



DEBATES
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY
FIFTH ASSEMBLY
WEEKLY HANSARD

31 MARCH

2004

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The Assembly met at 10.30 am.

MR SPEAKER (Mr Berry) took the chair at 10.30 am and asked members to stand in silence and pray or reflect on their responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory.

Petition

The following petition was lodged for presentation.

Fox Place, Lyneham

By **Mrs Burke**, from 22 residents:

To the Speaker and members of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The petition of certain residents of the Australian Capital Territory draws to the attention of the Assembly:

That we the residents of Fox Place, Lyneham, ACT raise strong objections to the proposed development on Blocks 8, 9, 10 of Fox Place (Street numbers 15, 17, 19) regarding the increase of some 1300% in dwellings as a significant increase and not consistent with the definition of B12 zoning which allows for 'increased development' not 'significant development' as defined under B11 zoning.

Your petitioners therefore request the Assembly to:

Call on the ACT Planning Minister, Mr Simon Corbell, to enforce the correct zoning requirements for the B12 development under consideration for Fox Place and to reconsider their proposal to allow the construction of 40 town houses in a very restricted cul-de-sac in order that the safety and amenity of the area be preserved.

The clerk having announced that the terms of the petition would be recorded in Hansard and a copy referred to the appropriate minister, the petition was received.

Vocational and higher education students

Debate resumed from 10 March 2004, on motion by **Ms MacDonald**:

That this Assembly:

- (1) recognises the high level of vocational and higher education student debt in the ACT and throughout Australia;
- (2) acknowledges that many ACT students are having difficulty meeting the costs of living;
- (3) notes that many students are forced to work increasingly long hours to meet the costs of living;

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- (4) acknowledges that the Federal Government's Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy payments are not high enough to meet the costs of living; and
- (5) calls on the Federal Government to:
 - (a) review the amount students are paid in Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy; and
 - (b) reassess the eligibility criteria of Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy, to make it easier for students to obtain these allowances.

MRS BURKE (10.33): I appreciate the opportunity to rise today to talk about this motion. I congratulate Ms MacDonald, who is not present, on putting forward this motion, one that obviously raises some interesting points for discussion. I am pleased also to have the opportunity to congratulate the federal government on this issue. It has made big strides forward in this area.

Firstly, it is worth looking at issues such as Austudy and the youth allowance system under Labor. Under the ALP, there was no incentive to study. One would find it very hard even to consider studying under the regime that was in place under Labor. Under the ALP, there was no Austudy or youth allowance income bank, which allows students to earn up to \$5,000 a year before they are penalised. Under the ALP, students had to get their head around something like 13 different classifications or student criteria.

Under the ALP, student debt was a significant issue. Student debt is not a coalition phenomenon. Ms MacDonald raised issues there and took the opportunity to bag the federal government. I think that she needs to look very closely at the record of the ALP on this matter. I would urge other members to do the same. Under the ALP, it was generally understood that students were far better off on the dole than in higher education. That is a pretty sad indictment of the way that they operate and consider themselves to be good leaders in the area of education. Being able to encourage students through a system of lifelong learning and education is something that the ALP was not too good at and on which it does not have a really good record on. For instance, the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling has found that students are far better off under the coalition's youth allowance than under the ALP's previous Austudy system. I think that its report was for 1998-2000.

Under the ALP, it was nearly impossible for mature age students, particularly those with a spouse and/or dependent children, to go to university. I have talked to several people to whom that has applied and they have borne that out. Indeed, we are looking at a nation in which we are all getting older and I for one would want to stay active and take part in the work force for as long as I can, doing study along that route. We also need to consider that under the ALP students could not obtain interest free loans for study or obtain financial support for postgraduate study.

I think that it is worth looking at what the current government has done from a wider perspective. Let's look at some of the positives which flow down through the states and territories. I will come to that later, but it is really important to get the federal perspective right at the beginning, that we do not cloud the issue about what the federal government

is or is not doing. We need to get the facts right about what the states and territories are or are not doing at the same time.

Let's look at some of the positives. The current federal government spends over \$2.3 billion a year on youth allowance initiatives alone. It certainly shows a commitment there, I would suggest. Under the current system, close to 380,000 students are on youth allowance. The coalition government established the Austudy/youth allowance income bank. That is significant, Mr Speaker, because under the ALP students were far worse off. The amount of money that students could earn outside of Austudy payments, for instance, was calculated on a weekly basis. Hence, if they earned good money in any one week under the ALP system, they actually lost a percentage of their Austudy—a negating system if ever I heard one. Instead, under the coalition policy students have a bank of money—as I have said before, over \$5,000—and can earn the majority of this money at any one time of the year, most particularly during holiday periods, which is, of course, when most students are available and free to work. It seems to me to be a very sensible plan.

The coalition government also refined the HECS system and introduced the PEL system for postgraduate study. This provides greater choice than ever before. The harsh reality is that it is a user pays system. Gone are the days of something for nothing. I was talking only last night to a very committed bunch of people in the TAFE system and they were in agreement with the need to pay our teachers more. In fact, in that debate it was mentioned that it is not always government, business or students that should come up with the money; it is a combination of all three.

I think that it is now quite possible and financially viable under the coalition government for mature age students to re-enter the education system. As I said, that was never the case under the ALP. We are now trying to break down those barriers even more. We are trying to make the workplace more accessible to mature age people returning to work. We are trying to make learning accessible and lifelong.

We have to make sure that people can hop into and out of education when they need it; having modules of learning is very important. Again, we look to our TAFE system for that. Certainly, the review that has been under way by the federal government has alluded to some positive things being put forward as recommendations, but again it is not always up to the federal government of the day. States and territories must start to take responsibility and show leadership in the area.

The coalition also established a student loan system with the Commonwealth Bank—at a very reduced interest, I might add—and a facility whereby students can enter the work force and pay off their loan over time at very reasonable rates. Again, it is that thing of not having something for nothing; it puts value to it. The people I was talking to last evening alluded as well to the fact that getting something for nothing is not the way to go and people do value things more when they have to pay for them. But I would agree that there is a balance there. Students who are in financial difficulties can obtain assistance through the student financial assistance scheme.

The point remains that the coalition government has provided more opportunities for students than any ALP government and has established a number of systems allowing students to pay their way through vocational and higher education. It really is important

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to note that because we talk about flexibility in learning and flexibility in the delivery of learning, we need also to find flexible ways in which people can pay for their education and be proud of what they have established at the end of it.

Students can earn over \$5,000 at any time of the year without being penalised. Students can also obtain a student loan at very reasonable rates to help them through their studies. University students can also pursue postgraduate study through deferring course costs with the new PEL system. Sadly, at this time—we do have a federal election upon us, but the date is yet to be announced, and there are also local elections going on round Australia—none of that is ALP policy.

Ms MacDonald's motion speaks of recognising the high level of vocational and higher education student debt in the ACT and throughout Australia. As I have said, somehow it puts the onus back on the federal government to be doing more. I would be the first to say that we always need to be reviewing the education system. It is most important that we never put any blocks in the way of people learning. But the states and territories have to accept their responsibility. That also came out in a sensible debate last night of which I was a part.

The motion also speaks of acknowledging that many ACT students are having difficulty meeting the costs of living. The harsh reality is that students are not the only ones having difficulties. I think that there is a growing difficulty out there for many people to meet obligations. Perhaps it is time that we in this place looked, for instance, at some of the things that we waste our money on and pushed it out into programs that would be of value to the majority of Canberrans, not to people in the minority. They are things that we need to look at seriously in this place; where are we best spending taxpayers' money? If we have students having difficulty meeting the cost of living, we need to make sure that we help them appropriately in any way we can. If that means helping the majority, then we need to move that way.

The motion notes that many students are forced to work increasingly long hours to meet the cost of living. Mr Speaker, I did not go to university, but my brother did, and I remember him working extraordinarily long hours—inordinately long hours. I do not know what has changed there. Are we becoming a softer nation? I do not know; I am not sure. I have heard it said a lot that students work long hours, but I remember my brother's experience. He is in his late 50s, so we are looking at many years ago and the situation seemed to be no different then. I do not know how we are actually viewing things here. That is for others to comment.

The motion says that the federal government's youth allowance, Austudy and Abstudy payments are not high enough to meet the cost of living. I have already referred to that. I think that Ms MacDonald needs to look at the ALP's record on that before she makes such a sweeping statement. She has called on the federal government to review the amount students are paid under youth allowance, Austudy and Abstudy. The coalition has a good record on that.

Acknowledging that people always want more money, we have to look at ways in which to better use our money. How are we resourcing things? What are we spending our money on? How are we helping students? Sometimes it comes down to the state and territory level and is not just a matter of carping on in a negative way about the current

federal government, which I think has tackled the situation and is still moving forward in a positive way.

The motion also calls on the federal government to reassess the eligibility criteria for the youth allowance, which is up to 25 years; for Austudy, which is over 25 years; and Abstudy to make it easier for students to obtain these allowances. Again, I think that is a bit of a motherhood statement. There are things there that are constantly happening all the time. I think that I have clearly articulated that this morning.

Mr Speaker, I was pleased to see the following said in an article in the *Canberra Times* of Tuesday, 30 March:

There was an urgent need for more funds for the vocational education and training sector, according to a House of Representatives committee report issued yesterday.

I note that the chair of that committee, Kerry Bartlett, is a Liberal member who has made some very valid points and the recommendations made are certainly worth looking at and being talked through.

I commend Ms MacDonald for bringing this subject out into the public arena. Again, she really needs to check and make sure of the ALP record on some of those things. We really need to review vocational education and training in a very different light in regard to the way in which we train people for the work force. Many issues come into the debate and I think that those issues can only be addressed when the states and territories start to deliver on their part of the bargain, instead of continually negating or trying to negate the efforts of a federal government that is clearly committed to advancing vocational education and training in Australia.

MS DUNDAS (10.46): Mr Speaker, the Democrats are happy to support this motion, although we find it ironic that the motion is being put forward by the ALP which, federally, has voted with the coalition time and again against Democrat attempts to lower the age of independence for accessing youth benefits to 18 or 21, as opposed to where it sits today at 25. We have a ludicrous situation where young people are considered dependent unless they have earned \$16,000 in the last 18 months or it is unsafe for them to live at home.

This motion calls on the federal government to review the amount students are paid through youth allowance, Austudy and Abstudy and reassess the eligibility criteria for those allowances to make it easier for students to get the support they need. I hope that Ms MacDonald is encouraging her federal Labor colleagues to look long and hard at their track record on this issue and that they will change their policy to recognise that young people need to access this support.

I have no problem with standing here and saying that ACT students are having difficulty meeting the cost of living, that they are living in debt and that the federal government's youth allowance, Austudy and Abstudy payments are not high enough to meet the cost of living. I do that on the proud track record of what the Democrats have been working towards in the Senate for the last 20 years.

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The restructuring of social security payments to young people has dramatically reduced the number of young people who are able to claim support to further their studies at school, TAFE or university, or support to assist them in looking for full-time work. Between 1998 and 2001, the number of full-time students under the age of 19 receiving youth allowance fell from 33 per cent to 21 per cent. As a result, an increasing number of school leavers are delaying entry to further education so they can work for 12 months to qualify for youth allowance. When they actually start education with their youth allowance payments they are still living in massive debt and below the poverty line. That is the reality for many students in the ACT, as it is across the nation.

For those lucky enough to have convinced Centrelink that they are eligible to receive youth allowance, the payments are simply not enough. The current rate of youth allowance puts recipients at 40 per cent below the poverty line. That is not enough on which to study full time and it is not enough to support someone while they look for work. We have heard the vice-chancellors of our universities talking about students not being able to live, not being able to eat, not being able to afford their education.

Last week we were having discussions about how the lack of support that students are getting means that their education is suffering and that they are having to manage full-time work as well as full-time studies, which means that they do not have enough time to devote to their learning to get the full understanding they are meant to get at university. It is truly disappointing that we, the lucky nation that is meant to be supporting higher education, are not able to support young people as they attempt to complete their degrees.

The October 2000 report *Runaway Youth Debt* found that there are fundamental flaws in the structure of youth allowance and its administration. Almost all the young people interviewed for the report mentioned that they had difficulties in surviving on youth allowance payments due to the inadequacy of the payments, the repayment of Centrelink debts and the impact of breaches. The consequence of these issues has entrenched poverty and further homelessness, criminal activity or contact with the criminal justice system and, for many, the inability to complete or undertake education. Young people are disproportionately represented in breaches of social security payments, with over 50 per cent of the Centrelink breaches going to people under the age of 25.

Youth allowance has been a failure in assisting young people to participate in vocational and higher education and has been a failure in providing a leg-up for our most vulnerable young people. The system is definitely one that needs review and it needs to recognise the poverty in which young people are currently living in the ACT as they attempt to complete higher education.

I am happy to support this motion, but I am disappointed that the ACT government is not doing more. It should be working to help young people attempting higher education or vocational education in the ACT, but the government appears to be washing its hands of the problem, as it has done with the crisis in student accommodation.

The government's vision of Canberra as the education capital of Australia stands in stark contrast with its lack of action in actually alleviating the problems and the government continues to lay the blame at the feet of others. Students on youth allowance contribute

to Canberra life. They contribute to our society, to our community and to our economy. They pay rates and land tax through their rent, they contribute in terms of all the goods and services that they pay for here in the ACT and when they graduate they will pay for their education, including government support, at over two times more than they got.

Clearly, the federal government is not doing enough to help struggling young people in the ACT, but the ACT government is not doing enough, either, and it would be a positive step for the ACT government to take the initiative and set about helping make the lives of students in the ACT more liveable and more affordable, as opposed to continually saying that this is just a federal government issue.

MS TUCKER (10.52): The Greens believe that a responsible government should foster a strong, vibrant, top-quality public education system that is free from preschool to university. That is the kind of vision that the Greens bring to the debate today about support for vocational and higher education. It is an affordable and responsible vision. We believe that higher education should be funded by the government rather than by individual students. We believe that it should be funded through progressive taxation, whereby people contribute, depending on what they earn, to pay for a service that is provided based on the willingness of people to want to learn and engage in higher education.

The question of student income support is fundamental to the debate about postsecondary education in Australia. Students must continually decide whether to prioritise their time earning money or spend their time ensuring that they can study and get a quality educational outcome. This is a trade-off that students face every day and it leaves us socially, culturally and economically sold short.

The Australian Council of Social Service in their submission to the government on the higher education proposal said:

...the package will contribute to growing divides in three areas: a divide between those people able to attend university and those who do not; inequality between the universities that poorer and wealthier students attend; and a disparity in the capacity of universities to deliver quality education.

They are concerned that adult students over 25 years of age receive only \$155 a week from Austudy, around 36 per cent below the Henderson poverty line, and are not eligible for rent assistance; that young students from poor backgrounds living away from home receive slightly more than students aged over 25—\$192 a week, including rent assistance—but this amount is still about 17 per cent below the Henderson poverty line; that adult unemployed people receive \$71 a week more than Austudy recipients, which creates a disincentive for people to improve their qualifications and job prospects; that high HECS debts already put off many prospective students from attending university, yet this barrier is likely to worsen under the government's plans to allow universities to increase HECS fees; and that inequality between universities will worsen as prestigious campuses become resource rich from higher HECS fees and more full-fee enrolments, while universities catering to lower and middle income students, such as those in regional areas, will have fewer resources.

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Rather than the thinning down of student support that we are seeing from the federal government, the Greens would prefer to have a debate about how to increase and improve the provision of student support. Recently, the federal government increased HECS fees by 25 per cent, which in effect increases the burden on students to pay for the cost of education and lightens the cost of higher education for the government.

The federal department of education reported that fee increases brought in by the current federal government have resulted in a reduced demand for higher education amongst school leaver applicants by around 9,000 students per year, a lower demand for higher education amongst mature age applicants of around 17,000 per year, and a reduced number of men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds being able to access the most expensive university courses. There has been a 38 per cent drop in the number of people from these low income backgrounds who have been able to access these expensive courses at university.

Approximately 10 per cent of students drop out as a direct result of financial hardship and these figures do not count for the unmeasured thousands of graduates who underachieve at university because they work 20 hours or more. To raise Abstudy and Austudy in line with Newstart levels, which would be similar to the scheme that exists in New Zealand, would cost approximately \$270 million per annum. To extend rent assistance to Austudy recipients would cost a further \$25 million per annum. That is a small price to pay for improved numbers and quality of Australian graduates. These measures, along with a reduction in the age of independence to 18 from 25, and the simplification of the interface between Centrelink and students are the kinds of measures Australia should be taking to support students.

I am not sure of federal Labor policy on support for students, but the Greens are not alone in calling for these sorts of measure for improved student income support. The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee, in their report to the minister, has called for the higher education legislation "to be supported by changes to the income support system, to ensure that students from low to middle income families do not face financial barriers to education and training but are encouraged to undertake suitable long-term education and training". Even the group of eight, the group of the wealthiest universities, has noted the need for greater equity measures. They have joined the National Tertiary Education Union, the Australian Council of Social Service and the National Union of Students, which have all articulated the need to create a liveable financial environment for students to succeed.

The overseas experience reinforces this consensus. In both the UK and New Zealand, experiments with the withdrawal or downgrading of student support funding are being reversed. A House of Commons select committee report released in June last year recommended that the recently reintroduced means tested student maintenance grants scheme should be expanded. The committee report endorsed the comments of Professor Brown of Liverpool John Moores University, who said that the main cost borne by students is not that of tuition fees but is, in fact, the cost of personal maintenance, which is very inadequately supported through the student loan system.

Universities should be places where we, as a community, can give students an opportunity to further their education in order that we may all benefit and be enriched by

the development of our collective intellectual capacity. Unfortunately, the current income support for postsecondary students does nothing to back the ability of the poorest of its students, those with carer responsibilities or those with different cultural backgrounds, and the Greens will continue to push for a fairer higher education system.

I wish to move an amendment that addresses the unmet need in the ACT for TAFE places. I move:

Insert:

- “(6) (a) calls on the ACT Government to accurately assess unmet need for TAFE courses in the ACT; and
- (b) to provide the Assembly with an estimate of costs to meet that need by the last sitting day in this term.”.

MR SPEAKER: Ms Tucker, I have referred back to some decisions that I have made and other Speakers have made in the past in relation to amendments, particularly with respect to standing order 140, which I will quote for the information of the Assembly:

Every amendment must be relevant to the question which it is proposed to amend.

The motion before the Assembly goes to the issue of student debt and youth allowance, Austudy and so on. The amendment talks about a different subject altogether, that is, the unmet need for TAFE courses in the ACT, and calls on the government to provided an estimate of the costs to meet that need. I think that that is outside the scope of the motion.

MS TUCKER: Could I clarify it?

MR SPEAKER: I am inclined to rule the amendment out of order, but I am prepared to listen to you.

MS TUCKER: I take your point, but I think that it is relevant in that it would be interesting to understand the unmet need and also to understand whether the capacity to pay is relevant to that. I know what you are saying, but I could argue that there is relevance there. I am interested in understanding whether the capacity to pay is actually stopping people from entering TAFE or the CIT.

Mrs Dunne: On that issue, Mr Speaker: whilst I think that your ruling is correct, that the amendment is not in the spirit of the motion, the opposition would be happy to consider an independent, free-standing motion on this topic at any stage. I think that might be a better way of dealing with it.

Ms MacDonald: Mr Speaker, speaking to the proposed amendment, I understand what Ms Tucker is asking for with the amendment to this motion, but it really is not relevant to the motion and it is a bit complex. I think that Ms Tucker is asking about unmet demand rather than unmet need, which are quite different issues. I would be happy to work with Ms Tucker towards having another motion, a stand-alone motion, on this issue, but the amendment does not relate directly to Austudy, Abstudy and youth allowance; it talks about courses rather than financial support for students.

MR SPEAKER: I think the point is well made that the amendment would go to an interesting issue insofar as TAFE courses are concerned, but I will stick with my inclination in relation to standing order 140 and rule it out of order because I think that it is outside the scope of the original motion.

MR PRATT (11.03): I, too, thank Ms MacDonald for raising this quite important issue. VET is at the forefront of our minds and has been for quite some time. It is important that we address whatever needs to be done to make VET more affordable, given that we are now providing high school students with choices that such students probably had not had for quite some time.

