingoes on their properties, regardless of their protected status. These comments were reportedly made in front of Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and Agriculture Victoria staff.

Concerns about what was heard at that meeting were subsequently raised with the government in writing, yet no response was ever received.

In 2024 the government took an important step by ending the unprotection order that had allowed dingoes to be killed on public land in the Big Desert and surrounding areas in the north-west region. It also made efforts to change its language, in line with genetic research and the expectations of First Nations advocates. The misnomer 'wild dogs' was replaced with the correct term 'dingoes', and the longstanding bounty of \$120 per dingo paid to landholders was finally removed. These were welcome decisions, but for the wilkerr population protection cannot simply mean changing their legal status and just hoping for the best. The federal assessment will run for three years. Three years is a very long time for a population that is this small, and we cannot have the diabolical situation where scientists are assessing whether a population is critically endangered while they go extinct at the same time.

My office has flagged with the minister the release of our 2024 documents motion on the dingo unprotection order for the remainder of the state, and we are hopeful that we can get these documents before the end of the term. Legal protection means very little if it is not enforced on the ground, and once they are extinct, no assessment or survey is ever going to bring them back. We have a choice here. We can wait for another report, another assessment or another committee to tell us what we already know, or we can act while there is something still left to save. The wilkerr dingoes are part of Victoria's natural and cultural heritage. They belong in the landscapes, and they deserve more than to become another species we mourn after it is too late. I ask the minister to take every possible step to ensure that does not happen and to share this information with the public.

St Francis Xavier College

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:39): (2774) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Education, and the action that I seek is that the minister provide an update on how the Building Fund for Non-Government Schools is supporting low-fee Catholic and independent schools across my electorate. I could talk about many such investments from this fund in recent years. I could talk about the new St Josephine Bakhita Primary School in Clyde North, just around the corner from the new Clyde Grammar school. Both schools are terrific schools in my electorate which have benefited from this funding. But today I wish to ask about St Francis Xavier College, a wonderful local school with campuses in Beaconsfield, Berwick and Officer. It was at the Berwick campus last week that Mr Tarlamis and I were delighted to join with principal Julie Banda, the head of the Victorian Catholic Education Authority Professor Elizabeth Labone and the entire school community at St Francis Xavier to celebrate and officially mark the opening of their new learning centre, which was supported with \$3 million from this fund. It was terrific to see this learning centre, which in fact has already been operational for most of this year, and to see the way in which students are already using it, their classrooms and their shared spaces. It was really wonderful to see the vibrant culture of this part of the school already thriving so strongly. It was particularly wonderful to be there with the school student leaders, the students and indeed the school choir, who were quite simply remarkable. I wish to acknowledge the entire school community for their significant efforts in bringing this new building together.

This is something that really demonstrates the value of investment right across the education system. This is an area where we have opened six new public government schools just in the last four years as well. It is also important that as we are focusing that investment in the public education sector we are also providing support for these other pathways. St Francis Xavier, this great local school, is a wonderful example of how this government has been supporting all such schools across our state so that we can continue to thrive and achieve the best NAPLAN results in the nation and be the true Education State.

Corrections system

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (23:41): (2775) My matter is for the Minister for Corrections regarding the growing capacity crisis in Victoria's custody and corrections system. The action I seek

is for the minister to outline what steps the government is taking to increase prison capacity and reduce the burden being placed on Victoria Police as a result of overcrowded custody facilities. Recent reports have revealed that police cells across Victoria are operating under significant pressure and some stations are reaching capacity, with frontline officers being diverted from their normal duties to supervise prisoners being held in custody. Victoria Police has acknowledged that members are 'experiencing significant workload pressures'. After years of a softer approach on crime the government has now turned to tougher bail laws, presenting them as a necessary reform to restore community confidence and improve public safety. However, these policy changes have had predictable consequences. By increasing the number of offenders denied bail and held on remand, they have placed significant additional pressure on a corrections system that already appears to be struggling to keep pace with demand. If the government is serious about community safety, it must also ensure that our prisons, community corrections services and rehab programs have the capacity and resources required to support these reforms effectively. Importantly, Victoria Police leadership has had to remind officers that custody capacity concern must not influence bail decisions; community safety and legislative requirements should always come first.