In terms of the issues raised about the federal government, it is not so easy to keep pace with the increasing cost of living. That is a challenge that all governments have to face. But I think that we do need to recognise in this debate that the federal coalition government has gone quite some distance in improving the opportunities for students across Australia to access vocational education and training. Indeed, the federal government is spending \$2.3 billion annually on providing allowances for young students going into tertiary level and/or VET training opportunities.

The federal government's philosophy, which is, of course, the philosophy of the Liberal Party itself, is very much to encourage personal growth and development. That is part of what underpins our thoughts about how to make Australia a better place. Consequently, the federal government will also be looking to encourage youths to better themselves. Certainly, federal Minister Nelson has demonstrated his intentions to improve access for students to funding.

Let's look at the federal ALP's track record on this subject. Their means-tested system that dictated how well students could access funding allowances was far tighter than the current system. At least the Howard government has freed up those constraints. I think that needs to be recognised here. The \$5,000 income allowance before any penalty is imposed is a long way better than it used to be, which is very important. Let's recognise that as well in this debate.

It is important that we have in place funding systems that encourage youth to strive for excellence, rather than a funding system that merely supports a hand-out mentality. That means that we have to target funding to encourage our youth to step up and take the opportunities that our system should be able to provide. Youth who demonstrate both potential and a hard work ethic, regardless of their SES background, deserve to be funded.

I support Ms MacDonald's call for the federal government to carry on with its reviews and to look more closely at a number of areas. I would certainly encourage the federal government to look at the scholarship system. I would like to see a scholarship system which closely assesses student potential and the work ethic of a student; that is, you know if you give a student a scholarship that that student already has a track record, demonstrated in high school, of being a diligent student and you know that the taxpayers' money will be well spent.

If we target all children, regardless of their demographic background, surely we will be picking up high school kids who are desperately short of funding and do need assistance. Let's look at targeting that assistance so that the money is well spent and we reinforce success, as demonstrated by high school students who, while they may not be university material or they may not yet be ready for university, have at least demonstrated a willingness to learn and a desire to better themselves.

Gone are the days when governments of any persuasion, federal or state, can simply pay for any and all courses, tertiary or VET. I would like to see federal and state governments target their funding more closely to students undertaking meaningful education.

Mr Speaker, over the last two years we have cranked up the debate here on the importance of vocational education and training. It is very important and the ACT government needs to continue in the direction it has commenced with rebuilding vocational education and training as it still has a long way to go before it can feel comfortable that we have reached a satisfactory level of delivery in the vocational education and training system.

For years the federal ALP government did little to encourage vocational education and training. There was a mindless policy that we should encourage all children to go to university, regardless of their suitability to undertake tertiary training. As a result of that, vocational education and training capabilities died on the vine. I am pleased that this government is now doing something, following in the tracks of the previous Liberal government, to revitalise vocational education and training in the ACT.

I congratulate them on at least having gone down the track of recognising that not all students will be ready to undertake university training after year 12. Some need to go out into the work stream and pick up a vocational education and training qualification and then perhaps go back to university later when they have matured or settled down. Of course, we also have youths whom we know do not want to go to university and we must make sure that they stream through an appropriate college and undertake VET after year 10. I congratulate the government on at least going down that track and I encourage it to continue going down that track.

Mr Speaker, I want to refer briefly to youth at risk, an issue raised often in this place. We are very concerned about youth at risk who are in danger of not finishing education and we know that we have a significant minority of children in that category. It is a social problem as well as an education problem. Therefore, vocational education and training is very important in terms of dealing with the youth at risk issues. I am pleased to say that Brendan Nelson has often talked about that and demonstrated the federal government's intention to rebuild VET across the country.

Unfortunately, I have to say that we need to do a lot more early in high school about looking at the curriculum for preparing the children who will have a tendency to go through the vocational education and training stream and catering for their needs in the early years in technical education subjects. I am not talking about VET subjects and I am not talking about certificate 1 or certificate 2; I am talking about trade and technically oriented subjects that pick up those kids who are falling out of the curriculum stream,

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particularly around the year 8 and year 9 mark, as they are having trouble with focusing. A lot more needs to be done in our high school curriculum to cater for that as a predicator to encouraging perhaps those students to go to college and pick up a formal VET stream.

We have had a discussion this morning about free education. Unfortunately, free education from kindergarten to university is a silly and irresponsible pipedream. It just cannot happen. Families and students have to pick up some of the responsibility. The government needs to pick up the responsibility for ensuring, as I said earlier, that those children who come from a difficult SES background are identified, recognised for their talents and supported. I am sure that in terms of poverty line issues that can be catered for, it is very important that we have in place good strategies to ensure that all children can attain their best potential in whatever stream.

MS MacDONALD (11.13), in reply: I thank members for their contribution to this debate, such as it was. I would like to note again the presence in the gallery of Max Jeganathan and Kathryn Cooper, the president and vice-president of the ANU Students Association. I thank them for their support in coming along today and when I gave my introductory speech.

It was announced on 12 March, after I gave that speech, that the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee will be conducting investigations into student income support, indigenous skills and training and lifelong learning in Australia. Austudy, Abstudy and rent assistance will be the focus of a six-month investigation, with the committee being expected to report to the federal parliament later this year.

Those inquiries are welcome news, but it is still important for this motion to get up because, apart from anything else, it would be a good motion to put forward to that Senate committee inquiry. But the Senate committee inquiry will not be reporting to parliament for at least six months and students are in a crisis situation now.

Today is a national day of action for students. A rally is being held in Garema Place today and I believe that hundreds of students from both the ANU and the University of Canberra are expected to attend. As part of the national campaign, students, unionists and community activists will be protesting against the introduction of the Howard government's new higher education package. I understand that the speakers at the rally will include Senator Kim Carr, Senator Kerry Nettle and representatives of the ANU and the University of Canberra. I will be attending that rally today to give my support to the students who are facing fairly tough times these days.

I would like to respond to some of the comments that have been made this morning in relation to this motion to correct some of the misinterpretations and misunderstandings of what my motion is calling for and talk about the facts of life. Mr Pratt said that the previous government had set about revitalising vocational education and training in the ACT. I could not disagree more with that assessment of the actions of the previous government. Mr Speaker, as you know and as other people in this chamber know very well, I worked within vocational education and training in an industry training advisory board for two years and I was also involved with that ITAB for five years prior to actually having a paid role, being both the chair and a member of the board for five

years. In that time, the former Carnell Liberal government's way of assisting vocational education and training within the ACT was to send funds which could have been providing real industry advice to government off to the ACT Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Mrs Burke: We now have a federal government that puts into ITABs for the first time ever.

MS MacDONALD: Those funds were never transparent, were never accountable. The ITABs could never actually get information about where the money was going, Mrs Burke.

Mrs Burke: Have you restored the funding?

MS MacDONALD: Mrs Burke talks about whether or not we have restored the funding. We provide \$500,000 to the ITABs, which is something the previous government never provided. We provide \$500,000—half a million dollars—which your former government never provided to vocational education and training.

Mr Pratt also talked about the federal government giving support for vocational education and training. As Mr Corbell has pointed out, it was the Keating Labor government that introduced the Australian National Training Authority. It was the Keating Labor government that made a difference by providing the links between industry, government and students in terms of getting up industry training advisory boards and setting up ANTA. It is the current Liberal government, under the so-called stewardship of Brendan Nelson—the fantastic minister we have looking after those areas!—that is allowing the Australian National Training Authority to die a very slow and painful death.

Mrs Burke: That is a ridiculous statement.

MS MacDONALD: It is dying a very slow and painful death, Mrs Burke. The Australian National Training Authority has had no real increase in its funds since the current federal government came to power, Mrs Burke.

I thank Ms Dundas for her support for this motion, but she said that it was ironic that the Labor Party was introducing the motion. Ms Dundas should be aware that the Labor Party is actually supportive of students. She made the claim that the ACT government was washing its hands of the student debt problem, as it had done with student accommodation, and that it was laying the blame at the feet of others. Ms Dundas, I have news for you: the finances for higher education and for vocational education and training in terms of funding TAFE in the main come from the federal government.

The other thing I would like to mention is that the Stanhope Labor government, far from washing its hands of this issue, is doing what it can where it can. As I am sure Minister Wood would attest to, the ACT government is providing student housing in the Currong Flats, delivered by Havelock Housing. Yesterday I was told that 14 or 15 students are being provided with accommodation in Currong Flats. We also provide between 30 and 40 postgraduate students with accommodation in ACT government housing. The ACT government is well aware that there is a problem with student housing. We are doing

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what we can to fix the problem. We are not ignoring it and we are not sweeping it under the carpet. We are trying to do what we can.

Finally, Mrs Burke made the comment—I thought that this was a real pearl—that under the Labor Party everybody knew that students would be better off on the dole. I was a student under the Hawke/Keating Labor government and I did face a situation where I needed to get some financial help. I admit that there were problems with it and not all of my colleagues within the Labor Party, even today, agree with me on the issue of the higher education contribution scheme, but I would say in terms of HECS, which we introduced, that it was actually affordable under the previous federal Labor government. The threshold for the higher education contribution scheme has been lowered to such a level that you could be earning a minuscule amount of money and have to start paying back your HECS debt.

Mrs Burke said that there was student debt back then. There was student debt back then, but what I am saying in this motion, what the students who are sitting in the gallery today are saying and what the student who will be attending the rally today are saying is that it has come to the point where they are being forced out of their study, that they can no longer afford to study. That is not a situation that I want to see happen. It is not a situation that any of us in this place would wish to see happen. It is certainly not a situation that the people up on the hill should wish to see happen because, when we lose students from courses, when they do not complete their courses, we lose the skills that otherwise they would be gaining and contributing to a better society within the country.

I found it quite interesting that Mrs Burke raised the issue of interest free loans under the current federal government. (*Extension of time granted.*) Under that government there really is no such thing as an interest free loan. In order to obtain a loan of \$10,000, students must assume a debt in excess of \$12,000. They are borrowing \$10,000, but they have to pay back \$12,000. I would like to know how that \$2,000 on top of the \$10,000 originally borrowed is actually interest free. The difference is a loan establishment fee of over 20 per cent. It is just a joke to call it an interest free loan. It is not an interest free loan.

The other thing I would say about the members opposite who have spoken on this issue today is that they just seem to have been spinning Minister Brendan Nelson's media releases backwards. I have to say that Minister Nelson has an interesting spin on the issue. I would not necessarily say that it is a realistic spin, but it is his spin and, no doubt, that is the line that the Liberal opposition in this place need to run.

Just before I close, I would like to thank members for the support that they are giving to the motion. In terms of Ms Tucker's proposed amendment, I would be happy to talk to her at some stage about having a separate motion as some way of actually gaining the information she is seeking. I know what Ms Tucker was trying to do in terms of vocational courses through the CIT.

There really is a difference between unmet need and unmet demand. In looking at unmet need, are we talking about community need, are we talking about student need or are we talking about the unmet need of the trainers at the CIT? Which need are we talking about in that regard? I think that issue could stand alone in a motion. Ms Tucker and I will talk

about that at a later time. Finally, I thank all members for their contribution to the debate. I have enjoyed it. I urge the Assembly to support the motion.

Motion agreed to.

Pneumococcal vaccine

MS MacDONALD (11.26): I move:

That this Assembly:

- (1) calls on the Federal Government to accept the recommendation of the National Health and Medical Research Council and provide pneumococcal vaccine free to all Australian children;
- (2) expresses concern at the Federal Government's decision not to implement the Council's recommendation which will disadvantage many low-income families who will not be able to afford the \$600 vaccine, therefore placing their children at greater risk;
- (3) recognises the severity of pneumococcal disease and notes the disease kills more Australians than meningococcal C, for which there is a Federal Government funded vaccination;
- (4) notes the health and financial benefits gained by providing pneumococcal disease vaccine free to all Australia; and
- (5) acknowledges a large number of organisations are in support of the National Health and Medical Research Council's recommendation, including the Australian Medical Association's Child and Youth Committee.

Since the year 2000 in the ACT, 10 people have died from pneumococcal disease and 113 cases have been reported. Nationally in 2002 there were 2,354 cases of invasive pneumococcal disease and in 2001 there were 25 deaths from pneumococcal. Eleven per cent of children reported to have pneumococcal meningitis will die and half of all children who contract the disease will be left permanently disabled. These are disturbing figures but I believe the most disturbing thing is that pneumococcal disease is completely preventable. A vaccine is available—a vaccine that has been recommended by the National Health and Medical Research Council and one that would protect against seven strains of the virus.

On 19 September 2003, the National Health and Medical Research Council, the NHMRC, included pneumococcal as a recommended vaccine for all Australian children under the age of two. The council recommended a three-dose series of vaccinations at two, four and six months of age. But, for the first time ever, the federal government has not accepted the recommendation of the NHMRC.

The immunisation handbook of the NHMRC is revised and reprinted every two to three years. The handbook provides a background to scientific support for the vaccines listed on the vaccination schedule, including information about risks, benefits and dosage regimes. It also contains advice on vaccinations for international travel, special risk groups, occupational hazards, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Because the federal government has not fully funded the Australian standard vaccination schedule, or the ASVS, the Australian Medical Association withdrew its support for the NHMRC booklet last year, stating it was confusing for parents, general practitioners and other immunisation providers. In the past, these booklets have been a valuable and comprehensive source of information for parents. But the latest edition has caused only uncertainty.

Pneumococcal is the leading cause of meningitis in children under the age of five, causing on average 60 cases and seven deaths annually—more than meningococcal C, for which there is a subsidised vaccination.

Pneumococcal disease is an infection caused by the bacterium streptococcus pneumonia. If it is spread beyond the respiratory track it causes invasive pneumococcal disease such as pneumonia, infection of the middle ear and meningitis. The results of this can be various disabilities such as blindness, deafness, learning difficulties, meningitis, septic arthritis and osteomyelitis—bone infection—and, in extreme cases, death.

Pneumococcal is passed from person to person via droplets when coughing or sneezing, kissing or indirectly via toys and other soiled items. It can easily be passed from child to child through sharing toys, drink bottles and other items. Symptoms vary, depending on the site of infection and the age of the person, but may include shortness of breath, headache, cough, crying, tugging at the ear, fever, nausea, drowsiness and stiff neck.

Pneumococcal is four times more common than meningococcal. Yet the Howard federal government has ignored the recommendation from its own expert body that it should subsidise vaccinations for all Australian children against pneumococcal infections. Why has the Howard government ruled out implementing the expert advice from the National Health and Medical Research Council? Because of what it would cost to supply the vaccine free to all Australian children. In Australia, vaccines are evaluated for Commonwealth funding in the same way that the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee evaluates drugs. If a vaccine meets a cost effectiveness threshold, it can be considered for funding in the Australian standard vaccination schedule.

It has been estimated that a national vaccination program to address pneumococcal disease in young children would cost \$60 million per year. While this figure sounds high, the federal government is spending \$290 million per year on meningococcal C vaccine. The Howard government has determined that, at this stage, implementing the council's recommendation and providing pneumococcal vaccine free to all Australian children is just not cost effective. The federal government has been attacked for this position. Health professionals from a vast range of organisations, including the Australian Medical Association, have condemned the government's decision.

Dr Ian Pryor, ACT AMA president, has given his full support to this motion I am presenting here today. Dr Pryor believes the federal government should fully fund the Australian standard vaccination schedule and, therefore, provide free pneumococcal vaccinations to all Australian children. The national branch of the AMA is also fully supportive of the recommendation for the federal government to supply pneumococcal vaccine free to all Australian children, and chair of the national AMA's Advisory Committee on Child and Youth Health, eminent paediatrician Dr Michael Rice, has been

calling on the federal government for the past six months to implement the council's recommendations. In November 2003 Dr Rice said:

The Communicable Disease Network of Australia has made invasive pneumococcal disease a notifiable disease and the NHMRC has recommended that all Australian children be immunised against it. While the Government has agreed to fund pneumococcal immunisation for children in high risk groups, not all high risk groups have been included, most notably children in childcare centres. At the very least, free pneumococcal immunisation should be available to all children in childcare. Ideally, the vaccine should be funded for all Australian children in an effort to eradicate the disease.

The vaccine is available privately, but at a cost of \$150 per dose, with three doses required, it is out of the price range of many Australian families, particularly those with more than one child. Dr Rice went on to say that the AMA was stunned by the federal government's decision to financially penalise parents who immunise their children against the disease. I quote Dr Rice:

The current schedule clearly discriminates against lower income families. Parents who want to follow the best scientific advice on immunisation will now have to pay more than \$500 from their own pockets to have their children fully immunised...the community is now confused and does not understand why the government has failed to implement the recommendation of its expert advisory committee. We run the risk that immunisation rates may fall to unacceptably low levels again. We must not allow this to happen.

This is the first time the federal government will not subsidise all the vaccines recommended by its advisory body. What message does this send to Australian parents? An authoritative body says the vaccine should be given to all Australian children, but the federal government says no.

While some people will be able to afford the vaccine, many others will not. It should not matter whether you are born into a rich family or a poor family, you should, as an infant, be entitled to all of the vaccines that the medical authorities recommend. The effect of this will be that families who have the disposable income available will go to their GP. The GP will say, "This is the recommended set of vaccines," and they will pay the \$600 per child necessary to ensure that their child is immunised against pneumococcal.

But low income families will take their child to the GP and, although they will be told their child should have the vaccine, when they look at their budget they just will not be able to afford it and they will say, "I will just have to take the risk." What a terrible position to put parents in. Why should those who do not have a high disposable income be forced to choose between their children's health and paying their bills?

Dr Jenny Royal from Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital told the ABC's *7.30 Report* recently that she wrestles daily with recommending a vaccine she knows can save lives, but knows many cannot afford. Dr Royal said:

I think the current system is unfair...At my immunisation clinic, I saw a family with three young children under the age of three years and we discussed this vaccine. It was so difficult for me to recommend a vaccine, which clearly was very expensive

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for them. The longer we don't use this vaccine, the more children that will come in with vaccine-preventable meningitis.

Pneumococcal disease is causing, and has the potential to cause, severe and lasting trauma to families and the young people who contract the disease. I will refer to two examples. The first is that of Canberra couple Stuart and Michelle Yeaman. The Yeaman's 11-month-old son Cameron died from pneumococcal disease last year and doctors say that Cameron almost certainly would have lived had he been given the vaccine. The sad thing is the Yeamans would have gladly paid for the vaccine, but they did not know that it existed. During an interview on the ABC's *7.30 Report* in August of last year, Mr Yeaman said:

The vaccine has been out there for three years. If we had have known about it, we would have used it. If it had have been on the free list, we would have been given access to it in any case.

That is the awful truth. Many have heard about meningococcal and know to look for a rash, if they suspect their child may have contracted the disease, but here is another disease that very few have heard of, but it is more common than and just as deadly as the much publicised meningococcal.

There is an obvious need for the federal government not only to provide pneumococcal vaccine free to Australian children but also to provide parents and guardians with more information about pneumococcal.

The second case I would like to highlight is that of the Western Australian 14-year-old Ella Hitchen. Ella contracted pneumococcal when she was just nine weeks old. While she has survived, she now suffers severe cerebral palsy and is a severe spastic quadriplegic. As reported in *The Australian* newspaper in August 2003, Ella's parents predicted that the community would have to spend \$4.5 million on her care over her lifetime. That is an extraordinary cost both in financial terms and in terms of the loss of quality to Ella's life because of the impact the disease has had and is having on both her and her family.

If the federal government followed the National Health and Medical Research Council's recommendation, these sorts of traumas could be prevented. In fact, it has been estimated that the vaccine could prevent the hospitalisation of about 750 Australian children under the age of five annually.

In *The Australian* newspaper in September 2003, the President of the College of Physicians, Don Robertson, said that although the vaccine was expensive, it was worthwhile to prevent children dying or developing brain damage from pneumococcal. Here we have the AMA, the College of Physicians, the National Health and Medical Research Council, numerous doctors and many Australian families calling on the government to provide pneumococcal vaccine free to Australian children. To date, these calls have not been answered. That is why it is imperative that today the members of this Assembly support this motion. Pressure needs to be applied to the federal government. With the addition of the ACT Legislative Assembly to the list of organisations—and I understand there has been unanimous support from the South Australian Parliament—professionals and public supporters urging the case, hopefully the Howard government

will do what is right for Australian children and provide them with free pneumococcal vaccine. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

MR CORBELL (Minister for Health and Minister for Planning) (11.40): I am pleased to rise in the Assembly today for a very valid and important matter for the Assembly to discuss; that is, the availability of the pneumococcal vaccine to Canberrans and particularly to young Canberrans—children in the ACT.

The first part of Ms MacDonald's motion deals with a call on the federal government to accept the recommendation of the National Health and Medical Research Council to provide pneumococcal vaccine free to all Australian children.

In September 2003 the Australian government accepted the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation—or ATAGI as it is known—recommendation of the universal pneumococcal vaccine for all Australian children. Currently, the pneumococcal vaccine is on the Australian standard vaccination schedule recommended for all children at two, four and sixth months of age. It is currently available free to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under two years and all children under five years with specified medical conditions.

At this stage it is not a vaccine broadly available to the child community here in the ACT, or indeed in any other part of Australia, free of charge. The conditions that specify in what circumstances it is available free of charge are set out in the schedule of vaccines provided free under the national immunisation program.

It is highly unusual that the federal government took the decision not to fund this particular vaccine free of charge to all children in Australia. It is unusual for the government to decline funding for these sorts of recommendations. The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation is a well-respected professional body which makes sensible and reasoned decisions on what vaccines should be made available and at what cost or, indeed, free of charge, here in Australia.

The second part of Ms MacDonald's motion expresses a concern at the federal government's decision not to implement the council's recommendation, which disadvantages many low income families who will not be able to afford the \$600 vaccination. As Ms MacDonald has already pointed out, all children are not eligible for free vaccine at the moment, and the cost of accessing the vaccines is approximately \$100 to \$150 per dose. Babies aged between two and six months require three doses of the vaccine, whereas babies aged between seven months and 17 months require two doses—clearly an extremely expensive proposition for most families here in the ACT.

As Ms MacDonald rightly points out, pneumococcal infection is more prevalent than infection resulting from the various strains of meningococcal, and indeed the Commonwealth government generously funds free immunisation for meningococcal C as part of its free immunisation program. The ACT government provides funding to assist in the distribution of that vaccination.

For children over the age of 17 months there is a need for only one dose of the vaccine, consistent with the National Health and Medical Research Council's recommendations.

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So as Ms MacDonald points out, for a family with babies the cost of the potential course for each child may be up to \$600.

The public health outcomes funding agreement, or PHOFA, provides that funding for a limited range of vaccines in the ACT. The current agreement is due to expire on 30 June this year. In 2003 the Commonwealth undertook a review of the current agreement in consultation with the states and territories. This encompassed the scope and intent of the agreement including levels of funding.

A negotiation process for the new agreement is expected to commence in March 2004 and will consider the funding levels for vaccines to be included in the agreements. In this context Ms MacDonald's motion is particularly timely because it allows us to send a clear message—and certainly I as minister will take heed of the resolution of the Assembly, if it chooses to pass it today, in terms of the negotiations for the future agreement—that free vaccination for pneumococcal disease is legitimate and should be seriously considered by the Commonwealth government.

Of course, the severity of pneumococcal disease is significant. The disease kills more Australians than meningococcal C, for which there is a federal government funded vaccination. Although the number of cases of this disease, or indeed deaths from it and the burden of the disease, is a very important consideration, cost effectiveness is also considered to be a significant factor in prioritising vaccine funding. It is for this reason that the expert group has recommended both vaccines on the Australian standard vaccination schedule. The National Health and Medical Research Council endorsed this in September 2003 after the May budget decisions had been finalised.

It is very clear that not only is it a worthwhile vaccination in the context of the ability to reduce incidence of this illness but also it is highly cost effective and recognised as such by the medical community. Of course, there are significant health and financial benefits to be gained by providing pneumococcal disease vaccine free to all young Australians. This was recognised by the expert group's recommendation. As Ms MacDonald points out, a large number of organisations, including the Australian Medical Association's Advisory Committee on Child and Youth Health, have been in support of the National Health and Medical Research Council's recommendation.

It is important that this lobbying by these organisations be accepted and endorsed by the Assembly today. Emphasis has been placed on funding, particularly in the context of the emphasis the Commonwealth has chosen in terms of funding meningococcal vaccine over pneumococcal vaccine. They are both legitimate vaccines; they are both cost effective. For that reason the ACT government has supported, and continues to support, the National Health and Medical Research Council's recommendation for a funded pneumococcal vaccine program for babies and children in the ACT.

This is a disease that has potentially devastating effects on babies and young children. It can cruel their chances of a productive and full life in the most devastating way, as Ms MacDonald has highlighted. For that reason it is a sensible motion which deserves the Assembly's support if we are to continue to strive to prevent illnesses in babies and young children that can have such awful and traumatic effects. I endorse and strongly support the motion today.

MS DUNDAS (11.49): I move the following amendment:

Omit paragraph (4).

Today we are debating a very interesting and important issue. I note however that the report from the National Health and Medical Research Council came down last year. If this was considered an urgent debate, there have been ample opportunities to have this discussion in the Assembly.

Free pneumococcal immunisation is provided to those children who are most at risk of contracting the disease. On my information, that figure is around 19,000. That includes all children living in Central Australia, all children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and those with a medical condition that places them at increased risk.

There is no doubt that pneumococcal is a dangerous disease and one that is preventable. I accept Ms MacDonald's point that pneumococcal not only causes more deaths than meningococcal but also causes more hospital visits. As a society we tend to throw our weight behind preventing and treating diseases and illnesses and often leave other afflictions behind, no matter how serious they are. Pneumococcal is one of those diseases that is neglected, in a publicity sense, because it is most prevalent in Central Australia, away from the eyes of metropolitan media. In an ideal world, all preventable diseases would be prevented rather than just those that grab the headlines.

Why should children's lives be put at risk while governments squabble over who is going to pay for a vaccination? It is an interesting point of this debate: we are again calling on the federal government to pick up the slack on something that we see as incredibly important.

We have not discussed the ongoing side effects of vaccinations—that has not really been explored as it should be—and we are expressing our concern that the federal government is not following the National Health and Medical Research Council's recommendations. We need to look at what the ACT government can and should be doing in relation to the state of our health care system.

I know it is the federal government's responsibility to deal with these issues. We cannot set up the situation where we say, "We'll do it because we have to" and let the federal government off lightly. But because of the Medicare Plus deal that the federal government has done with the independent systems our health system is approaching decline. The ACT has been particularly badly hit by the Medicare Plus deal. The health of our citizens in the ACT is simply so important that we cannot continually pass the blame on to the federal government. We should be looking at the promotion of childhood immunisation. We should be looking at what we as an Assembly will prioritise through the budgets for the health care of the ACT.

I have moved this amendment, which deletes clause 4 of the motion, because I do not think we can note the health and financial benefits gained by providing pneumococcal disease vaccine free to all Australia. The work has not been done—the evidence has not been provided—that the cost benefit of a nation-wide vaccination will be the best for the community.

I support that the pneumococcal vaccination program should be extended. But we need more evidence about whether it should be given to every child without looking at the implications. We should not be giving people vaccinations when they do not need them, as there are associated risks of vaccinations. A lot of research is still being done about the impact of vaccinations on young people and on whether the protection they get from the vaccination is harming their health in other ways.

There needs to be more research. The United States is now working on some programs, including the vaccine safety datalink study, which is a partnership program that looks at the medical records of millions of children and adults and allows that research to be consolidated to see the impact, through independent studies, of vaccinations of millions of patients over a 10-year period. Without that work being done I do not think we can make the blanket statement that there is a health and financial benefit of providing a vaccine free to all Australia. More work needs to be done. As I said, the vaccination should be provided free to all those people who have identified need for the protection offered by the pneumococcal vaccination. But we cannot make that sweeping statement for the whole of Australia until further research has been done.

MS TUCKER (11.55): According to Jill Forest and others of the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance of Vaccine Preventable Diseases the pneumococcal bacteria is responsible for more deaths worldwide than any other single pathogen. It causes meningitis, bacteraemia, pneumonia and otitis media, particularly affecting infants and children under five years of age, adults over 60 years of age and those with chronic underlying medical conditions or immunosuppression. However, there are quite different rates of infection and different levels of invasiveness of the disease in indigenous versus non-indigenous population and different age groups. Invasive pneumococcal infection is the most likely to cause death, but ear diseases—otitis media—in remote areas, and particularly in indigenous children, is likely to be associated with perforated tympanic membranes and discharge.

This review noted that in the non-indigenous population the invasive infection primarily manifests as pneumonia and mainly affects adults over 60 years of age, particularly with various predisposing conditions. In non-indigenous children the invasive infection is mostly associated with bacteraemia, blood infection and meningitis and is highest in the first two years of life. Significant risk factors in these young children include attendance at childcare centres, parental smoking and otitis media—ear disease. In this group pneumococcal meningitis causes significant illness. The case fatality rate is 10 per cent and there are long-term health consequences.

However, in the indigenous population, in all age groups, indigenous rates of invasive pneumococcal infection are up to 75 times higher than in non-indigenous groups and are caused by a broader range of types of bacteria. The paper notes that in all age groups indigenous rates of invasive pneumococcal infection are up to 75 times higher than in non-indigenous groups and are caused by a broader range of serotypes.

In Queensland meningitis occurs earlier than in non-indigenous children—at six versus 12 months. Across Northern Australia a striking difference is the high incidence of infection in younger indigenous adults aged 15 to 50 years, as well as the extremes of

age, especially in those who have chronic lung, liver and kidney disease with or without alcohol abuse.

Roughly one quarter of the serotypes involved are not covered by the seven-valent conjugate vaccine. As with hip disease, the incidence of invasive pneumococcal disease in indigenous children is not uniform. Attack rates in Northern Australia are lower than in Central Australia and lower in urban regions than in rural remote regions. Ear disease starts early and its pattern around the country varies. In remote areas, otitis media is more likely to be associated with perforated tympanic membrane with purulent discharge.

The federal government's vaccination funding program covers the cost of vaccine for some but not all groups. According to a media release from the then acting minister for health, Julie Bishop, I understand that the federal government is providing \$2.23 million for free pneumococcal immunisation program for 91,000 children at most risk, including all children living in Central Australia, all children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, and children with medical conditions that place them at increased risk from the complications of pneumococcal disease.

Funding for a universal program is under consideration. On the specifics of the motion, as far as I can ascertain, the National Health and Medical Research Council did not recommend that the pneumococcal vaccine be provided free to all Australian children. It did endorse a new Australian vaccination schedule on 18 September 2003, but this does not discuss funding at all. According to the NHMRC they do not make recommendations on funding. I question the points made in this motion by Ms MacDonald.

The AMA, however, did recommend that the health minister fully fund the childhood immunisation schedule as a matter of urgency. In that media release Dr Rice said that the most significant omission from the funded schedule is the vaccine that prevents pneumococcal disease in young children. They also recommended that, at the very least, free pneumococcal immunisation should be available to all children in childcare. Ideally the vaccine should be funded for all Australian children in an effort to eradicate the disease.

The AMA in this press release also questioned the attention to meningococcal C over this particular bacteria. This is a serious question. We do not want serious decisions about public health to be guided by political imperatives such as the need to appear to be responding to a new scary disease. However, I cannot say that I have enough information to say that that is what is happening.

As Mr Corbell pointed out, both these vaccines are on the recommended schedule. The simple fact of the number of deaths may cover the complexities of disease transmission, susceptibility and the effectiveness of the vaccine.

Ms MacDonald has also noted criticism of the new vaccination schedule by the AMA saying, I think, that the AMA has withdrawn its support for the new schedule. I am not sure what this means for this debate, given that it is reliant on the authority of the schedule. But maybe I misunderstood what Ms MacDonald was saying; she is not here so she cannot clarify.

There are questions about how much would fully funded pneumococcal vaccine cost. According to Ms MacDonald the cost for a full childhood vaccination program is \$60 million; hundreds of millions according to the minister's office, although this was a quick on the phone response, not anything written; and \$27 million for the first year according to the AMA. I am not quite clear on the costs.

My point is that I support raising the question about how well funded provision of vaccination for this disease is. But I would not feel comfortable supporting this motion as it stands. I would want to do more work on it and get some more opinions on it. If we as an Assembly are making a very strong statement on this matter about funding for this vaccination I want to be totally confident that it is necessary, that it is appropriate and that there is a better use of funds to ensure greater targeting of vaccination to ensure that those vulnerable groups—groups that are already listed such as indigenous, and children in child care and with parents that smoke—are accessing vaccination.

It would be irresponsible for me at this point to support this motion as it stands. However, I am happy to say that I am interested to see how the federal government, and other expert groups and stakeholders, see the need for this vaccination.

MR SMYTH (Leader of the Opposition) (12.03): I thank Ms Dundas for her amendment and I thank Ms MacDonald for bringing on the motion today. The intention is good. We need to constantly review and revise how we deal with infectious diseases and the immunisation regime that this country has. But we need to get it right. I note some of the words from Ms Tucker recently about the lack of knowledge that she has—and probably most of us have—about pneumococcal.

If members were to access the national childhood pneumococcal vaccination program website, they would see who is entitled to the vaccine now as a free service. There is a vaccination program; it is aimed at indigenous children living in Central Australia, who are 15 times more likely to acquire pneumococcal infections than non-indigenous children living in urban areas. We certainly have a problem there. It then goes on to state that if your child is in one of the following risk groups then your child is eligible for free vaccine under the national childhood pneumococcal vaccination program.

It includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under the age of five, non-indigenous children living in Central Australia under the age of two and all children under the age of five with any of these medical risk factors. A full list of the factors is taken into consideration.

There is an interesting section on the website that asks whether the pneumococcal vaccine should be funded for all children in the future, the answer to which is, "The vaccine is being considered for future funding under the government's national immunisation program". I have been in contact with the office of Mr Abbott, the federal health minister, this morning. He is very interested in the concept. He is also very much aware that—unlike I think a figure of \$60 million that was quoted to implement such a program—it would be hundreds of millions of dollars to provide the immunisation to all children free of charge.

You then have to balance up the issues. If the problem is concentrated in Central Australia and it is Aboriginal children under five and non-Aboriginal children under the age of two, perhaps the money might be better spent concentrating on where the disease is most prevalent and getting the better effect there, with a general education program for the rest of the country in those areas where the effect is not being felt.

That is why the motion as written has a good intent but we need to modify it. I have circulated some amendments, which we will deal with after Ms Dundas's amendment. The net has other sites such as The Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand—this was downloaded this morning—which states that “analysis of the data available does not support a public health strategy to vaccinate all individuals in a particular at-risk group” and that “clinicians should consider vaccination for individuals in the following groups.” It then lists quite a large group of different people in different conditions. I address one of the concerns that Ms Dundas has. According to The Thoracic Society of Australia, the vaccine is safe and can be administered at the same time as the influenza vaccine. It does go on to say though with vaccine safety that there might be minor adverse affects occurring in up to 50 per cent of primary vaccinations, but serious complications occur in less than one per cent of cases.

Apparently it is a good vaccine. It is reliable and it is recommended for use, but it is not being recommended for widespread use. If we look at the motion we see that it calls on the federal government to accept the recommendation of the NHMRC and provide pneumococcal vaccine free to all Australian children. We have just heard from Ms Tucker that that might be incorrect. So before this motion can be passed paragraph one will need to be amended. I have just circulated another amendment that deletes all words after “and provide”. It would call on the federal government to accept the recommendation of the National Health and Medical Research Council in regard to this.

Paragraph 2 is unfortunate because the federal government has not made a decision not to implement the council's recommendation. As is seen on the website, the funding level for pneumococcal vaccine is still under consideration. We need to give them some time at least to do the work properly rather than just race in.

I think paragraph 3 is fine as it stands. I think we all recognise the severity. Ms Dundas's amendment states that this Assembly “notes the health and financial benefits gained...”. A case has not been made in this debate this morning and I have not seen a written case that says there are health and financial benefits to be gained by providing the vaccine free to all Australians.

This is about how you develop your strategy and what is your target. If there is an enormous at-risk group—and there appears to be—then let us put all the resources into them. If there is a broad at-risk group that extends across the country, maybe we need to consider immunising all children, and indeed all Australians. If that is the case—I have not seen a case. Based on some of Mr Corbell's analysis yesterday of how much it will cost to run a forensic unit in the ACT prison—if it ever gets built—I would not trust much that he says when it comes to analysis of health and/or financial benefits.

Paragraph 5 is I assume a correct statement. There are some organisations in support of the National Health and Medical Research Council's recommendation. But I would add a

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paragraph 6 that acknowledges that there are some organisations such as The Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand that are not in favour of immunising everyone.

It is an interesting dilemma for the Assembly. It is true that all are concerned and interested in the effects of pneumococcal. When you read the data that I have been able to track down on the net, the effect particularly on indigenous Australians in Central Australia must be taken into account.

When Ms Dundas's amendment is dealt with, I will move the four amendments now circulated in my name that will make the motion slightly more general. It will call on the federal government to consider quickly what it will do. It will present a more balanced picture of our state of the understanding of the pneumococcal vaccine issue more accurately so that we as an Assembly can move on together hopefully and come up with a better solution to this problem.

Question put:

That **Ms Dundas's** amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 7		Noes 6	
Mrs Burke	Mr Smyth	Mr Berry	Mr Stanhope
Mrs Cornwell	Mr Stefaniak	Mr Corbell	Mr Wood
Mrs Cross	Ms Tucker	Ms MacDonald	
Ms Dundas		Mr Quinlan	

Question so resolved in the affirmative.

Amendment agreed to.

MR SMYTH (Leader of the Opposition) (12.15): I seek leave to move the four amendments circulated in my name.

Leave granted.

MR SMYTH: I move the following amendments:

- (1) Paragraph (1), omit all words after "Council", substitute "regarding pneumococcal vaccine."
- (2) Paragraph (1), omit "accept", substitute "consider quickly".
- (3) Paragraph (2), omit the paragraph.
- (4) Insert new paragraph (6):

"(6) acknowledges that other organisations like the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand are not in support of vaccination of all individuals."

As I mentioned in the speech to the motion before we got to the amendments, I think that the motion is well intentioned but, for the sake of accuracy in terms of what we do as an Assembly, it needs to be modified slightly. The amendments achieve a number of things. The hand-written amendment, which has already been circulated, will now be varied to include the words “provide pneumococcal vaccine”. That altered amendment will be circulated shortly.

In paragraph 1 we need to remove the word “accept” and ask the federal government to “consider quickly” the recommendation. There are two ways you can address this: immunise everyone in the hope that it does not hit anyone, or concentrate with greater resources on those areas where this disease is felt at its worst to reduce the effect on those most adversely affected.

The amendment would then remove the words after “Council”, so that the amended paragraph 1 would read:

- (1) calls on the Federal Government to consider quickly the recommendation of the National Health and Medical Research Council to provide pneumococcal vaccine;

It is then just to be considered.

Paragraph 2 is not true. I do not believe that the federal government has taken a decision not to implement the council’s recommendation. If you consult the website—and I am happy to show it to members—the vaccine is being considered for future funding now. From my discussion this morning with the federal minister’s office it is quite clear that a decision has not been taken not to implement the council’s recommendation. Therefore we should delete paragraph 2, as it is simply not true.

Paragraph 3 can stand. What we do need to do is insert a new paragraph 6, simply to show that there is a debate out there. Some groups are certainly in support of it; some groups are not in support of the vaccination going to all Australians. While we have that level of debate among medical professionals and clinicians, I do not think it is up to us to force the federal government to do something that the jury is still out on. In that regard I think the motion gives a more balanced view. It calls on the federal government to make a quick decision, it recognises the severity of the pneumococcal disease and it says that the jury is divided at this stage about what the effect will be. I commend the amendments to the house.

MR SPEAKER: For the sake of clarity, one of the amendments is handwritten and headed “Revised amendment notice No 1”. The other one is a typed document, which contains three parts. Is everybody clear on that?

MS MacDONALD (12.18): I am reasonably clear about what Mr Smyth is trying to do. He is basically trying to cripple the motion. I am sorry that I did not get up before and speak to Ms Dundas’s amendment. Anyway, I will not reflect on the vote.