This highlights a broader problem. If the Carroll government expects more offenders to be held on remand, it must ensure there is significant capacity within the corrections system to accommodate them. When police are required to manage overcrowded cells and supervise prisoners for extended periods, those officers are unavailable to patrol communities, respond to incidents and undertake proactive policing. At a time when Victorians are concerned about crime and police shortages remain a challenge this is a pressure the system can ill afford. This is not simply a corrections issue; it is a community safety issue that is affecting policing capacity across the state. So I ask the minister: what immediate action is the Carroll government taking to expand custody and prison capacity, reduce reliance on police cells and ensure that Victoria Police can focus on keeping communities safe rather than managing an overcrowded corrections system?

Infrastructure Victoria

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (23:44): (2776) My adjournment is for the Minister for Finance and relates to the proposed axing of Infrastructure Victoria. Infrastructure Victoria was established in 2015 with bipartisan support to ensure that infrastructure projects were independently assessed on merit and the value that they would return to the people of Victoria, taking the politics out of infrastructure planning.

Victorian taxpayers are mostly left in the dark when it comes to this government's infrastructure spending. From the Suburban Rail Loop to the rebuilding of the public housing towers, we see no transparency, no business case, no cost-benefit analysis. One minute it is a thought bubble, the next minute it is something the state 'simply can't afford not to build'. When we in the chamber are so bold as to seek details, we are told that it is commercial in confidence or cabinet in confidence or simply executive privilege. We do not need to see the details; we are just supposed to take the government's word for it. The value of Infrastructure Victoria to the taxpayers, if not this government, is that it can independently assess whether Victorian taxpayers, who actually foot the bill, get value. But in the name of efficiency and cost savings – oh, the irony – Infrastructure Victoria's functions will be absorbed into the Department of Transport and Planning. It is one thing to cut back on pot plants and tea and coffee and quite another to axe an agency actually providing valuable advice to all sides of politics.

The Minister for Finance has defended its abolition, insisting that the department is capable of providing thorough and independent advice. So let us get this straight. We will now be relying on the planning department to, what, give itself the frank and fearless advice that it rarely chooses to listen to when it is being provided by an independent body. Really? Infrastructure Victoria have played a crucial role in highlighting infrastructure inequality. For my communities, by way of example, it led us to raise the dearth of social infrastructure such as libraries and aquatic centres in the west. Abolishing Infrastructure Victoria will further reduce transparency and accountability, items we are told these days are not optional. At a time when trust in this government is surely at an all-time low, I

ask: will the minister reconsider this appalling decision? Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank Jonathan Spear and the staff of Infrastructure Victoria for their important work.

Kindergarten funding

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:47): (2777) My question is to the Minister for Children. Early childhood education is essential for preparing our children for their futures. That is why last week it was announced that more than \$4.5 million would be shared amongst 89 services to upgrade buildings and playgrounds as well as to buy equipment to ensure all children can participate in kindergarten. This comes as part of the Building Blocks inclusion grants. To date, Labor has delivered more than \$27.2 million in Building Blocks inclusion grants, which have gone towards supporting 205 kinder buildings and playground projects across the state. The North-Eastern Metropolitan Region is home to around 40 kindergartens, and with an increasing population it is understandable that more kindergartens will eventually be required. Furthermore, as existing kinder facilities and equipment age, they will also need to be upgraded or replaced. The action I seek is for the minister to advise me if there are any planned future grants programs which kindergartens in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region can access to update and improve their existing facilities.

Patient transport

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (23:48): (2778) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is for the minister to urgently increase and index the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme, or VPTAS as it is known – the subsidies for travel and accommodation. The minister earlier this year told the Parliament that distance can limit access to health care and lead to poorer health outcomes and, in her own words, ‘that has got to change’. The minister also said the government wanted to ensure that ‘no matter what your language, culture or postcode, Victoria’s health system works for you.’