With regard to changing “accept” to “consider quickly” in relation to the recommendation, the Howard government has changed the ground rules. It has decided

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to ignore the recommendation of the National Health and Medical Research Council. Ms Tucker has made the comment that she is not sure that that is the case. It is my understanding that they have recommended that this vaccination be provided free. Mr Smyth is saying to delete paragraph 2 because we cannot force anything on the federal government and, going back a step to paragraph 1, to take out “provide pneumococcal vaccine free to all Australian children”.

On the first white sheet, he wants to insert a new paragraph that says:

(6) acknowledges that other organisations like the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand are not in support of vaccination of all individuals.

I have no quibble with that. Of course you would not give the vaccination to all individuals. ACT Health has a document in which it asks: who should not be given conjugate pneumococcal vaccine? It lists:

- Children with acute febrile illness (temperature above 38.5°C)—delay the vaccination until the child is well;
- Children who are hypersensitive to latex or any component of the vaccine, including diphtheria toxoid;
- Children who have experienced an allergic reaction, or anaphylactic reaction, following prior administration of Prevenar®;

The document says not to give it to infants younger than six weeks of age, based on the Prevenar product information, which indicates that Prevenar can be given at six to eight weeks. It goes on to say that the risks from pneumococcal conjugate vaccination are extremely small. It states:

The risk of this vaccine causing serious harm, or death, is extremely small. In studies involving nearly 60,000 doses, pneumococcal conjugate vaccine was associated with only mild reactions: Up to one infant out of four had redness, tenderness, or swelling at the injection site—

which happens with a lot of injections.

Up to one out of three had a mild fever, and up to about one in 50 had a higher fever (over 39 degrees). Some children also became fussy or drowsy or had a loss of appetite. So far, no moderate or severe reactions have been associated with this vaccine. However, a vaccine, like medicine, could cause serious problems, such as a severe allergic reaction.

We are all aware of this. I do not have an issue with adding the paragraph about the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand, but I do have an issue with the other amendments on that sheet.

MS TUCKER (12.22): I support the first amendment: delete “accept” and insert “consider quickly”. On the third amendment—to omit paragraph 2—Ms MacDonald understands Mr Smyth’s intention to be to protect the federal government. Mr Smyth said that the federal government is in fact considering this issue—which is also the understanding of my office—so it is not appropriate to have that second paragraph in. It seems quite wrong to leave that second paragraph in, as it is incorrect.

Paragraph 4 has gone; that was Ms Dundas's amendment. I do not know if No 5—"acknowledges a large number of organisations..."—is okay. I just asked Ms MacDonald whether she had listed the number of organisations, and she said she had, but I did not hear that. I am not totally comfortable with that. Unless she speaks again to explain what the organisations are, I have some concerns about supporting that.

Mr Smyth's new paragraph 6 acknowledging that other organisations are not in support of this is interpreted by Ms MacDonald to mean that they are not in support of vaccination of all individuals because they are concerned about those who may have allergic reactions or have a febrile condition, or whatever. That is not my understanding of what those words mean. I thought that this motion was about a free vaccine being available to all Australian children, and I thought that he was saying that these two organisations were not in support of that. I would like clarification from Mr Smyth about what the words "vaccination of all individuals" mean. I assume it does not mean people who are allergic. That is obvious.

MR SMYTH (Leader of the Opposition) (12.25): I seek leave to speak again.

Leave granted.

MR SMYTH: I will address the concerns of members, working in reverse order, with Ms Tucker's first. Paragraph 6 is about a general concern from the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand that, in general, not all people require this; it is not about those groups of individuals who are obviously allergic to it. Ms Tucker's interpretation was correct and, unfortunately, Ms MacDonald's was not.

On paragraph 5, I have some concerns about saying "a large number of organisations" and listing two. I can live with "a large number" if that makes Ms MacDonald feel good, but the jury is out. I was simply trying to say that the jury is out on this. We should not, with a small amount of knowledge and an hour's debate, suddenly determine things that we cannot possibly know are true or false. It is just being cautious and saying that there are some in favour, and there are also some who are against it.

My amendment 3, to delete paragraph 2, is not to gut the motion. If the motion is about attacking the federal government, then that is just politics—go for it. But I thought the motion was about getting a better health outcome for young Australians. At this stage, the federal government has not said that they would not implement the council's recommendations. They are still deciding. Ms Tucker has checked with the federal government as well. So, for the sake of accuracy, paragraph 2 needs to go. It is not true.

Paragraph 1 must be amended. As Ms Tucker has also pointed out, the NHMRC has not actually recommended that the vaccine be free to all Australian children. Again for the sake of accuracy, my amendment calls on the federal government to consider quickly the recommendations of the NHMRC regarding pneumococcal vaccine. I think that is also a reasonable stance. It sends a message to the federal government that we as a jurisdiction are interested in pneumococcal and that we want something to happen quickly. But if, as Mr Abbott's office told my office this morning, we accept and have to spend not 60 million but hundreds of millions of dollars to implement this, then we should do it wisely.

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To immunise all is not the best strategy when we should be concentrating on those most in need: indigenous kids in central Australia and other kids in that area. I ask members to accept the amendments. The amendments are designed to send a clear message, to be accurate and to convey to the federal government our concern that something happen and happen quickly.

Ordered that the amendments be divided.

Question put:

That amendment No 1 be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 7

Noes 6

Mrs Burke

Mr Smyth

Mr Berry

Mr Stanhope

Mrs Cornwell

Mr Stefaniak

Mr Corbell

Mr Wood

Mrs Cross

Ms Tucker

Ms MacDonald

Ms Dundas

Mr Quinlan

Question so resolved in the affirmative.

Amendment agreed to.

Question put:

That amendment No 2 be agreed to.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Question put:

That amendment No 3 be agreed to.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Question put:

That amendment No 4 be agreed to.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Sitting suspended from 12.34 to 2.30 pm.

Ministerial arrangements

MR STANHOPE: Mr Speaker, the minister for education is unable to be present for question time today due to family commitments. Any questions members may have for Ms Gallagher should be directed to me and I will do my best to respond.

Questions without notice

Mental health—funding

MR SMYTH: My question without notice is to the Minister for Health. Minister, over the past two months you have repeatedly claimed that the government has—and I quote—“almost doubled” spending per capita on mental health since coming to office. You claimed in this Assembly as late as yesterday that spending on mental health in the ACT was \$67 per head when you came to government and is now estimated to be \$117 per head in the 2003-04 budget.

Minister, is it not the case that, because of the creation in January 2003 of the stand alone agency Mental Health ACT, the budget for the 2003-04 year presents mental health funding in quite a different manner from the way spending was reported four years ago? Is it not the case that for the first time the new administrative arrangements include as mental health spending the expenses for provisions and expenses for administrative overheads that were previously allocated against the Canberra Hospital, as well as a share of the cost of planning and policy work previously allocated to the Department of Health?

Minister, one of your own press releases claims that real funding has increased by \$3.4 million over the last two years. This could amount to an increase of around only \$11 per capita. Has your government really increased mental health funding from \$67 per capita to \$117, or have your previous statements to the public and in this Assembly been incorrect?

MR CORBELL: My comments are correct. The answer to Mr Smyth’s question is yes, we have increased funding.

MR SMYTH: I have a supplementary question. Minister, given that the budget released in May 2001 showed a spending estimate that had already reached \$82 per capita for the 2001-02 year, will you not concede that your claim that spending was only \$67 per head when you came to office and has increased by \$50 per head since then is simply not correct?

MR CORBELL: If Mr Smyth wants to challenge the data from the latest national mental health report, which recorded the ACT’s per capita expenditure as \$67 per head, he can do that. That is not the ACT government’s figure; that is the figure of the national mental health report, which shows that under the Liberal Party expenditure was at its lowest for a considerable period and that \$67 per capita was the level of expenditure that the Liberals were delivering—a measly amount. The ACT government, under this government, has had to address this and make a significant investment.

Bushfires—destruction of fences

MR CORNWELL: My question is to the Minister for Environment, Mr Stanhope. The ACT rural lessee Steve Angus said on *Stateline* last week:

We were told at a meeting in Tharwa two weeks after the fires that the ACT government was going to do...all the boundary fences adjoining the national park or forestry but that was it and nothing else has happened since then...we're working on them ourselves but we're not getting any help from our neighbour, Namadgi national park. ...

We can't restock until we get our boundaries sorted out because the cattle, well at a thousand dollars for a cow and calf at the moment and I can't afford, at fifty or sixty thousand dollars, to have them disappear into the hills every second or third day. Which is what they're doing. That's just where we are at the moment fourteen, fifteen months after the fires.

Yesterday, in response to a question from me on this subject, you said:

It is generally accepted that there will be some sharing of responsibility for fences between neighbours. In relation to government nature reserves and the road reserves, the ACT government has a responsibility.

After you were brought back from a digression about internal fences, you went on to say:

In relation to shared fences, to only boundary fences—that is, fences between leasehold land and territory land—the territory has accepted its full responsibility.

However, the letter of 19 March from Dr Maxine Cooper, executive director of Environment ACT, from which I quoted yesterday, clearly says:

...rural boundary fences...are to be repaired on the basis that...on completion of the repair work, fencing that is not already your responsibility and property is to become your and any subsequent owner's responsibility and property.

Who is right, Minister—you or the executive director?

MR STANHOPE: Responsibility for fencing is a complex issue.

Mr Smyth: Who is right—you or Maxine?

MR STANHOPE: There is no inconsistency between the two statements. It is a question of the situation now and the situation that might prevail in the circumstance of the ACT government at this time accepting that it will provide significant funds for the repair of rural fences. We are doing that. I will check the figures to date—it is very complex and detailed, and the legal position is amazingly diffuse—but at this stage I think we have provided around \$1½ million in funding for rural fences. As I say, I will get the details of the expenditure to date.

From memory, there is about \$2½ million for rural fencing in the third appropriation bill. The government has already provided about \$1½ million to repair rural fences, and I

think we have included \$2½ million. So we are talking roughly \$4 million altogether for the repair of rural fences. That is the broad picture.

Many of the fences that will be repaired as a result of this funding are fences for which the territory has no responsibility. That goes to the point of the letter and the desire of the ACT government to regularise the position in relation to fence ownership on rural leases. At the moment, across the board the position is disparate. Some lessees, through their leases, have responsibility for a range of fences, which their neighbours do not. It goes to the question of when the lease was signed and what the terms of the lease are.

This has happened historically. It has happened over the past 50 years. It has happened as a result of the decision the previous government took to move to 99-year leases. Subsequent to the decision to move to 99-year leases, the agency responsible for the administration of rural leases was not as diligent as it might have been in relation to ownership of and responsibility for fences—post the move to 99-year leases. The position on ownership of and responsibility for rural leases is inconsistent between lease and lease. That is undesirable and essentially unfair and inequitable.

There has been significant damage to rural fences. The government has moved generously to seek to repair that damage. We are providing \$4 million, and that \$4 million will be committed to the repair of fences for which in some instances the ACT government has no responsibility. We are doing it as a gesture of support for rural lessees.

Mrs Dunne: They do not feel very supported.

MR STANHOPE: Mrs Dunne says that rural lessees do not feel supported by our \$4 million commitment to rural lessees through the repair of their fences—in many instances fences for which the government has no responsibility but for which we have nevertheless agreed to contribute and, in many instances, not just contribute but meet the full cost.

We are taking the responsibility, as any responsible government department would, to seek to regularise the position on ownership and responsibility for rural fences to ensure that the issues we currently face can be addressed into the future. I believe that the position we have taken is perfectly reasonable, and so do the vast majority of lessees.

MR CORNWELL: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Chief Minister, why has it taken so long—14 or 15 months after the fire? Allowing that because of this delay some of the lessees are now doing the repairs themselves, will they be compensated for the work that they have done that the government has not?

MR STANHOPE: You touch on one of the difficulties we faced. Some rural lessees had insurance. Some rural lessees were responsible. Some rural lessees insured their fences. Some were not so much irresponsible but did not insure their fences or their infrastructure. Their infrastructure was destroyed, and they now face a difficulty, as do 500 urban residents who lost their homes—and many other residents who were severely affected by the fire.

There is a question of balance, and there is a question of capacity in relation to the contribution the government makes to people affected by the fire. Are you seriously suggesting, in the context of the decisions the government has taken to support urban residents affected by the fire, that a different regime should apply to rural lessees—that we simply meet all the costs they incur? Are you seriously suggesting that we apply a different standard?

These issues are complex, and they have been made complex by the vast range of different conditions in separate leases as between neighbour and neighbour in circumstances where some rural lessees insured and some did not. Some fully insured, some partially insured and some did not insure at all. It is very complex. The legal arrangements that apply to the different classes of lease produce different results and different conclusions. We have worked our way through all of those issues and have agreed, through the third appropriation, to commit an additional \$2½ million, as I remember, to repair rural fences. The vast majority of rural lessees are more than satisfied with the government's response to this issue.

Mental health—funding

MR HARGREAVES: Can the Minister for Health advise the Assembly of the amount of money that the Stanhope government spends on mental health?

MR CORBELL: Yesterday, during the adjournment debate, Mr Smyth asked me whether I could help him understand where the figure of \$117 per head, or per capita, comes from. I am grateful for the opportunity presented by Mr Hargreaves's question to do that.

The amount of recurrent expenditure that the Stanhope government spends on mental health is clearly outlined on page 149 of budget paper No 4, that is, \$37.966 million for 2003-04. That figure includes the new initiatives, plus CPI and pay rises, growth adjustments and so on. That is the amount of money that the ACT government—the Stanhope government—spends on mental health. The population estimate that underlies these figures is 323,000 territorians.

I am pleased to advise Mr Smyth that \$38 million divided by 323,000 equals, believe it or not, \$117 per head of population. I am really pleased that I have been able to outline, through Mr Hargreaves's question, the amount of money that the ACT government spends on mental health services. I would have thought that Mr Smyth would have understood that fairly basic calculation. Unfortunately, he seemed to be struggling with it last night during the adjournment debate, which just shows that you should not assume anything, Mr Speaker.

The opposition's spokesperson also asked me where the figure of \$67 per head of population attributed to the last government comes from. As I indicated to Mr Smyth earlier and as I am pleased to confirm, that is confirmed at page 20 of chapter 2 of the national mental health report 2002. Mr Smyth's office can access this report, if he is interested in reflecting on the dismal record of the ACT Liberal government—the appalling and dismal record of the ACT Liberal government—by going to www.mentalhealth.gov.au and see it all there in black and white. That is where the figure

comes from and our record is a strong one, improving funding for mental health services. That is where the statistics come from.

Mr Smyth: But you only put in \$3.4 million.

MR CORBELL: I know that Mr Smyth does not like it and I know that he gets frustrated about it, but that is the reality and that is what is in the report.

MR HARGREAVES: I have a supplementary question. I would like to know how the current level of expenditure differs from the levels of previous years.

MR CORBELL: How it differs is that the national mental health report 2002 showed that mental health funding actually declined under the Canberra Liberals when they were last in government. It actually went down from \$68.6 per head of population in 1996-97 to \$63.7 per head of population in 1997-98. What an outstanding record! What an absolutely outstanding record on which to go to the people of Canberra—an actual decline! Do you know what, Mr Speaker? Those are not even the ACT government's figures. They are the figures of the national mental health report, the key leading indicator on mental health funding across Australia. Guess what, Mr Speaker! There is more.

Mr Smyth: It is dishonest to compare different figures.

MR CORBELL: You do not like it, do you, Mr Smyth? You do not like it when your record is shown up to be completely inadequate. Let's just see what happened in 1998-99. Guess what! It went down again, Mr Speaker.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Direct your comments through the chair, please, Mr Corbell.

MR CORBELL: Certainly, Mr Speaker. It went down again. In 1998-99 it was \$63.1 per head of population, down from \$63.7, so the miserable decline continued under the Liberal Party. What happened when they went to the last election, Mr Speaker? What sorts of measures did they propose to address this significant decline? There was a mere extra \$74,000, Mr Speaker. That was the full commitment—a mere extra \$74,000.

Mr Smyth: Careful.

MR CORBELL: Mr Speaker, no wonder Mr Smyth knows that it is a sore point. No wonder Mr Smyth is trying desperately to make up ground, even if it means making promises that he cannot keep and cannot pay for. He is so desperate to make up ground that he will promise the world to try to address the failure of the previous government. In contrast, this government will continue its comprehensive program of reform and improve funding in mental health services.

Health administration

MRS CROSS: My question is to the Minister for Health, Mr Corbell. Minister, can you assure the people of the ACT that there will not be a cover-up here should the ACT experience similar problems to those that have occurred in western Sydney hospitals? In some New South Wales hospitals, serious claims of patient mismanagement, resulting in

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premature death of patients, and serious accusations of ill treatment of other patients have been found to have been covered up by hospital management and doctors.

MR CORBELL: The question is somewhat hypothetical, but the quick answer is no.

MRS CROSS: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Minister, can you briefly explain what mechanisms are in place to address such problems?

MR CORBELL: It is fair to say that the range of mechanisms in place to identify concerns about the operation of any public health system, indeed the systems in place here in the ACT, are quite comprehensive. For example, the role of the Community and Health Services Complaints Commissioner is a very important one. He is an independent ombudsman for complaints from consumers regarding the course of treatment they receive through the ACT public health system. The commissioner undertakes an extensive range of investigations every year to identify and look at the causes of any failings brought to his attention by consumers concerning care, or lack thereof, in the public hospital system. Wherever possible, he seeks to work cooperatively with the health system to identify ways to improve any deficiencies that may be identified.

Additionally, I am very pleased to advise the Assembly that the government, since the establishment of the unified health portfolio, is now establishing for the first time coordinated territory-wide clinical governance arrangements so that within our public hospitals, indeed across both our two public hospitals, Calvary and the Canberra hospital, we will have significant clinical governance arrangements to coordinate the level of clinical care provided and to identify any particular problems surrounding clinical care. In addition to that, we have an extensive range of clinical privileges committees in place to discuss, under privilege, any deficiencies in the level of care or treatment provided in our public hospital system. So, there is a reasonable range of measures in place.

My summary today has been by no means exhaustive, but I hope it gives Mrs Cross and other members a better understanding of what mechanisms are in place to identify failings in health care. I must say, in relation to the New South Wales experience, one of the greatest difficulties was, as was identified by my counterpart, Mr Iemma, the failure of the ombudsman in the case. Their equivalent of our commissioner for health services complaints failed to bring to the government's attention issues of concern. The comment on the subject was something like, "It whispered where it should have roared." I am not fully conversant with the circumstances in New South Wales, but I can say that our mechanisms are robust and have certainly worked well in all the time that I have been Minister for Health.

Environmental advisory committees

MRS DUNNE: My question is to the Minister for Environment. In response to a question from Ms Tucker yesterday, you criticised the natural resources committee for not coming forward in 1997 when the previous government undertook its preliminary assessment process for Gungahlin Drive. I quote you:

There was a preliminary assessment process initiated by the previous government in 1997. I cannot believe that those organisations or those individuals did not have an

opportunity to participate in the preliminary assessment...arranged by the previous government.

Mr Wood created this committee on 23 April 2002 to replace the environment advisory committee that had served the previous government. Do you not think it a bit rich for you to criticise this organisation for not offering its views in 1997 when your government created it in 2002?

MR STANHOPE: It is fair to say that what I said was those organisations or the individuals involved—

Mrs Dunne: “I cannot believe that those organisations—

MR STANHOPE: And?

Mrs Dunne: “or individuals”.

MR STANHOPE: Thank you. Thank you.

Mrs Dunne: You criticised the organisation.

MR STANHOPE: Or those individuals. Thank you Mrs Dunne. That is what I said, and I said it advisedly. I knew what I was saying: those organisations—that is, those that were in place in 1997 or those individuals; that is, those—

Mrs Dunne: You criticised them.

MR STANHOPE: What did I say? What did I say? I said, “Those organisations or those individuals involved—

Mrs Dunne: You criticised them: “I can’t believe those organisations or individuals didn’t come forward in 1997.”

MR STANHOPE: And the individuals involved were involved in 1997. If they were around and involved—they were here in 1997—they had two opportunities: one in 1997 as individuals, the other at any other time as either members of organisations or as individuals.

I was awake to the issue Mrs Dunne. The words I used were used advisedly.

MRS DUNNE: I have a supplementary question. Why are you so ignorant of your portfolios that you were not aware that the government created its principal advisory committee in April 2002?