Well, Minister, this week we have had another test of those words. Yesterday the Leukaemia Foundation released its national scorecard comparing patient travel assistance schemes across Australia. Victoria disgracefully is dead last – not somewhere in the middle of the pack, not slightly behind the other states, last. Victoria scored just 41.3 out of 100, compared with 95.3 in South Australia, 87.5 in Western Australia and 79.2 in Tasmania. That is an appalling result for a state that claims its health system works for Victorians regardless of their postcode, and it has not happened overnight. For years, VPTAS subsidies have failed to keep pace with the actual cost of fuel, running a car and finding somewhere to stay while receiving treatment. Victoria provides just \$49.50 a night for accommodation. Show me a Melbourne hotel under \$200 a night. The Leukaemia Foundation says patients driving hundreds of kilometres for treatment should receive at least 45 cents per kilometre, and that assistance should be indexed annually so it cannot simply be set and forgotten.

At present they get an embarrassing 21 cents. The ATO says it should be 91 cents, and yet they are calling for less than half. These are not Victorians choosing to travel; they are cancer patients and other seriously ill Victorians who have no choice but to travel because the specialist care they need is not available close to home. Some will travel hundreds of kilometres for chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery or specialist appointments. Others will have to leave their families and stay in Melbourne for weeks or months. They are already confronting serious illness, lost income and enormous uncertainty. Their postcode should not hand them another bill.

Minister, you said distance limiting access to health care has got to change. You said Victoria’s health system should work for people regardless of postcode. Victoria is now ranked the worst state or territory in Australia for helping these patients meet the cost of accessing treatment, and that is a disgrace.

Dental services

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (23:50): (2779) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I am seeking is for her to properly fund our public dental system so that every Victorian can see a dentist when they need one. Miguel de Cervantes in *Don Quixote*

said, 'Every tooth in a man's head is more valuable than a diamond.' Well, not according to the Victorian Labor government. Really, it should be pretty simple: if you need to see a dentist, you should be able to see one. Yet for the past 12 years they have overseen the deterioration of the public dental system. It is the bare bones of what it should be, under extreme pressure from years of neglect.

More than 1.5 million Victorian adults are eligible for public dental care, but only a fraction of them actually receive it because of long waiting lists. The thing is that a toothache or infection does not wait patiently for an appointment. Dental disease is the leading cause of preventable hospitalisations for kids under 10 in Victoria, and it causes thousands of hospitalisations and deaths in adults. It is not just dental pain and infection. Dental disease is linked to so many other conditions, from heart disease and stroke to pregnancy complications and autoimmune disease. The alternative to languishing on the public dental waiting list is private dental care, but that often means hundreds or even thousands of dollars people simply do not have. So if you cannot afford private care, bad luck – just keep brushing, keep taking pain relief and keep hoping. Nobody should have to decide between getting a tooth fixed and paying the rent or putting food on the table, but that is the reality for a third of Victorian adults who have put off dental care because of the cost.

It does not have to be this way. We could invest in our public dental system to build it up into something that all Victorians could be proud of. We could have the best paid public dental workforce in the country, with genuine opportunities to build long-term careers. We could have modern clinics with the equipment they need, a properly paid workforce and, more importantly, people getting preventative care and intervention when they need it. You may be thinking this is all too expensive, but it is not; it is just a matter of priorities. Victoria can actually afford to invest in dental health. What we cannot afford is to continue leaving people in agonising pain for years. We cannot afford to keep allowing preventable dental disease to become emergencies. Dental care is health care, and it is time we funded it like that.

Don Bosco youth centre

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (23:53): (2780) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Youth. Our government knows that setting young Victorians up for the future means investing in the services they rely on locally. We are delivering free TAFE pathways and free public transport for under-18s and rolling out free kinder to ease the pressures on working families. But physical accessible spaces for young people to gather, play and find support are just as vital. That is exactly why the Brunswick community is currently passionately advocating for the Don Bosco youth centre and hostel on Sydney Road.