MR STANHOPE: I just answered that question. I was very careful in my choice of words: I said, “Those organisations or the individuals involved” to cover that very point.

Gungahlin Drive extension

MS TUCKER: My question is to Mr Stanhope as Minister for Environment. It is related to endangered species and valuable biodiversity research sites on or near the GDE route and a petition handed to the minister today from 160 scientists, research fellows and other academics calling for a moratorium on the construction of the GDE because of the lack of a current comprehensive external and peer reviewed environmental impact assessment.

Minister, can you advise the Assembly how you will respond to this plea from the scientific community in the ACT, given that, clearly, the existing assessments have been inadequate as we have now had an extremely rare and endangered plant identified in the area of the GDE route and serious concerns are being raised by scientists about other vulnerable species? Will you continue just to attack the individuals concerned and the timing of their advice or will you deal with this important environmental responsibility?

MR STANHOPE: It is not true to say that I was handed a petition today. I have not been handed a petition today. I have had some advice that a petition has been provided somewhere, but it certainly has not been handed to me. I do not know whether it was provided to my office. For the sake of the record, the claim that a petition was handed to me is not correct, but I am aware that a petition apparently has been prepared.

You asked what I would say to them. I have to repeat, Ms Tucker, that the essential thrust of my comments yesterday was that this has been a long and very public process. It is a process that commenced in 1996 or 1997. There was a preliminary assessment process conducted by the previous government. There was, I believe, an Assembly committee inquiry into the GDE.

There were a number of other opportunities for a formal response to issues in relation to the GDE through two other preliminary assessments and through a broad range of public consultations conducted by the previous government and by this government—not necessarily through a formal process, but meetings that were arranged by departments and organised by the previous government and then community meetings and community consultation facilitated and conducted by this government after the change of government.

Over the last seven years—4½ years of a Liberal government and 2½ years of a Labor government—officials and departments have worked on a single project which has not deviated, despite the differences of opinion in relation to whether the route should follow the eastern alignment or the western alignment. We had a long debate and significant community discussion around that and it was resolved, perhaps unsatisfactorily in the view of some of us, at the end of the day.

The point I make is about the innumerable occasions and opportunities for input at all levels by organisations, by individuals, by scientists and by government advisory committees. There has been no constraint on or impediment to participation by anybody in the long debate and there have been many opportunities for contribution, including through preliminary assessments, an Assembly inquiry and all of those other forums that

exist within this community to debate these issues, and for everybody within this community to put their views.

Those views have always been welcomed. They were particularly welcomed at the stage of the preliminary assessment, which is a process that does, by statute, require public consultation and public involvement. There have been three occasions on which there has been that formal, public, statutorily provided requirement to consult.

Of course it has been a contentious issue. It is a difficult issue. It is a hard issue that has required hard decisions. None of us likes the idea that the environment will suffer as a result of the construction of this road. It is just that we have taken what we regard as the right decision, a balanced decision and a decision in relation to our commitment to sustainable development; that we have sought to balance the environmental, social and economic needs of the territory.

One of the things that concern me about the debate at the moment is that the social needs, particularly of the residents of Gungahlin, are not being evenly balanced by the proponents of no road for Gungahlin. They completely ignore that significant arm or leg of our commitment to sustainable development, namely, our commitment and our need as a government to meet the social needs of those we represent. It is in balancing the social, economic and environmental needs and responsibilities that we make the hard decisions we do. In making those decisions, we seek to balance all of those elements of decision making.

I would welcome the views of the scientists, of the advisory committees and of all those others that have contributed. They have undoubtedly informed the decisions and the detail of the decisions that governments have taken—this government and the previous government. We welcomed them during the formative stages, we welcomed them during the community consultation and we welcomed them in the public forums and through letters to the editor. We would have welcomed them even at the time the decision was taken. But I have to say that the decision has been taken. It has been taken after seven years. The contracts are now signed. Money has changed hands. The bulldozers have moved in. It is too late. We have signed contracts worth millions of dollars. I am not going to cancel them.

MR SPEAKER: Order! The minister's time has expired.

MS TUCKER: The answer seems to be to continue to attack the individuals, rather than taking responsibility.

MR SPEAKER: Come to the supplementary question.

MS TUCKER: Can you tell the Assembly how you plan to protect—

Mr Stanhope: I take a point of order, Mr Speaker. The statement was false. I attacked no individual in the response to that question. That is simply gratuitous, offensive, wrong and disrespectful.

MS TUCKER: I said attack the timing.

MR SPEAKER: Ms Tucker, come to the supplementary question or resume your seat.

MS TUCKER: Can you at least tell the Assembly right now how, as Minister for Environment, you plan to protect the recently discovered specimens of the endangered *Swansonia recta*, how you will ensure that other specimens are identified and protected, how you will ensure the survival of the woodland birds now that we are being told by scientists that the route will go through the hot spots for those birds, and how you will protect the echidnas?

MR STANHOPE: There were three preliminary assessments, detailed investigations, of the environmental impacts of the construction of the Gungahlin Drive extension. Certainly there will be environmental impacts. Some of them will be harsh, hard and wrenching. We have made the decision.

There will be a very significant scar, a new scar, in the landscape. A significant number of trees—in fact, thousands of trees—will be felled and destroyed. There will be an impact on habitat. There will be an impact on the natural environment. We know that. Through the preliminary assessment process, which is how we seek to address issues around the natural environment and its protection when we undertake any major infrastructure, we seek to the best of our ability and to the extent we can to protect those valuable aspects of the natural environment, of the ecology.

Through that preliminary assessment process, we have taken those steps. The process has been undertaken rigorously. We have utilised significant scientific and expert advice available to us. It has been well consulted on. All of the issues in relation to the impact of this road on the environment have been taken into consideration and will be addressed to the greatest capacity we have to address and protect it having regard to the decision we have taken to meet the social, economic and other needs and requirements of this community. That is what we are seeking to do.

We do not have the luxury of taking a stand on the sidelines and do nothing approach, of providing no response or no other attitude to issues around the needs of the people of Gungahlin. We cannot do that. We need to respond to the transport needs of all of Canberra—in this instance, particularly those of Gungahlin, a community not yet, I think, of 30,000 and scheduled to grow to something in the order of 90,000.

Government tendering arrangements

MRS BURKE: My question is to the Treasurer as the minister responsible for procurement policy. ACT roadworks contracts require that tenderers submit an industrial relations plan as part of any tender. That plan must show compliance with the government's industrial relations agenda, which we all know is dictated by the unions. Amongst other onerous and highly intrusive conditions, tenderers have to list the number of direct employees and indirect/contract personnel. Section B (2) (ii) of the guidelines goes on to threaten, ominously, that if the number of full-time equivalent indirect contract personnel exceeds the number of direct employees for any one personnel type, the industrial relations plan will be considered non-compliant, that is, you are ruled out of the tender. Treasurer, why have you put in place this discriminatory and anti-

competitive arrangement and how much taxpayers' money is being wasted by this politically driven breach of the Trade Practices Act?

MR QUINLAN: I have to say that the way the question is framed is rather consistent with the questions Mrs Burke has asked in this place from time to time. The language used does you no credit. Why do we wish to ensure that we have a decent industrial relations regime applying in the ACT? It is because we believe that there has been, in recent years, abuse of employment practice.

Mrs Dunne: I rise on a point of order. Standing order 118(b) requires you to answer the question and not debate the subject. The question is: why have you done this?

MR SPEAKER: Resume your seat, Mrs Dunne, there is no point of order.

Mrs Dunne: I have not finished making my point of order, Mr Speaker, so I think that you can't tell yet. The question was: why are you doing this, which is in breach of the Trade Practices Act?

MR SPEAKER: The Treasurer is answering the question and he is answering the question pursuant to standing order 118. He has confined his remarks to the subject matter.

MR QUINLAN: If I might respond to the point of order, Mr Speaker, I observe that the number of points of order being raised in recent times is bordering on the ridiculous. It has nothing to do with standing orders and more to do with, "Why don't you give us the answer we would like to hear?"

To return to the offensively framed question, let me say that what this government is concerned about is the growing practice of employees being employed under contract when they are, in fact, effectively employees. This process of employing people behind the facade of a contract is exactly that: a facade. It is a device to reduce the conditions and the entitlements of people working at a reasonably low level in our community. It is our responsibility to protect against that cancer.

MRS BURKE: I have a supplementary question, Mr Speaker. Is this onerous industrial relations policy an example of Labor's so-called commitment to making "the ACT the most small business-friendly location in Australia"—I quote from the white paper, page 23—or is it just another pay-off to your union masters who run the Labor Party and determine your preselection?

MR QUINLAN: Let me repeat what I have said before: that we need to protect against that. We are not going to be small business-friendly by allowing employees to be abused. Take, for example, Mrs Burke, the cleaning industry and some of the pernicious practices that existed there. Take, for example, some of the cleaning contractors in the ACT who had to be brought to heel because of their improper practices and their abuse of their employees—

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! Mr Smyth, I warn you.

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MR QUINLAN: because they were in a position of strength and because they were able to use that strength to prey upon and take advantage of little people. We do not want to see that sort of behaviour—which was, and probably still is, to some extent, prevalent in an industry like the cleaning industry—continue in the ACT.

Lyneham section master plan

MS DUNDAS: My question is to the Minister for Planning. I hope he will be able to hear it and that I will be able to hear the response. Recently the residents of Fox Place in Lyneham have raised a number of concerns about the Lyneham section master plan and the developments taking place in that suburb. Will you be responding to their calls and initiate a review of the section master plan in Lyneham?

MR CORBELL: The section master plan for Fox Place in Lyneham was approved only last year. It was done as part of the neighbourhood planning program for Lyneham and involved a broad range of residents in developing those section master plans. So given the already extensive and very recent process that has occurred in determining the section master plan, I do not see a need to revise the section master plan at this time.

If the Fox Place residents are concerned about the redevelopment of some existing single dwellings in their street, I understand those concerns, Mr Speaker. I think it is also important to put on the record that Fox Place is within the B11, B12 redevelopment area and these policies provide opportunities for increased dwelling densities in residential areas close to transport corridors, commercial areas and employment centres. The policies permit a maximum building height of two stories and require the development to be in accordance with the urban housing code.

It is not as though these planning policies have been place in terms of the master plan for a long time and need to be revised. The master plan was only finalised last year after a very thorough consultation process through the neighbourhood planning program. In relation to the redevelopment of that area at Lyneham, it has been recognised since the early 1990s, and in the territory plan since the early 1990s, that that is an area of the inner north that is subject to potential redevelopment to encourage the densities of development needed to support effective public transport use along Northbourne Avenue and to provide more people with the opportunity to live close to the city, thus containing the outward growth of Canberra.

The rationale for redevelopment is sound in that area. The master plan itself is new and it has gone through an extensive public consultation process. Whilst I had a meeting with Fox Place residents last year and was very pleased to be able to respond to a number of their concerns, particularly in relation to traffic—I provided a commitment to erect barriers to prevent cars parking on the reserve area in the middle of Fox Place—the planning policies have been set for a considerable period of time. The master plan that guides those policies is new and I do not see any reason to revise it at this time.

MS DUNDAS: I thank the minister for his answer. Considering that residents have expressed concerns that they cannot initiate a review and that they were unhappy with the neighbourhood planning process, are these concerns about community involvement in the planning processes of the ACT and in the development of master plans being

addressed in the studies underpinning your much anticipated announcement of the future of planning consultation in the territory?

MR CORBELL: I think it is similar to the discussion we were having yesterday during the matter of public importance—confusing outcomes with process. I can appreciate that residents of that particular neighbourhood—that street—are concerned about redevelopment in their street. I can appreciate that. That is part of the master planning process—to put in place a framework that guides that redevelopment. But I think, fundamentally, the residents’ objection is to the redevelopment that is occurring. That is a policy setting that is not new. Redevelopment of that part of Lyneham has been a policy setting of successive territory governments since the early 1990s.

If we are serious about supporting sustainable transport, Ms Dundas—I frequently get asked questions and I get prompts from you about improving public transport in this city—we have to look at it in the context of land planning. Integrated transport land planning is fundamental to improving public transport in our city. One of the key elements of that is high density development closer to identified public transport corridors. Fox Place is one of those corridors.

Knowledge fund

MS MacDONALD: My question is to the Minister for Economic Development, Mr Quinlan. Minister, I ask whether you can update the house on the progress of the government’s knowledge fund program.

MR QUINLAN: Since its inception, the knowledge fund has proved itself to be a highly successful program and has been embraced by the business community in assisting Canberra companies and the knowledge industries to grow and to prosper.

This was part of the government’s overall strategy of strengthening and diversifying the ACT economy. We identified this as a major issue prior to the last election—something that the opposition is only now picking up. I am very flattered to hear my own words coming back in terms of broadening the base of the economy and the need for diversity. Imitation is of course the sincerest form of flattery.

Our economic white paper outlines the big task that confronts government to further develop the ACT economy. By virtue of the knowledge fund, this government, on coming to office, immediately started to put our strategy in place. We set up the knowledge fund, which consists of five complementary components.

They are proof of concept grants, which provide funding to prove the commercial application of a particular concept; commercialisation grants, which provide funding to assist companies to use knowledge to commercialise goods and services; industry development grants, which fund projects aimed at building the ACT economy’s overall capacity to create, to use and diffuse knowledge; management of high technology start ups, to provide assistance to companies to develop their businesses and financial skill to better commercialise their high technology goods and services; and equity investment provides companies with the patient capital needed to rapidly grow knowledge based companies.

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To date the knowledge fund has provided assistance to 119 companies and organisations with a total of \$7.3 plus million in grants. The grants cover companies working on a wide range of industries including education, sports science, automotive parts, photonics, security, pharmaceuticals and defence. That is by no means a completely exhaustive list.

I read in a throw away line from a press release of the Leader of the Opposition that this was the “failed” knowledge bank. I ask members to compare this approach with that taken by the previous government, which seemed to pick out one or two large industries, throw a lot of money at them and lose it. I will give one example. We have an expert panel involved in examining applications—there are many applications for this—and one of the members of that panel is a very well known and accomplished business person and physicist. In recent weeks he confided that at the beginning he was somewhat sceptical about the knowledge bank and what it was attempting to do. At least he is a complete convert.

Virtually on all judgements the knowledge bank is, and will continue to be, a complete success and a whole lot better—a more strategic approach—than we have seen in past years.

MS MacDONALD: I have a supplementary question. Can the minister tell the Assembly whether the interactive entertainment and education sector received any support from the ACT government? Is he aware of any other proposals or policies in this area?

MR QUINLAN: As fate would have it, yes the government has provided a considerable amount of assistance to the interactive entertainment and education sector—something approaching half a million dollars.

MR SPEAKER: Order! The supplementary question has to relate to the original question. The original question is about the knowledge fund. Is the knowledge bank contained within the—

MR QUINLAN: I am about to enumerate knowledge bank grants to the interactive entertainment industry, Mr Speaker. Some examples of grants include the Academy of Interactive Entertainment, \$100,000; Irrational Games, \$100,000; Panther Games Pty Ltd, \$100,000; the ACT Film and Television Council, \$40,000. We have also spent \$25,000 on an export program assisting industry attendance at various conferences. In total we have spent over half a million dollars assisting the industry.

Mr Cornwell: How much did you spend on the Assembly, because that’s the real entertainment centre?

MR QUINLAN: We will have to lift our game, Greg, if that is the best we can do. By comparison, the opposition has recently come forward and said that they would prioritise this sector of the industry with \$200,000. This was something new. Quite obviously, they had not done their homework.

We have seen almost 1,500 questions on notice in this place, most of them with many parts; so thousands of questions have been asked. Yet Mr Smyth can base his new policy

without knowing just how much has already been done in an industry. All I can say to Mr Smyth is: thousands of questions on notice and still you know nothing.

Bushfires—declaration of state of emergency

MR PRATT: My question is to the Chief Minister. Mr Stanhope, the coroner's inquest has heard that the secretary of the emergency management committee prepared a draft state of emergency declaration on Thursday 16 January 2003, or on the morning of Friday, 17 January 2003, for your signature because it was likely that you might have to sign such a document declaring a state of emergency. What information about the likely impact of bushfires prompted preparation of this document for your signature on those days?

MR STANHOPE: I have absolutely no idea

Bushfires—warnings

MR STEFANIAK: My question is also to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, Ms Marika Harvey has stated that she organised a meeting for 8 am on 18 January last year after hearing an alarming warning at the planning meeting the previous evening. The head of your department, Mr Tonkin, attended this meeting. Why do you expect us to believe that the head of your department attended a meeting on the early morning of the 18th to discuss evacuation of Duffy, Holder and Rivett without Mr Tonkin or anybody else telling you of the dire risk facing Canberra on the evening of the 17th or the morning of the 18th?

MR STANHOPE: I think the question that was asked was: why does he expect us to believe me"—I think that was the only question contained in the ramble. It is because it was true.

MR STEFANIAK: Chief Minister, why were the residents of Duffy, Rivett and Holder denied the opportunity of six hours to prepare for the fires given that your government discussed evacuating these suburbs at 8 am and they—the residents—were not told until 2 pm?

MR STANHOPE: These are issues, of course, that are being canvassed exhaustively in the coronial inquest. I think it appropriate that those issues be allowed to be explored through that process. I cannot answer the particular question the member asks. I think the only real answer that any of us will ever achieve to the particular question that is being posed—I know it is being posed by many residents of Canberra—will have to await the outcomes of the coronial inquest. I think it appropriate that that be the circumstance.

I have expressed this before and I will express it again now: I have grave concerns about the line of questioning the opposition is persisting with in relation to the coronial inquest. I think it is quite inappropriate. I think it is destructive. I think it is unhelpful that the opposition in this place is using this forum to provide some sort of re-run or commentary on the day-to-day evidence of the coronial inquest.

I believe—I know it is a matter of some judgment—that there is rarely, if ever, a circumstance in which the sub judice rule should not apply to the coronial inquest. It

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should be taken as a given that a coronial inquest—a quasi-judicial process—should be accorded by this Assembly and by all parliaments the same respect that we provide in relation to proceedings in courts.

I say that again, just by way of explanation of my view and my attitude on this matter: I cannot answer some of the questions that are being asked. I simply do not have information. The information is being provided by a variety of witnesses through the coronial process. For the opposition to ask me in this place to answer questions about which I have absolutely no information and to seek to make some political gain out of the fact that I perhaps do or do not know the answer to certain questions is to my way of thinking very tawdry politics.

Mr Speaker, I ask that further questions be placed on the notice paper.

Papers

Mr Stanhope presented the following papers:

January 2003 Bushfires—Answer to questions without notice asked of Mr Stanhope by Mr Smyth (Leader of the Opposition) and taken on notice on 11 March 2004.

Public Interest Disclosure Act—Answer to question without notice asked of Mr Stanhope by Ms Tucker and taken on notice on 11 March 2004.

Summernats—Answer to question without notice asked of Mr Stanhope by Ms Tucker and taken on notice on 11 March 2004.

Supplementary answer to question without notice Bushfires—insurance for firefighters

MR WOOD: Mr Speaker, yesterday Mr Smyth prompted me about a question that he had asked on 12 February about indemnity covering the Bushfire Act. Mr Smyth, I can see the confusion. I said, when I answered the question, I would get back to you, which I did, about a dozen pages on in the *Hansard* after question time. I did invite you to come back if you had more questions. At page 307 of the *Hansard* of 12 February, you will find that fairly brief answer.

State of the environment report Paper

MR STANHOPE (Chief Minister, Attorney-General, Minister for Environment and Minister for Community Affairs) (3.30): Mr Speaker, for the information of members, I present the following paper:

Commissioner for the Environment Act, pursuant to section 9—State of the Environment Report 2003, prepared by the Commissioner for the Environment.

I seek leave to move a motion authorising publication of the paper.

Leave granted.

Mr Stanhope: Mr Speaker, I move:

That the paper be authorised for publication.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Mrs Dunne: Mr Speaker, on this subject: the government didn't seek leave for this to be discussed. I don't mind it being discussed.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Mrs Dunne, can I explain what has just happened.

Mrs Dunne: Yes, I understand what has happened.

MR SPEAKER: Leave has been granted for a motion to be moved to authorise publication of the document. That motion was subsequently moved and carried.