Recently, alongside the member for Pascoe Vale, I sat down with Sarah and the passionate community advocates from the Save Don Bosco group. They have already rallied over 6000 signatures to protect a site that has served the inner north since 1939. It is not just a piece of real estate. Originally built on land generously donated by the local Danelli family, it has provided generations of young people with a safe, supervised place to go after school. Beyond the recreation hall and the iconic trampolines, the youth hostel provides secure, affordable accommodation for those that need a roof over their heads while completing their studies or trade apprenticeships.

I want to be unequivocally clear on one point: the Salesians must atone for past wrongs, and victim-survivors of institutional child sexual abuse absolutely must receive the full redress and compensation they are owed and entitled to. That is non-negotiable. Local families are asking why this specific asset, built on local generosity and decades of community contributions, is being rushed to market through a limited expression-of-interest process. Brunswick residents should not have to pay the price and lose an irreplaceable youth facility when alternative assets could clearly be explored. As the Sydney Road corridor continues to grow and densify, we need to preserve recreational spaces for our young people to thrive, not sell them off. The action I seek is for the minister to provide an update on the investments, programs and resources our Carroll Labor government is delivering to support young people across Brunswick in the Northern Metropolitan Region.

Albury Wodonga Health

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (23:55): (2781) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action that I seek is for the minister to commit additional funding to expand services at Albury Wodonga Health beyond the existing redevelopment plan. Last Friday I met with a group of energetic residents from Albury–Wodonga who call themselves the Concerned Nannas. They are concerned about Albury Wodonga Health and do not believe that the current redevelopment will provide the facilities necessary to handle patient demand in a health catchment that services 300,000 people. The current service is incapable of coping with demand, and they shared stories of cancelled surgeries, delayed care, long waiting lists, crumbling facilities and constant ambulance ramping. But they argued that the proposed redevelopment and its seven-storey medical tower will struggle to meet even existing demand, let alone demand in 10 years time. The strain on the health service is also causing significant stress among doctors and nurses. Morale is at rock bottom. Many good doctors have left, and recruiting new doctors is a struggle.

The Nannas managed to gather a remarkable 12,800 signatures on a statement that calls on the New South Wales and Victorian state governments to work collaboratively with each other and with local and federal governments to deliver the best possible health service for the region. The statement calls for a pause on the existing redevelopment and asks for a new single-site hospital. It also calls for modular wards to immediately address the current bed shortage that sees the health service between 30 and 70 beds short of what is needed on a daily basis. The volume of signatures demonstrates the level of concern in the Albury–Wodonga community: 12,800 people from both sides of the border signed the statement, and it should not matter which state the signatures come from because Albury–Wodonga is one community with a cross-border health service that is managed by Victoria, so every signature matters.

The concerns of the signatories are not new. I have raised them countless times with this Labor government, which continues to stonewall and dismiss every criticism. I attended the Albury–Wodonga regional health summit in 2024 and heard that the new plan on the table was designed to fit a limited budget, not to meet need or demand. Since then, even that plan has been gutted. There is no helipad, the paediatric ward is a ghost floor, an operating theatre a shell and a multistorey car park has been dumped too. I successfully moved a motion in this Parliament requiring this government to produce documents that reveal how the Victorian Labor government and New South Wales cooked up this half-baked plan, but the government never complied with the order. I spent two years fighting for transparency, and this government keeps ignoring it.

Climate change

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (23:58): (2782) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Climate Action, and I ask her to establish a permanent climate resilience fund funded by a levy on the biggest fossil fuel polluters to help Victorian households and communities prepare for the worsening fires, floods and extreme heat that we know are coming. The cost of not acting on climate has arrived. Victorians are paying that cost right now through higher insurance premiums, damaged homes, emergency response requirements, rebuilding costs and public infrastructure that has to be repaired again and again.

The Insurance Council of Australia's new catastrophe resilience report makes that painfully clear. In 2025–26 just seven declared extreme weather events generated more than \$3.98 billion in insured losses across Australia, \$1.7 billion more than the year before. Between 2022 and 2026 insurers received more than 400,000 claims to repair or rebuild homes damaged in declared disasters, costing \$11.3 billion, and the cost does not stop at the insurance payout. The insurance council says that disaster rebuilding is now competing with new housing for the same builders, trades and materials, driving up construction costs and putting further pressure on premiums and housing supply. We have seen this here in Victoria. The January bushfires alone have generated around 4850 insurance claims and \$598 million in incurred losses. In his valedictory my colleague and dear friend Tim Read gave a

striking example of costs that we are all bearing now. He pointed to the recent LA fires, where the destruction of thousands of high-value homes fed through to the global reinsurance market and pushed up insurance costs globally, far beyond California. As Tim put it:

People are paying for climate change, whether they think about it or not.

That goes for our government and our opposition as well: whether they think about it or not, we are all already paying the price for the major parties' inaction on climate. Even if your home has not flooded or burnt, you are already paying for climate change. But the people who are not paying their fair share are the coal and gas corporations, who have made enormous profits from the pollution driving this crisis.

Earlier this year Labor rejected a dedicated resilient homes scheme recommended by Victoria's parliamentary climate resilience inquiry. That decision looks even more reckless and stupid right now. We should be investing before disaster strikes, helping people retrofit homes, protecting community infrastructure, improving urban heat resilience and supporting communities in high-risk areas. Those costs belong on the balance sheets of the companies fuelling the climate crisis, not family budgets. Minister, make the polluters pay, and put that money into a permanent fund to make our homes and communities safer before the next disaster hits.

Road maintenance

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (00:01): (2783) My adjournment is to the Premier, and it concerns the shocking state of our roads. We have seen the Premier's \$372 million announcement. All of a sudden he has reached under the couch and found the money. And how did he pay for this? Three level crossing removals delayed. All three of them just happen to be in one Liberal electorate. He could not pick a Labor one to delay a level crossing in. The three of them had to be in one Liberal electorate, just like they have got 13 activity centres in one electorate in Malvern. So he has found some money for this, and I have got a bit of advice for the Premier: potholes are a bit like botox, because there is only so much you can patch over them. Eventually you have got to wait four to six months before you have to patch them up again.

What you really need is a real plan to resurface our roads, and only the Liberals and Nationals have a \$5 billion plan to resurface and maintain our roads – a 25 per cent increase in current spending. We will establish Better Roads Victoria as a standalone division in the Department of Transport and Planning. Has the Premier even seen the potholes on Keilor Road? Clearly he has not, because they are out of control. This is a main arterial road in his own electorate. Well, do you know who has got a plan to fix it? My good friend Samantha Byrne, the Liberal candidate for Niddrie, who has consistently advocated on these issues.

I will just go to another part of this policy. We saw the Premier come out with a bizarre plan that minimum security prisoners would be involved in some pilot trial to also repair our roads. Could you imagine? Take a moment to imagine the screeching from the other side, from down at Trades Hall, from Luke Hilakari talking about chain gangs. You know, Mr Erdogan, this is exactly the line that would be blasted out on the TV screens and in the newspapers from Luke Hilakari and from those opposite if we had come up with this idea. This is a Premier who is desperate, who when he was Minister for Roads and Road Safety cut \$214 million from roads. Now he wants to pretend like he is acting on potholes. So the action I seek from the minister is to follow the lead of the Liberals and Nationals policy.