Mrs Dunne: But it is not on the notice paper.

MR SPEAKER: All I can say to you is this: you may wish to raise it as a matter of private members business, but I cannot help you otherwise. I am sorry.

Mrs Dunne: The cloak and dagger stuff about publication of these state of the environment reports is ridiculous.

MR SPEAKER: There are many means to get things on the notice paper. I will leave that to you.

Commissioner for the Family Bill 2004

Debate resumed from 3 March 2004, on motion by **Mrs Burke:**

That this bill be agreed to in principle

Debate on motion (by **Mr Wood**) adjourned to the next sitting.

Youth night shelter in Civic

MS DUNDAS (3.32): I move:

That this Assembly, recognising the need for a youth night shelter in Civic to provide safe overnight accommodation for young people unable to return home late at night, calls on the ACT Government to make the establishment of a youth night shelter a high priority for the 2004-2005 financial year.

Mr Speaker, ACTCOSS, the Youth Coalition, youth refuge workers and successive Assembly committees have been crying for a youth night shelter for a number of years now. Yet, despite repeated assurances that things were happening, we have seen no movement on this issue.

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The need for a safe overnight shelter for young people aged 12 to 17 has been clearly demonstrated. We know that young people stay out late in Civic; we know they often do not have the means to get home; we also know that young people see Civic as a focal point for their activities.

Some of the young people who have no means of getting home or, in some cases, feel that their home is such a threatening environment they do not want to go home accept unsafe offers of accommodation. They even agree to sex simply to get out of the cold for a night. They put themselves at great risk of ongoing abuse, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Some young people end up engaging in criminal activity so that they can get arrested and detained in Quamby because Quamby gives them a roof and a feed. These are outcomes we should be trying to avoid; we should be working for the best interests of these young people.

The motion that I move today is a simple motion and it calls on the government to make, as part of the 2004-05 financial year, the establishment of a youth night shelter a high priority. There are many different ways that the government can do that—whether or not that is actually committing the funds through an investigative study and committing the fund for the outcomes of those studies or, believing that they have done enough studies, actually putting the funding in to get such a facility up and running.

A night shelter open between 7 pm and 11 am that provided a bed, a shower and access to people who cared could make an amazing difference for the young people who are sleeping rough every night in our town. Advice from the community sector has made me believe that a facility of about 10 to 12 beds would be adequate to meet our needs for the foreseeable future.

I understand that the government has been sent an actual costed proposal by a new advocacy group for young people entitled youth information referral resource service. They have a proposal and they, on their costings, are talking about \$400,000 for this project to be up and running and operating over a period of 12 months.

What we are talking about here is not medium-term accommodation for young people; it is not about setting up another refuge; and it is not about long-term support. The proposal is for a shelter for one-off or occasional use by young people who are in immediate crisis. Young people have crises 24 hours a day. At the moment we have youth centres that support young people, but they do not operate 24 hours a day. There is no safe place for young people to visit after hours. This is what this proposal seeks to address.

How the actual youth night shelter will operate is, again, in the scope of the government in discussion with the community sector. Some workers have suggested that young people only be allowed to stay there three consecutive nights because three consecutive nights is enough indication that there is a long-term accommodation problem for this young person. But of course the best model would be decided in consultation with the young people themselves and the community services that are already helping to support them.

One of the main roles that this youth night shelter would have would be, actually after young people come in, referring them in the morning to the services that can provide

them with that longer-term support so they are not continually stuck in a cycle of crisis. A youth night shelter would improve outcomes also at our existing youth shelters.

Some of the kids who would be best served by a night shelter and some immediate care end up at refuges where staffing resources are scarce and the single staff member on duty overnight is struggling to cope with clients who have possibly mental health issues, possibly drug and alcohol issues and possibly both. They need to be able to focus their attention on their longer-term clients, those with longer-term issues, and help them get their lives under enough control so they can find and maintain permanent accommodation. We should be supporting young people in short-term crisis in a different way.

As the committee report on the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people indicated, it is little wonder that when so many young people go in and out of refuges there is such limited capacity to work with clients towards resolving the underlying issues contributing to their homelessness. So a youth night shelter would relieve some of the pressure on our refuges, allow them to do the work and in the meantime help young people from falling into the cycle that they would need to be in to be accessing refuges.

A lot of evidence has been put forward about the need for such a facility, and this evidence has been gathering for a number of years. In March 2001, under the previous government, the Standing Committee on Health and Community Care called for the ACT government to research the needs and models of a youth night shelter, in consultation with young people and the relevant agencies.

When the Labor government took office, the Chief Minister made a ministerial statement, and I quote from the statement made in this house on 11 December 2001. The Chief Minister was talking about health and community care. He went on to say:

We will also conduct a feasibility study into the need for a youth night shelter.

Chief Minister, since that time, in 2001, we have seen little action on that promise. We have seen the Select Committee on the Status of Women make a recommendation that the government investigate the need for the establishment of a youth night shelter. That report was tabled in November 2002. In the government's response of May 2003, the government supported the recommendation and said that it would be forwarded to the Homelessness Advisory Group for consideration in the context of the ACT homelessness strategy due for release in September 2003.

The rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people report made a similar recommendation calling for the homelessness strategy to provide for a youth night shelter and for consultation with stakeholders. These recommendations were based upon the overwhelming evidence that something needed to happen; we just could not continue to talk and wait for further investigations to happen. We are now at least a year, two years, three years down the track from when these reports were being released, and the youth sector itself is not aware of any consultation that suggests that work on a night shelter is moving forward. So we could fear that the proposal is being passed around and left to quietly wait on a shelf somewhere.

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That is why I thought it was very important to bring the debate into this Assembly during Youth Week, so that we could actually get the commitment to see some progress in the next budget. Yes, a youth night shelter will take money. Maybe that is why none of these studies that the government has talked about have actually progressed, because there have not been any resources there. It is a very simple thing to support young people in our community. It will make such a difference to the lives of young people.

This morning here in the Assembly a group of young people were putting forth their stories about their lives in and out of Family Services, in and out of refuges, constantly looking for support because their lives were such that they were crying out for help. They indicated that they would love a shelter like this, that it could have helped them earlier on to stop the fall into the cycle of crisis that they are in now—somewhere where they could have stopped by during the night that would have helped them in the morning to get in contact with the right people, to work out the right answers to their problems. But now these children are in long-term crisis situations requiring intensive support to get their lives back on track, when a simple thing like a youth night shelter could have made such a difference to them earlier on. We definitely need a study to determine what accommodation model would be most useful and cost effective, but we know that a youth night shelter is needed.

What I hope to hear today is a commitment from the government to getting the research done and a timeframe for getting the youth night shelter started up and running in the coming financial year, so that we do actually have some real outcomes for the young people in our community.

MR WOOD (Minister for Disability, Housing and Community Services, Minister for Urban Services, Minister for Police and Emergency Services, and Minister for Arts and Heritage) (3.43): Mr Speaker, it is a bit rich for Ms Dundas to come in here and say there has been little action on the part of the government. I think it is rather ridiculous for Ms Dundas to come in here and say this is an important debate that we need to bring into this Assembly. Why do I think it is rich and ridiculous? Ms Dundas first proposed this motion, put it on the notice paper, on 4 March 2003, a year ago; so you are trying to tell me that this is important to you? “Let’s do it; let’s have some action.”

Ms Dundas: I was hoping you’d have done something in the intervening 12 months, Minister.

MR WOOD: Just pay some attention. I can claim it is important because I think I can demonstrate it, but I do not think that you can claim it is important when you have to amend your motion to change the dates of the years you have in mind because it has been sitting on the notice paper for a year.

Mrs Burke: Well, she rests her case; you’ve done nothing since.

MR WOOD: Don’t you attend to what’s happening in this community? This raises the problem of private members business when you have got lots of things to do. You are one member in this Assembly; the government has a vast range of resources and I do not expect that you would know all the things that are going on. I do expect that you would know that there has been very intensive work on our homelessness strategy. You would

know that because I have said it, I believe, often enough. You would know that. As a subset of that, there is a proposal that I will talk about in a short space of time.

Yes, there is a problem; there is no doubt about that; I am not denying that. One of our budgets, our last budget, put \$13.4 million over four years into the problem—long overdue, long overdue—and we have already allocated over \$2 million of that to get things moving. Sorry, we are way ahead of other people. Sorry about that.

Mrs Burke: Two years down the track, that is not bad, at last.

MR WOOD: You hear this all the time. In contrast with what you people did, we are putting money in, not taking it out. The AIHW, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, reports, disturbingly, that there are increasing numbers of young people entering SAAP services—this is stated in their report in 2001-02—and that the ACT has the highest number of 12 to 13-year olds and 14 to 15-year olds in SAAP services in Australia. Yes, indeed there is an issue—no question about that—and we know about it. The report on the needs of homelessness, those that are suffering homelessness in the ACT, also demonstrates quite alarming figures. There is no doubt about this. There is an issue out there, but it is an issue that the government is dealing with.

Many young people leave home, for a variety of reasons. We have to examine all those reasons. They may be having relationship problems within the family. While such matters can be difficult to resolve they require a variety of responses. In the case of young people who are first time out of home, we want to do everything possible to keep them out of the welfare system and out of the refuge system; we want to connect them to community services that can work with them and their families to rebuild their relationships. We need to link up with these young people through their schools and through youth centres on a vast range of ideas. We want to get information and help to them about their options and support before they move into a real crisis. Some young people may be contending with substance dependence, mental health conditions or morbidity. The consequences of emotional, physical or sexual abuse require quite different interventions.

Our current response to homeless young people in the ACT includes funding of \$3.2 million to refuges and \$1.4 million to youth centres. Of course, there are many initiatives that work with families before crisis to build their relationships and their resilience. But yes, I agree: we still need to look closely at these responses to ensure they are the most appropriate, that they are well targeted and that they are effective. We have been looking closely; we put the money there; we are spending the money; but we are also looking closely to define the best strategy.

I know that youth SAAP providers are doing a lot of work at the moment to build their capacity to respond to the complex needs of homeless young people. We need to support on-the-ground workers, making sure they are trained and resourced to do the work. We also need to look carefully at identified service gaps.

A new facility may be necessary. A new facility is not always the most appropriate response. I would say that, in looking at the circumstances of those first time, out-of-home young people, a facility is not necessarily going to be the service response of choice, although it is obviously something that gets a high degree of consideration.

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So let's move on to what has been happening that I think renders this motion unnecessary and perhaps somewhat problematic. There is, I think, no real need for this motion. Next week, on Wednesday of next week, I will table the homelessness strategy—the result of very careful, indeed exhaustive, consultation. I have just signed off letters to you all for the public launch in the reception room next door at 10 o'clock next Wednesday.

That homelessness strategy is the outcome of a thoroughly worked through process, and I would not want it to be at odds with something else. They may be in harmony; that may happen. They may be at slightly different odds; they might diverge slightly. I would not want that to happen.

That strategy is based on earlier works—the needs analysis that I mentioned, a review of youth SAAP—so we have got all the data to work on; we have spoken to all the people. Yes, young people. We have spoken to the youth refuges; we have spoken to the community; there have been consultations; there have been forums. You went to one of those forums—remember?—over at ANU Forestry. We have had that exhaustive consultation; we have been there. We have carefully developed that strategy; we have allocated that money that I mentioned—and I suppose I mention it too often for some people. That money will provide the consultation, the forums, the discussions and the development of the strategy; and we can best allocate that money. It is that strategy that provides the framework in which we will work.

I think that your motion, Ms Dundas, would have been better considered a year ago when it could have been worked into this homelessness strategy in general, which is pretty detailed. I have seen it, and you will see it. Yes, we are well aware of that committee report; I have got it here in front of me. I am well aware of it and I am well aware of the proposal in there for a youth night shelter.

As to youth homelessness specifically included in the homelessness strategy: we are taking action. I am about to have another report. I am sorry for Mrs Burke over there. Yes, we have taken some time to do this; I acknowledge that. But we do things thoroughly on this side of the house.

Mrs Burke: Mr Wood!

MR WOOD: You have no grounds to complain. Really, you have not. What we have done is contract Mr David MacKenzie, senior research fellow at the Institute for Social Research and director of Youth Development Australia, a pre-eminent researcher on youth homelessness, to undertake research, which is all done now, on the ACT service system, including the potential for a youth night shelter and the nature of such a service. Contrary to what Ms Dundas said, Mr MacKenzie's project was developed, I am told, in close consultation with the Youth Coalition of the ACT and actively sought the input of young people who have experienced homelessness.

Mr MacKenzie's draft report will be completed—this is the end of March—in April. His draft report on youth homelessness will be completed in April, in a matter of weeks. That is the draft. I expect—I cannot absolutely guarantee—as a draft it will be floated around briefly for final comment. That is the draft strategy.

That is where we are at. All this careful work acknowledging the problem has a purpose. We have the money; we will now have the clear direction; and we have the purpose. That is the path we want to be following. I think we can demonstrate, as I so often hear in this chamber, that we have developed a strategy on homelessness and then a detailed strategy, as a part of that, on youth homelessness. We have had extensive community consultation and consultation with the youth sector.

These are things I hear all the time in this place. We have done what you tell us to do; we have put in the money to go with it; we have started to spend that money in certain directions. So we have done all the things that this Assembly persistently asks for. I think that we are entitled to say, “Ms Dundas, hang on a minute; think about your motion. It may be that the result of all this community consultation and the strategy about youth will have exactly the same idea as you have here.” It may be. But it is a month or more before I can accurately assert that. And I would not want—in terms of what this Assembly wants in the way of consultation and strategy development—the Assembly to be going in what would be, I think, only a slightly different direction in terms of priorities.

I do not read this motion as absolutely requiring me to put something in the budget. Look, the budget is already done; we have just got to tick off the budget. As far as doing the budget for 2004-05 is concerned, it is too late anyway. I cannot adjust at this stage. But we have got the money there anyway—the money is allocated in the forward estimates—for homelessness, including youth homelessness.

I do not want us to be at odds. I believe that we have done everything that the Assembly requires us to do. So let’s not see a slight divergence here. I would ask you to think about withdrawing your motion because of what I have said to you—and I will report back to you pretty quickly—or adjourning it so that the fruits of all the work that I have done can come to bear.

Are we going to go in a different direction? It may be; it may not be. I cannot tell you that. I have seen the homelessness strategy—I have got it—but I have not seen Mr MacKenzie’s work. We could well be walking the same steps or there could be some divergences; I do not know yet. So let’s not compound the issue by passing a motion in which you say you want something in the 2004-05 budget. In any case, I cannot do that; we’re done. The budget is almost set in concrete now. I do not have the capacity to take new proposals to the budget process. So that is the story.

On this issue, more than most, we have responded absolutely properly, diligently and enthusiastically; consulted with everybody; and got the strategies. We have done it. And are you going to say to me, “Well, blow what we’ve said to you before in this chamber; forget about it. Don’t worry about what we’ve said before; we’re just going to overrule it”—if that was to be, and I still do not know that that is the case—“We don’t care what the community says; we don’t care about strategies; we’re just going to impose something off the floor of this chamber”? Not that that is relevant, because I think we both might be heading in the same direction, but I cannot guarantee that.

MR SPEAKER: The member’s time has expired.

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MRS BURKE (3.58): I rise to say that the Liberal opposition will be supporting this motion on the notice paper. I am slightly aghast at some of the comments that Mr Wood has made. To insinuate that people like Ms Dundas and I are not in touch with the community is a downright insult, quite frankly.

Mr Wood: I didn't say that.

MRS BURKE: No, you said, "Don't you know what's going on out there?"

Mr Wood: I said you do not know what we are doing all the time.

MRS BURKE: Well, it is the other way around, I think, Mr Wood, because if you were at the meeting we were at this morning, then you would have known from the stakeholders who were at that meeting that there are still major service gaps.

On 10 March a workshop was conducted to discuss such issues. Service gaps for young people were identified and a new model was proposed. There was a follow-up meeting today. This was held by the youth information referral resource service, at which Ms Dundas was present as well. The youth information referral resource service has actually put in a submission, but I am not sure, from listening to Mr Wood's comments, if they are going to be too late. But, obviously, they have done a lot of consulting with the community, a lot of talking to people out there.

I think it is rather a shame that Mr Wood protesteth too much. Indeed, I would see it more that he is probably concerned that Ms Dundas has stolen his thunder. So if it is in line or if there are some things that can work, why should Ms Dundas have to remove her motion from the notice paper, Mr Wood? Why can't you, for a change, start working with other people in this place for good and positive outcomes? I ask you often enough. I have fairly given up now, but that is your choice.

Ms Dundas raised the issue of Civic, saying that it was the focal point of activities for many young people. Indeed, the instigators of the youth information referral resource service, Tanya Keed and Christine Darcy, actually run a very impromptu service that picks up and takes young people home early in the morning. Last weekend it was seven young people. They get rung up at all hours of the morning because, for reasons which Mr Wood himself said and which I will allude to in a minute, they were not able to go home.

Ms Dundas referred to doing a crime to get a roof over their head, virtually; people were feeling that they were somehow safe in Quamby or the Belconnen Remand Centre, wherever it might be. "If I'm bad at least I get a roof over my head." That is a dreadful culture. There are obviously needs in the community and that is why it is taking so long for these reviews, strategies and papers to come down; and there is no action there.

Mr Wood talks about money being put in. We hear the rhetoric about \$13 million, the number bandied around so many times. Where are the houses? Where are the roofs? You said that you were going to do better than the Liberal government.

Mr Wood: It's happening out there.

MRS BURKE: I do not see that you have built houses yet; you are building a few. We have not heard about the progress on that great stand on youth before the last election—and what you were going to do was nobody's business—but here we are now proposing to you that there is a problem and you are saying, "No. Let's wait for another report." I say that we do not need more studies; we need to move. We need action for young people.

Mr Wood: That was the problem with Kate Carnell's government. It was just do this, do this, without thinking; and that was the problem with it.

MRS BURKE: You just did not like the pro-activeness of Kate Carnell; that is the problem. The problem with this government is that it does not like people who are energetic and want to get out there and do the job, Mr Wood, and you know that to be true.

Ms Dundas mentions a 10 to 12-bed facility—about \$400,000 I think you said, Ms Dundas. I think that that figure would have been known for a long time and, no doubt Mr Wood, as you are sitting there probably feeling quite embarrassed, that report is going to show you that is what it was. You could have had this home and hosed and done a long time ago, because this is not a new issue. I am not going to use the words that this is a complex issue. This seems to be a stock, standard saying coming from the government seats over there.

Mr Wood: Did I say that?

MRS BURKE: No, you have not in this instance actually, so I am just saying it for you. It is quite simple. There are people who need homes at night, who need roofs over their heads; they need to be dealt with. There is a gap; you have acknowledged that already in some of the words that you said yourself; there is an unmet need. We have talked a lot about unmet needs.

We need a service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Some would notice that I and, in fact, the youth information referral resource service refer to that; they talk about a crisis line for young people, Canberra-based. This was my whole reason in raising that when I did about a Canberra-based crisis line pulling together all services.

Young people do not know whom to call, do not know whom to go to in times of crisis. We are not making that very clear, and that is something this government could have done much better. It could have used somebody like Lifeline, funded them and resourced them properly over two years ago when it knew the problem existed. That may have helped young people. That may have helped resolve some problems and got them some solutions. That was over two years ago, and there is still no assistance for youth at risk or homeless in our city.

There are things being done. You say money is going to it, Mr Wood. I would argue: where is it going? Into administration? Where is it going? It is certainly not going into accommodation. We are still waiting for the boarding house out at Gungahlin that was promised. Yes, that is a long, dim, distant thing in the wherever. A commitment is needed, a front-end funding, instead of band-aid solutions.

You said yourself, Mr Wood, that workers are stretched to the limit. Why don't you resource them, if you know they are stretched to the limit? We have the same in Family Services. What are we doing for front-line workers who are taking all the flak while the government sits back and does zero? "Don't touch me; I'm just the government." What about front-line workers? What about the people who are on the battlefield out there, doing it tough? Let's give them the service that they need; let's give them the support they need. We have heard about the gaps that are there. You talked about a facility not always being the service response of choice. I say that in an ideal world this may be the case. Your asking Ms Dundas to remove this motion is absolutely ridiculous. We have to keep it in the light; we have to keep it out there so that it is an issue and you do not bury it in some report that sits on a shelf for yet another 12 months. You may huff and puff.