Ambulance services

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (00:04): (2784) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Ambulance Services, and it concerns the deteriorating ambulance response times right across my Eastern Victoria Region. Despite 12 years of Labor – 12 years of a Labor government – and repeated commitments to improve ambulance services, response times across my region are continuing to deteriorate. Every major local government area in Eastern Victoria is experiencing

longer wait times and declining performance. The most recent – which is not very recent – information tells us that Cardinia, Baw Baw, Latrobe, South Gippsland, Bass Coast, East Gippsland and Wellington are all in dire straits. Let us look at the stats: South Gippsland has suffered the largest decline, with the proportion of code 1 emergency responses within 15 minutes falling from 68.1 per cent to 45.3 per cent – a drop of 22 percentage points. Cardinia has declined 19 percentage points. Latrobe Valley has declined 10 percentage points. Most concerning of all, East Gippsland and Wellington residents now wait more than 19 minutes on an average code 1 ambulance response. These figures are not reflective of course of the many, many, many dedicated and professional paramedics that frequent and work so very hard in those ambulances and the times that they are sitting frustrated in emergency spaces in our hospitals. Certainly these figures reflect a system under pressure, where demand continues to rise and performance continues to decline. We know that morale has suffered for these fabulous people and we know that staff are fatigued in this space, but we also know that patients are being left in unacceptable conditions. The action I seek is for the minister to indeed explain why she has failed to release the latest health data relating to ambulance response times and explain to my Eastern Victoria Region residents why they are receiving worse service than when the Liberals and Nationals were in government.

Road maintenance

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (00:07): (2785) My adjournment is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Across northern Victoria, residents, farmers, freight operators and local businesses are fed up with the appalling condition of our roads. We are seeing lives put at risk, vehicles damaged, roads closed, longer travel times and increased risks for everyone who uses our roads. The action I seek is for the government to fix our regional roads and to provide a specific update on the state of the Charlton-St Arnaud Road and the Elmore-Raywood Road and what is being done to improve these important roads that families, farmers and businesses rely on every day.

In June last year I wrote to the minister on behalf of a local resident to raise concerns about the Charlton-St Arnaud Road. The government responded that experts were finalising a program of works to repair, rebuild and resurface roads across the state and that the Charlton-St Arnaud Road would be considered as part of that process. The minister also advised that the road was being inspected monthly for safety hazards and general defects. Well, 12 months later nothing has been done. That same resident contacted me again recently, providing photographs showing the appalling condition of the road. They told me that in some sections the lane is just 2.1 metres wide, meaning vehicles have to drive off the road to pass each other. This is not just cars; they mentioned school buses, horse floats, tourists, learner drivers, utes with trailers, farm machinery, B-doubles, C-doubles and road trains, and they described the road as ‘dangerously unsafe’. Their experience is reflected right across the region.

In the last week I have been to Wunghnu, Maldon and Bridgewater, and everywhere I go people are raising the same issue: the condition of our roads. I was also in Raywood last week with the Nationals candidate for Bendigo East Andrew Lethlean, listening to local residents and speaking with freight operators concerned about the Elmore-Raywood Road, particularly the Kamarooka section. This road is falling apart, and it is used regularly by school buses and is an important freight and transport route. While the government patched 566,000 square metres of road in 2024–25, this year’s target has been reduced to just 74,000 square metres. That is an enormous reduction when regional roads are already in desperate need of investment. With just 11 weeks until the election, the government are now promising to fix the potholes, but they have been in government for 12 years. The Nationals have a plan: in government we will properly fund our roads through the fair share guarantee, establish Better Roads Victoria to rebuild technical expertise, allocate \$5 billion to repair and rebuild Victoria’s roads, fix roads properly the first time and enforce tough standards to hold construction companies accountable. Regional drivers are paying the price for Labor’s neglect. We will stop the waste and invest in safer, better roads across regional Victoria.

Responses

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (00:10): There were 15 matters today addressed to a range of ministers, including to me, which I will provide a written response to. I will ensure that all of these matters are referred to the relevant ministers for an appropriate response in line with the standing orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (00:10): During question time Ms Crozier raised a point of order, asking me to review an answer from the Minister for Health to one of her questions and to follow up on another one. I believe the minister was responsive to the question and answered the question, so I will not be asking for a written response.

The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 12:11 am (Wednesday).