As I said this morning, I had the pleasure of hosting a gathering of the youth information referral resource service. These women who are trying to pull together and get some funding and are having extreme difficulty in doing so are actually picking up the slack of the gaps that you are refusing to acknowledge. The government is just sitting on its hands. I must say, Mr Wood, you were very indignant at times in some of your responses, but you were not at the meeting that we were at this morning; you did not hear from the people this morning because you do not talk to people out there. Like all the ministers at the moment, you keep yourself locked away; you do not seem to talk to real people.

There is lots of talk about where we are going, what you are going to do, but let's see the action. You said there is an issue; there is no question about that. We know about it. Why do we need another report? Why are you waiting for another report to come down? Surely you know this full well. You said yourself, "We know about it. No doubt about this, there is an issue out there." Interesting.

Mr Wood, you rightly said that young people leave home for all sorts of reasons. I have personal experience of this. My daughter left home at 15½, so I well know. She ended up in Burnie Court. But she would have been able to go to a place of refuge that was safer perhaps than somewhere like Burnie Court, had there been somewhere to go. Yes, you touched on the fact that there are all sorts of problems. We need to go perhaps deeper and beyond that in terms of relationships.

As I said, it is very disappointing to be faced with yet another strategy, more draft reports, another report when you know, the government knows, what is going on out there—and very eminent people are being paid very well—when that money could be well directed into resourcing front-line people and these people who need roofs over their heads at night. Ms Dundas has simply stolen the government's thunder here. I and the Liberal opposition will be supporting this motion, and I urge members to do likewise.

MS TUCKER (4.08): For several years there has been talk of a youth night shelter as an element of the comprehensive strategy to support young people who are homeless or dependent on unsafe accommodation. The Youth Coalition included a recommendation to develop models for such a shelter in its submission on the 2002-03 budget, and then in the submission on the 2003-04 it expanded on that idea. A few excerpts from last year's submission offer some of the thinking behind this idea. This is a direct quote:

In its submission to the ACT Budget process 2001/02, the Youth Coalition recommended that the ACT Government fund research to assess the need and develop models of a 'Youth Night Shelter'. More recently, the report of the *Select Committee on the Status of Women in the ACT (2002)* also recommended investigation of a youth night shelter. This recommendation was made in response to addressing a gap in accommodation services for young people whose needs are unable to be met by existing models of accommodation services. In particular, those young people who are homeless and do not require, or are unable to accept greater levels of support such as that offered by youth SAAP services, however, are in need of a safe place to sleep with access to basic facilities (e.g. shower, overnight accommodation)

Reports from the youth sector and related reports (most recently the *Needs Analysis of Homelessness in the ACT (2002)*) highlight the continuing need for both additional 'beds' and a form of accommodation which is accessible to young people who do not 'fit' with mainstream services still exists.

The investigative work into alternative youth housing options by the Housing Policy Section of the Department of Urban Services (DUS) in 2000 and the subsequent research by the DUS in 2001 into a model and location for a youth night shelter was welcomed and supported by the youth sector. The establishment of a youth night shelter was also raised as an appropriate response at the Ministerial Youth Council's first *Annual Youth InterACT Conference* convened in October 2002. A letter of support for this initiative has been provided by a member of the Ministerial Youth Council.

As an election commitment by the ALP, the Youth Coalition believes it is now time for the ACT Government to dedicate funds to the development of a Youth Night Shelter.

And, finally:

The establishment of a Youth Night Shelter should also have a positive impact on the number of inappropriate over night stays at Quamby Youth Detention Centre.

Since then I am aware that quite a lot of work has begun on issues around homelessness. In fact the minister is launching a strategy next week. There was also an external consultant commissioned to examine specific issues around youth homelessness who is expected to report around the end of the month.

As Mr Wood has argued, on one hand, you can argue that it makes sense to wait until the consultant reports before we start calling for the government to take action on a night shelter. On the other hand, it is perhaps reasonable for the Assembly to express its view that a night shelter in some form ought to be a priority for the next financial year and that such a priority could be managed as part of the strategy.

I would also make the point that the issue of safety of homeless or unsatisfactorily housed young people can only be addressed through direct consultation and discussion with young people. We need proper research and engagement with young people in order to design the programs or facilities that will improve their lives. Mr Wood has said that is occurring through the process, but I would also submit that it has occurred over the last

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few years and that is why I wanted to read out that position from the Youth Coalition, because this work, this consultation, has been going on for too long.

There was a youth in crisis forum here this morning, which involved, among others, a number of young people who are entangled with the criminal justice system, and the topic of safety at night was raised by a number of those attending. The need for some model of a night shelter—and I want to stress that this motion does not lock us into a particular model—was raised. I think we do have to look fairly closely at the needs and situation of young people to determine that. Typically, though, we are talking about young people who are subject to orders to reside; they are no longer accepted at refuges; refuges often will not take kids on orders; and the refuges cannot cope, which is understandable. And it is not necessarily going to be possible at home either. Marlow often will not take them, for understandable reasons.

Basically they end up on an order, the orders end up being breached and they are put into Quamby. Sometimes people end up in Quamby just overnight. If members are not aware what that entails, I can tell you it is not like booking into a hotel. If you are going into Quamby overnight you are strip-searched. It is a very traumatic process, but we know that that is what is happening at the moment. It is the only accommodation for these particular types of kids.

I am trying to stress here that a night shelter is not just for kids who are out late or something. The need is actually much more complex than that, if Mrs Burke does not mind my saying that. It is. You have to acknowledge that there are a number of young people in our community who will use this, and they are kids who are really quite vulnerable. This need has been clearly expressed over the years.

The other thing I would just like to say here too about Quamby is that we are told quite often that there are always exit plans for kids when they leave Quamby, but that is not what we are hearing from young people, particularly those kids who are just in there for a night in these sorts of circumstances. I would have to say that what is happening in Quamby is a serious failing because clearly an exit plan deals with something as basic as where you will sleep tonight. Some kind of overnight shelter with attached services does seem to me to be a reasonable call based on real information.

I have heard what Mr Wood has said. He is concerned about the budget process and he does not feel that it is realistic to say it has to be a high priority for 2004-05. As Ms Dundas pointed out, it is the case that the Treasurer usually, in his opinion on this issue, does say that there is a capacity for budget to be worked out right up to the last moment, even though that may not be Mr Wood's opinion of the process. I guess it is a matter of the importance that is given to the issue. I sympathise if Mr Wood does not have that opinion, but by passing this motion we would be supporting the importance of a night shelter. Hopefully, that would mean that it would be given high priority by the Treasurer.

On the point of it being disrespectful of the process of the current communication with young people and the consultancy: I would just say again, as I have already said, that the need is well and truly established. We are asking only that it be made a high priority, and I feel perfectly comfortable actually supporting that because I think it should be a high

priority and I do not think that it is inappropriate for the Assembly to communicate that sentiment to the minister.

MR PRATT (4.16): I am happy to speak in support of this motion. Mr Wood's comments about the aims of government to connect with youth at risk are absolutely well placed, and he certainly discussed SATs. These comments are laudable, and I think good work is being done by a number of government departments. But, parallel to that work currently being done, there is now an identified need—there always will be; it does not matter how much more sophisticated the government is able to make its youth work programs—for a night shelter. It is a unique facility that fills a niche requirement.

I have talked to the Salvos and other NGO workers who have worked with youth in Tuggeranong, and I have been out with them to visit displaced teenagers who are located around the parks and the lakeside. No doubt you have seen them too, John. These are kids who seem to have nowhere to go. Perhaps they have had yet another spat with mum, or a step-dad, and they have had a few beers as well and do not feel particularly happy. These NGOs do terrific work, but they do this work on the trot. They do not have a shelter to fall back on. They probably have an office. Indeed, some of the kids we have seen around the lakeside are semi-homeless, if not homeless. These young people are in conflict with their parents or their legal guardians.

I know that these non-government organisations would welcome the night shelter; they would probably like one in Tuggeranong. I do not know how far the budget will stretch, but Ms Dundas is quite right: let's start by putting a shelter in Civic as a pilot project and then, hopefully, as we pull the resources together, go further afield, at least to the three major townships.

NGOs are filling a gap that the government should be involved in—at least, it should be in partnership with them. In fact, a partnership between NGOs and government is desirable in this type of work. In this case, one would hope that the NGOs could identify the user requirement for government to budget. Indeed, that is why we do not need a trial and we do not need another three or four reviews.

We simply have to talk to the NGOs, who are working at the coalface in our town centres. They know what the user requirement is. Let's fund the project, but let's perhaps give it to the NGOs to run. The NGOs ought to run the night shelter as the implementing partner of government. NGOs are staffed by people who are compassionate and who know the work that they have to be doing.

I would see a night shelter as being the first drop-off point for a severely emotional and/or displaced teenager. If they happened to be badly intoxicated, either with alcohol or drugs, going to the shelter would be the safest and smartest thing for a young—or older—teenager to do, rather than walking home at a dangerous hour of the night, catching a cab or, worse, bunking down in an industrial rubbish bin in an alley at the back of Civic or, worse still, mixing with the wrong crowd in the back of an alleyway behind Civic.

I would like to see a shelter staffed to provide not only a safe and secure environment but also a first point of assistance to either intoxicated or emotionally disturbed youth. It

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would need to have sufficient staff, or at least one or two multiskilled staff, capable of compassionately dealing with kids who might turn up there.

The great advantage of having a night shelter in Civic—and, hopefully, in every town centre one day—is that it would become a magnet, a place to which displaced youth could go. What better way for government workers and NGO workers to engage with kids at risk? At least if the shelter is there the kids will come to it. Perhaps that is an opportunity for the experts in our society to engage with these kids and provide early intervention to help them with their problems.

I take note of Mr Wood's intentions, and he seems to understand and agree with the need for a night shelter. I am sure that it is in his heart and he wants to get on with a project such as this. However, he is constrained by a government that creaks along and lacks the urgency and imagination to get to grips with a need that was identified in 2000. We are talking about a need that has been around for quite a long time. Mr Stefaniak says that when they were in government they were talking to youth workers and they had probably commenced a review of the need. The issue has been identified for quite a long time as an important need, if not an urgent need. So, come on, cabinet. Help Mr Wood out. Give him the wherewithal to mobilise such a project.

I echo the comments of Mrs Burke that the government should hasten to build into the budget the money needed to get this project going and also her comments that we do not need to wait for more reviews or more reports. What is so difficult technically about identifying the scope, role and shape of a night shelter? Why can't the minister and his departments connect with the NGOs, which we were talking about earlier, to define the need? I do not know why we have so many reviews that go on for so damn long before decisions can be made. Of course, in some cases you need reviews that take time to technically analyse difficult projects, but a night shelter is surely not all that complicated.

A significant number of youth are at risk in ACT society. We know that from the data that we are able to collect through questions on notice, and we know from the information that we receive from the Department of Education and Youth Services that there are a significant number of kids in Canberra who are at risk. We know there are quite a number of them. It is not a major percentage in terms of the total youth in Canberra, but it is a significant number. We know that there are kids out there who are in trouble.

Talking to the police, we know that there are a lot of kids at a loose end. The police would like nothing better than to work alongside NGOs and government youth workers and, in contact with a night shelter, help resolve some of the problems they have to deal with. The police do not want to be booking kids and taking them off to the remand centre or the police station. They have more important things to do.

I commend Ms Dundas's motion and ask that the government get on with it and see if they can put something into the budget as soon as possible. Ted, stop that process and allow Mr Wood to get this project on the table.

MS DUNDAS (4.25): I thank members for contributing to the debate. I was a little taken aback by the minister's comments. I was, somewhat hopefully, expecting that the government would come down and go, "Yes, Ms Dundas. Your motion is unnecessary

because we have already done it.” That is what I was actually hoping for. We have had that happen before. The government has said, “This motion is superfluous. We are already doing it. We are happy to let it through.” To hear the minister say that the budget is already set in stone was interesting when in estimates we hear the Treasurer say up to the very last minute, “We are continually revising the budget, always working on initiatives.” The Treasurer has said that again and again. I compliment the government on their process this time around, but we need to recognise that the provision of a youth night shelter should be a priority.

Mr Wood: I’m happy with that. Can I put it on the record?

MS DUNDAS: The minister indicates that he is happy for the youth night shelter to be a priority. This has been on the Labor government’s agenda since that first ministerial statement in 2001. It has been mentioned before then and after and in countless budget submissions. The minister said that I should have debated this a year ago, when it was first put on the notice paper. I put it on the notice paper as warning to the government that this was an issue that I wanted to see progressed.

I held off on the debate while the Standing Committee on Community Services and Social Equity completed its investigations into the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people and awaited the government’s response to that report. I hoped that, with all the discussion that was happening and the focus that was being afforded to young people in the community, we would see this moving forward.

In the ongoing discussions I have been having with the youth sector and with young people, the evidence put to me was that it was not progressing. That is why I moved this motion today and sought the Assembly’s support for it. The motion calls for the ACT government to make the establishment of a youth night shelter a high priority for next financial year.

I have already indicated, in my opening comments, that the format the youth night shelter would take is incredibly flexible. Saying “a high priority” is about making sure that the idea is actually progressed over the next financial year. Maybe it will be progressed earlier than that, from the comments that Minister Wood made. Maybe it will not. But it is something that we cannot afford to let drop off the agenda, and this motion puts loud and clear on the agenda that we want to see young people in our community supported at all hours of the day.

I will say again what has already been said in this debate: the need is established and we are asking that it be a high priority. I hope that members can see the benefits of what we are talking about today and can support this commitment to getting the necessary work done and a timeframe for getting work commenced on supporting young people over the next financial year.

Motion agreed to.

Civics and electoral education programs

MR HARGREAVES (4.30): I move:

That this Assembly:

- (1) notes with concern estimates that as many as one in four people aged 18-24 are not on the electoral roll;
- (2) calls on the A.C.T. Electoral Commission to examine ways to encourage young people to enrol to vote such as sending out enrolment information with Year 12 school results, provisional drivers license applications and proof of age cards;
- (3) recognises that existing educational programs of civics education play an important role in including young people in processes of electoral education and participation; and
- (4) calls on the Minister for Education, Youth and Family Services to refer current civics programs used in schools to the curriculum review team for investigation into the adequacy of these programs.

I take the opportunity in National Youth Week to raise the issue of youth participation in our democracy, expressing the concern of many in our community that a large number of our younger citizens are not yet registered to vote and as such are not participating fully in our society. This concern is shared by electoral authorities, who have been working in recent years to address the problem, with some success. I commend their efforts and hope that by raising these issues today, we can bring more ideas and resources to solve this problem.

Australians aged over 18 are required by law to enrol to vote. The ACT has a joint roll agreement with the Australian Electoral Commission. Under these arrangements electors need to complete only one form to enrol for federal and territory government elections. Enrolment peaks around elections. The increased activity of political parties and electoral authorities, combined with the increased media focus on politics, undoubtedly results in more enrolments. It is widely accepted that a considerable number of young people delay their enrolment until an election is announced and the rolls are about to close.

According to Australian Electoral Commission figures, the seven-day cut-off period following the calling of an election is the busiest time for enrolment activity. In the 1998 federal election, approximately 350,000 people enrolled or updated their enrolment in that seven-day period. In the 1999 republic referendum, 315,000 enrolments were processed, half of them—155,000—from first-time voters.

However, data from the 2001 federal and ACT elections show that, even after this peak in enrolments, around 13 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds in the ACT were not on the roll. In the period between elections, this figure can rise up to 25 per cent. The ACT Electoral Commissioner, Phillip Green, estimates that 22 per cent of eligible Australian citizens in the 18 to 24 age group are currently not on the roll. This is slightly higher than the national average.

Mr Green anticipates that in the lead-up to the ACT and federal elections this year this number will drop to around 10 per cent. Whilst this is an improvement on 25 per cent

non-enrolment, it still represents an alarmingly high number of ACT residents who are not participating in our democratic process.

I believe that an increased education and enrolment effort is needed between elections if we are to make serious inroads into this problem. There are many reasons why some young people do not enrol to vote, and it is impossible to expect a 100 per cent enrolment level. Nevertheless, I believe that we can and should do better than current levels. Every effort should be made to encourage young Canberrans to participate in our democracy. Information and education are crucial to this goal.

Misinformation about the system is rife among those who are not currently enrolled. I recently met some young people who, for one reason or another, had overlooked enrolling for the last election. They informed me, rather reluctantly, that they remained off the roll for fear of being prosecuted for their earlier mistake. This is an unwarranted fear. The AEC states clearly: "Where a person may have overlooked the responsibility to enrol and vote, the Australian Electoral Commission's main interest is to ensure that eligible people do actually enrol."

Section 101 (7) of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 states:

Where a person sends or delivers a claim for enrolment, or for transfer of enrolment, to a Divisional Returning Officer or an Australian Electoral Officer, proceedings shall not be instituted against that person for any offence...committed before the claim was so sent or delivered.

This means that, once a person gives the AEC a completed enrolment form, the AEC cannot prosecute the person for not enrolling before, no matter how long he or she has technically been in breach of the law. Therefore, people can be assured that anyone who had overlooked current enrolment in the past and who now decides to enrol to vote may do so without fear of incurring a penalty. This is but one example of the need for increased education on electoral methods, and I am sure members will have many similar examples.

The second point in this motion today calls on the ACT Electoral Commission to examine ways to encourage young people to enrol to vote and gives a few suggestions for how this might be achieved. These suggestions are by no means exhaustive, and I acknowledge that the ACT Electoral Commission have a variety of programs in place already and have also been testing a number of pilot projects over the past few years.

Two examples of projects that have had a positive effect on enrolments in the ACT are the active use of data-matching technologies and the introduction of a government-wide change-of-address form with provision for electoral enrolment. The most recent report of the Electoral Council of Australia—a consultative council of electoral commissioners and chief electoral officers from the electoral authorities of the Commonwealth, states and territories—places high priority on the enrolment of young people.

The Electoral Council's report on a continuous roll update program for 2001-02 states:

The most effective program is that undertaken by the VEC in which Board of Studies data is matched to the roll and an enrolment reminder in the form of a birthday card is mailed to 7 year olds. Further use is made of Victorian Tertiary

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Admissions Centre and VicRoads data to stimulate enrolments from young people. This integrated program maintains enrolment of 18 year olds at or above 70% of the estimated eligible population and at corresponding higher levels for older age groups.

The council goes on to say:

Without access to a similar suite of data, programs targeting youth in the other states and the territories are not as effective.

It is worth noting that the AEC takes responsibility for maintaining up-to-date electoral rolls for federal, state and territory, and local government elections. They carry out the continuous roll update process as a means of ensuring an up-to-date electoral roll.

Over the last three years, the AEC has developed an increasing number of automated data-matching systems to ensure that the electoral roll is continuously reviewed and thereby more accurately maintained. Examples of data used in data matching are Australia Post redirection advices, Centrelink change of address advices and some state and territory motor transport data on new licences.

These are all good ideas and seem to be getting results for the commission. They should be encouraged to continue with these programs and develop more. The other important solution for the enrolment problem is civics education. Civics and citizenship education lets us look at our rights and responsibilities as citizens, analyse our history and endeavour to promote active citizenship, which touches all aspects of our lives.

ACT government civics and citizenship education aims to:

- provide students with an understanding of Australia's history and the structures of Australian government and law
- provide students with an understanding of Australian national identity as it has changed over time and as it now is, encompassing cultural diversity and reconciliation and the opportunity to explore our beliefs and values
- provide students with an understanding of Australia's role and place in the world community
- assist students to develop a sense of self in relation to community and to consider the rights and responsibilities of citizens
- ensure that students become involved in community service opportunities that contribute to the improvement of local, national and international communities.

It is a great program and plays an important role in our democracy, but I wonder if we are emphasising it enough at the moment. We should always be examining the value and effectiveness of our programs. That is why this motion calls on the Minister for Education to refer the current civics programs used in schools to the curriculum review team for investigation.

In conclusion, we have an entrenched problem: we cannot get enrolment levels to approach 100 per cent. We should not accept that the current situation is the best we can do. New strategies are needed to supplement the existing programs. We can learn from other jurisdictions and should look at adopting programs that work in other parts of the country.

I urge members to support this motion today.

MR STEFANIAK (4.40): The opposition will be supporting Mr Hargreaves's motion. One of the biggest problems of any electoral system is to ensure that as many people as possible vote. Even in a compulsory system, as the figures from the commission show, not everyone is enrolled. Some people simply do not want to enrol.

Mr Speaker, you, Mr Hargreaves, Mr Cornwell and I have scrutineered at a number of elections, and it is interesting to see some of the works of art, some of the not-so-great works of art and some of the crass comments made by people who want to vote informally. That is fair enough; at least they are enrolled. One of the beauties of the Australian electoral system, which is duplicated in all the states and territories, is that it is compulsory. It makes sure that people at least attempt to exercise their civic and democratic right, a right many people have fought and died for over the centuries and a right many people around the world would love to have but do not because they live in totalitarian dictatorships.

Mr Hargreaves's motion is timely. A lot of what he has in his motion is actually happening. He has a few interesting ideas. The second part of his motion calls on the commission to examine ways to encourage young people to enrol to vote, such as sending out enrolment information with year 12 school results, provisional driver's licence applications and proof-of-age cards. Let's try that. I do not know if that will work, but it does not hurt to try.

The Electoral Commissioner, Phillip Green, has sent a note to all MLAs, and I will read the salient points. It is dated 30 March—yesterday. He regurgitates Mr Hargreaves's motion and states:

The ACT Electoral Commission, in conjunction with the Australian Electoral Commission and other State and Territory electoral authorities, has in place a series of initiatives aimed at encouraging young people to enrol to vote.

For many years electoral authorities have been working to address the fact that a greater proportion of young people in the 18-24 year old age group tend not to be on the electoral roll compared to other age groups. It is a feature of this age group that a significant proportion of people delay their electoral enrolment until an election is announced and they are aware that electoral rolls are about to close.

In the ACT, it is estimated that currently around 78% of eligible Australian citizens in the 18-24 year old age group are enrolled. This compares to a national average of around 80% currently. It is anticipated that the proportion of young people enrolled in the ACT will increase significantly in the lead up to the October ACT election as people become aware of the deadline for enrolling for the election. At the 2001 election, it was estimated that the enrolment rate for this age group was around 90%.

It should be noted that these calculations use estimates of numbers of eligible citizens that make assumptions regarding likely numbers of people who are or are not eligible for enrolment. It is possible that the high number of non-Australian citizen students in the ACT may mean that these statistics under-estimate the actual proportion of eligible citizens enrolled in the 18-24 year old age group. Therefore these statistics need to be used with some caution.

The ACT Electoral Commission undertakes extensive on-going enrolment programs in conjunction with the Australian Electoral Commission. Several of these programs target the 18-24 year old age group.

Schools Enrolment Project

The ACT Electoral Commission conducts an annual school enrolment project which is aimed at working with schools to collect electoral enrolment forms. Each government and private school with college-age students in the ACT is paid \$2.50 for each enrolment form it collects from its students. This program has been conducted successfully since 2000, and will be conducted later this year in the lead up to the roll close for the October election.

Continuous Roll Update

As part of the national Continuous Roll Update program, the ACT Electoral Commission provides the Australian Electoral Commission with data from ACT Road User Services, the ACT Secondary Schools Board, ACTEWAGL and the ACT Rental Bond Board. Data is also received from Centrelink and the citizenship authorities. This data is used to target people who may not be correctly enrolled with direct mail, including enrolment forms, and targeted household reviews.

This has proved to be a very effective method of keeping the electoral roll up to date. The schools and road user data is particularly useful for identifying young people who may not be correctly enrolled.

Electoral Education

The ACT Electoral Commission recognises the importance of electoral education and offers a comprehensive electoral education program to all ACT schools. The electoral education program is aimed primarily at raising awareness of the ACT's electoral system. Education sessions are often conducted in cooperation with the Legislative Assembly's Education Officer. Participants at these sessions, which are conducted at the Legislative Assembly or in schools, are shown how the Members of the Legislative Assembly are elected and how the Assembly functions. Hands on learning often includes a mock election where enrolment is emphasised. Electoral enrolment requirements are also stressed in this education program.

Printed Electoral Education Material

In addition to conducting face-to-face education sessions, the ACT Electoral Commission has developed a range of printed electoral education resources for distribution to schools. This material is primarily aimed at providing teachers with the ability to conduct electoral education in their own classrooms. This service is part of an Australia-wide move to incorporate electoral education and civics education in regular school curricula. The material is distributed to all school libraries by the Assembly and is advertised in the Assembly's and the Commission's promotional material. All the material is available from the Assembly's and the Commission's internet sites.

Student Representative Council Elections

A campaign to encourage secondary schools to use the Commission's services to elect members to the Student Representative Council using the Hare-Clark system is undertaken on an annual basis.

Mr Hargreaves: Why don't you just table it, Bill? Table the letter, mate!

MR STEFANIAK: I will in a second. It goes on:

In 2003 a series of documents was made available on the website to guide teachers through the electoral process should they want to run their own school elections. The Commission regularly assists schools with the conduct of their Student Representative Council elections.

I will take Mr Hargreaves up on his offer. There are also the headings "Professional development for teachers", "Units of work", "Constitutional Convention" and "Election roll close advertising". I will take up his offer and table that letter. I seek leave to table the letter.

Leave granted.

MR STEFANIAK: I table the letter.

MR SPEAKER: You could have saved us a bit of trouble.

Mr Cornwell: We've all got one.

MR STEFANIAK: You have all got one. Okay.

Mr Hargreaves: You could have done it a bit earlier because we've all read it!

MR STEFANIAK: All right. I think it is important. It just shows you, Mr Hargreaves, that a lot is occurring already. At times I wonder how much more you can do, but I think you raise some interesting points. If civics education can be improved and if you want to refer that to the curriculum review team just to see if something more about this could be put in, we have no problem with that. People's democratic rights are fundamental, and the right to vote is the most fundamental right of all. That is quite important, and they are reasonably good suggestions. Let's see if we can improve it further. We may not be able to improve it much, but let's give it a go because it is important.

I will listen with interest to what Ms Dundas has to say. I would like to hear what she says about young people having fewer opportunities to enrol. That may well be so, and I have a fair bit of sympathy in relation to her first proposed new paragraph. It seems to extend what Mr Hargreaves already has. I am interested to hear what she says in relation to the second and third paragraphs.

Whilst I do not have great problems with the Electoral Commission further increasing its role of getting young people to enrol—and even doing research—I am a little bit wary of supporting something that calls for additional funding. Having been in government and appreciating the tightness of budgets, I wonder whether that is necessary. Mr Hargreaves does not do that. This can be improved without spending a lot of money.

I also wonder whether we need to conduct an investigation into the possibility of lowering the voting age in the ACT. The issue of whether it should be 16 has been around for a long time. My party has looked at it, and we rejected it fairly recently. It crops up from time to time. Eighteen is quite a good age. Around that time people are leaving year 12, they have probably just got their licence and they are able to drink. That used to be 21. Eighteen is now accepted as the coming of age. It is the age for national service in countries that still have it. It is often the youngest age used in those types of schemes. It is the time a lot of young people go out into the workforce and off to first-year university or further education in some tertiary institution such as the CIT. It is a landmark age.

There is a lot of evidence around to indicate that 16-year-olds are not all that interested and do not have the maturity that 18-year-olds have. Think of third world countries that use 16-year-olds as kid soldiers. On balance, 16 is too young; 18 is pretty reasonable. Most people accept that. I wonder whether we need to have further investigation into lowering the voting age, but I look forward to hearing what Ms Dundas has to say. It is an important motion by Mr Hargreaves, which we are happy to accept.

MR CORNWELL (4.51): I will speak now because Ms Dundas might want to comment on a few statements that I am about to make. I do not have any problem with the motion either, and I do note the electoral office paper. Mr Hargreaves quite rightly mentioned exercising democratic rights. It could be interpreted, Mr Hargreaves, and I am sure you will not be offended by this, that this motion coming up now with an election in October might be an attempt to encourage the vote.

It is like the bill of rights and other legislation that has been passed in here. It is all very well to have these things; it is quite another matter whether people want to use them. The question I want to address is whether a lot of young people who have not enrolled think it is worth it to do so. Frankly, I do not think a lot of people think very much of politicians, and I cannot say I blame them when I look around and see some of the stupid things that we do: the brawling, the self-centredness, the use of 100 words where 10 would do, the power before principle, the divisiveness we see—and this annoys a great many people—when we should be united to address problems, and the tendency to politicise matters that a lot of other people regard simply as problems that should be solved for society. In other words, we need to lift our game.

It applies in this Assembly as much as in any other parliament in the country, and there is certainly evidence to say that a great many people are extremely disillusioned with politicians.

Mr Wood: I don't find that.

MR CORNWELL: Don't you?

Mr Wood: You speak for yourself.

MR CORNWELL: You need to get out a bit more, Mr Wood. You will have the opportunity to—as I do, my friend—after October. But seriously, there is evidence to indicate that many people are disillusioned with politicians, for the reasons I outlined. It

does not come as any great surprise to me that youth, who tend to see things in black and white—and I am not being critical with that—

Mr Wood: Some people here see things in black and white, too

MR CORNWELL: Yes, yes. Some of them do not see them at all, Mr Wood! But it is true: young people tend to see things in black and white rather than—

Ms Dundas: Graffiti cans come in all different colours.

MR CORNWELL: if I may again put on a political hat—in the cynical grey of political self-interest. I do not see anything wrong. I did not catch Ms Dundas’s interjection, but it was not an offensive comment on my part, Ms Dundas, that they see things in black and white. It is perfectly reasonable that they are intense in their beliefs and their views.

Unless we are prepared to think seriously about lifting our game in terms of this, we can try all we like to encourage people to enrol and, we hope, to vote—not informally, but in some positive sense—and they still will not. Although I support Mr Hargreaves’s motion, I do not think it is simply a matter of saying, “Let’s get out there and sell this wonderful democratic right.” We must also look to our own behaviour—as should all politicians—so that people are keen to enrol to vote and to exercise that democratic right.

I have no simple solution to this. I have delivered a little homily today, to myself and to other members. But I do think it is an important factor in the problem of getting people, particularly young people, to enrol. I commend the motion. I also commend my comments to the house.

MS DUNDAS (4.56): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate as one of only a very few young people across the country who have actually had the privilege of being elected to represent their community. Most people who represent their electorates are over the age of 40 and it is actually quite rare to find representatives younger than that, so it is from that personal view quite exciting to be participating in this debate.

I would like to start by congratulating Mr Hargreaves for bringing this motion to the attention of the Assembly, especially in Youth Week, and I am glad that there are members of this Assembly who are willing to look at this issue and debate it, because often issues surrounding youth are overlooked. I also want to make it quite clear that I very much agree with the intention of Mr Hargreaves’s motion. However, I have three amendments to this motion to clarify its intention and extend its scope and I seek leave to move the amendments together.

Leave granted.

MS DUNDAS: I move:

(1) Omit paragraph (1), substitute:

“(1) Notes the Australia-wide trend that some younger voters are not currently listed on the electoral role because they have had fewer opportunities to enrol, and that this also applies to the ACT;”

(2) Omit paragraph (2), substitute:

“(2) Calls on the ACT Government to provide the ACT Electoral commission with additional funding, where necessary, so that it can increase its role in encouraging younger voters to enrol, educating young people about the electoral system, and conducting research on the most effective and efficient means to achieve these aims;”

(3) Insert new paragraph (5):

“(5) Calls on the ACT Government to conduct an investigation into possibilities for lowering the voting age in the ACT, including opportunities for consulting young people for their views.”

I was initially concerned at Mr Hargreaves’s motion because it begins by asking us to note with concern that younger voters are sometimes not enrolled to vote. This fact has sometimes been used to argue that young people do not care about politics; that they are not happy with politicians, as Mr Cornwell has put forward; and therefore that their needs are less than those of other citizens. The argument goes that we do not need to pay attention to the voice of young Canberrans because they cannot even be bothered to complete their most basic responsibility of citizenship, which is to participate in the electoral process.

I want to make it quite clear at this point that I am not accusing Mr Hargreaves of any such argument; I know his intentions are the opposite, and I acknowledge his many contributions, through his Assembly and committee work, to the welfare and participation of young people. But why is the enrolment figure lower for younger people? The first and most obvious reason is that they simply have had far less time to get on to the electoral roll. We limit the enrolment age to 17 in Australia and therefore young people cannot enrol to vote until they have reached the age of 17. In contrast, people in, say, their 40s have had a good 20-odd years to get onto the electoral roll, and once a person is on the roll it is quite difficult to get off it again. I am not sure, but it might even be illegal to do so.

There are also other reasons why young people may not have applied to get onto the electoral roll. There is a very real feeling among young people that they are not included in the political processes, especially when they see that our parliaments are still predominantly composed of mature age men who do not represent their views. The young people do not see themselves reflected in their houses of parliament, and that is something that needs to be addressed.

There are important social reasons why young people do not enrol. They change residence far more often than do older people. They are also more likely to be homeless, living in poverty or trying to combine work and study, and they have little opportunity to think about the political environment when they are struggling to make ends meet.

My first amendment goes to the heart of this issue. It simply alters the wording of Mr Hargreaves’s first paragraph to make it clear that we are not blaming young people for the fact that they are underrepresented in the electoral system. There are a whole host of reasons for this situation, with the most obvious being the reduced time they have to get onto the roll. So my amendment calls for us to note the trend of young voters not to be listed on the electoral roll but also puts forward why that has been the case, so we are

not just making that blanket assumption that it is the fault of young people that they are not on the roll.

At 5.00 pm, in accordance with standing order 34, the debate was interrupted. The motion for the adjournment of the Assembly having been put and negatived, the debate was resumed.

MS DUNDAS: I now turn to the second paragraph of Mr Hargreaves's motion. I again wish to congratulate him for turning his mind to possible ways of improving the number of opportunities to remind young people to enrol to vote. However, I am not convinced that his suggestions are the most effective means of doing so. As has already been tabled in this place, the Electoral Commissioner has written to all members to outline the current strategies the commission uses to ensure that young people have adequate opportunities to enrol to vote. The commission uses a variety of data to be able to specifically target young people who have not yet enrolled, including data from Road User Services, the ACT Secondary Schools Board, ActewAGL and the ACT rental bond board. Data is also received from Centrelink and the citizenship authorities. So the commission has the ability to crosscheck potential voters against the electoral roll and target individuals who are not already currently enrolled. It does appear to be the most efficient and effective method of ensuring that the electoral roll is up to date. So I am not sure that the suggestions Mr Hargreaves put forward are the most useful. For example, most people receiving their year 12 results are well past 17, the age when they first become eligible to enrol to vote. It would be more useful to target students turning 17 while they are still at school rather than at a period when they may be considering moving out of home, pursuing study outside the ACT or indeed taking a well-earned break. When you are receiving your year 12 results, you are thinking about your future, about all the opportunities that are being put forward before you, not about enrolling to vote. If we target young people in the classroom at school we will make more of a difference.

Equally, drivers licence applications are filled in by a whole range of people, many of whom are already enrolled to vote. And, contrary to popular opinion, many young people do not immediately apply for a licence at the first opportunity just because they can. With the ever-increasing costs of education, many young people delay learning to drive until they are in a financial position to afford to run a car.

Thirdly, I was not aware that proof of age cards were sent through the mail at all, which is a worrying aspect of Mr Hargreaves's motion. I would be somewhat concerned if we were sending a high-level identification document through the mail. I understood that proof of age cards were picked up in person in a similar way to a drivers licence; that you rocked up to a shopfront. My amendment seeks to clarify those issues. It is intended to express the idea that the Assembly is interested in ensuring that the Electoral Commission has the resources to expand on its educational and enrolment programs where necessary—I repeat “where necessary”.

I draw the Assembly's attention to the fact that additional education and enrolment activities would need to be resourced. Therefore, if they cannot be met within current budgets, there would need to be some funding for them to occur.

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My final amendment adds a new paragraph to call on the government to investigate possibilities for lowering the voting age in the ACT, including an opportunity to allow young people to express their views on the subject. This option is discussed in report No 2 of the Democratic Audit of Australia on Political Equality in Australia, produced by researchers at the Australian National University. I note that Brazil currently allows its citizens to vote from the age of 16 as do some German states. The UK Electoral Commission is currently conducting a policy review to consider whether or not the United Kingdom's minimum voting and candidacy ages should be lowered. Part of its motivation was alarm at the low participation rates of young people in elections. Lowering the voting age is seen as a useful means of increasing the voter participation of young people.

I acknowledge that Ms Tucker has previously raised this issue in the Assembly through a private member's bill in 1996. However, I understand that it was never actually brought to a vote. I think it is high time we went back and reconsidered the issue. We have recently passed the Human Rights Act which states that every citizen has the right and is to have the opportunity to "vote and be elected at periodic elections, that guarantee the free expression of the will of the electors". I note this is actually one of the few parts of the Human Rights Act that uses the word "citizen" as opposed to community members. (*Extension of time granted.*) To be a citizen you need to have the right to vote; it is one of the major parts of being a citizen. So we actually deny young people citizenship in this country.

I think there is a fair argument that cutting off the voting age at 18 is an unnecessary restriction on the participation of young people in their governance and that lowering the voting age is an appropriate way to give effect to section 17 of the Human Rights Act. More importantly, people under 18 can make the decision to work, to drive a car, to move out of home, to join the military, to sign some contracts and to consent to sexual intercourse and they are old enough to be convicted of crimes and to form criminal intent. Why then are they not old enough to vote? The slogan of the American War of Independence was "no taxation without representation". Young people pay taxes to both the territory and federal governments. Why should they not have a say in how that money is then spent?

The arguments against lowering the voting age are predictable. They go along the lines that young people are not mature enough, that they do not show enough interest in the political processes—as Mr Cornwell put forward, that they are not interested or in any way enthralled by politicians—or that they would make the decision on superficial or selfish grounds; black and white, as Mr Cornwell put it. These types of arguments are always put up against any change to the political franchise. Similar arguments were used against women when they fought for the vote and against allowing indigenous people to vote in this country.

The Democrats believe in universal suffrage and there is no good reason to leave young people out of the universal. I hope the rest of the Assembly can see the importance in calling for the government to examine an expansion in the voting franchise. I would like to make it clear that I have not anticipated any outcome with the amendment that I have moved. I have not tried to determine the results of any investigation. The age could be lowered to 15, 16 or 17. Enrolment or voting could be optional; it could be compulsory.

I have not specified any particular model. However, it is crucial that young people themselves are given the opportunity to comment on this issue. Whilst I was technically counted as a young person 12 months ago, I am not now. There are no young people in this Assembly to take part in this debate and to participate in this decision. A process of consultation would be essential to any investigation into this proposal. Lowering the voting age is a way to increase participation in the electoral system and to allow young people a greater say in their community, and I think we can all agree that that is what we are trying to achieve with this debate today. So I again thank Mr Hargreaves for drawing this issue to the attention of the Assembly today and I hope that the Assembly can agree to broaden the scope.

MS TUCKER (5.10): Voting is a basic democratic right, and over time the notion of citizenship in relation to voting rights has gradually expanded. It was not until this century that women could vote in all states and it was not until the 1960s that indigenous people could vote. It was in the 1970s that the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18.

The ACT Electoral Commissioner has confirmed that approximately 78 per cent of eligible Australian citizens in the 18 to 25 age group are enrolled. This figure is complicated by a few factors that members have already mentioned. However, this is widely recognised as something to be concerned about. Work is being done to try and encourage young people to enrol. I think Mr Hargreaves recognises this also.

I understand that Elections ACT has a number of ongoing enrolment programs that target the 18 to 25 age group. These include access data from federal and local departments to target mail-outs and household reviews. I understand that there is a progressive Australia-wide youth electoral study being undertaken at the moment. This study is a four-year longitudinal study with the Australian Electoral Commission and two universities and it sounds as though it will present some very interesting perspectives on why young people do or do not enrol and vote, their attitudes to enrolment and voting and whether there are social and psychological variables that influence participation. I look forward to seeing the results of this study and I understand that in about a month some preliminary results will be released.

One of the issues that the study will address and that Mr Hargreaves's motion also addresses is civics education. I believe that civics education is a critical part of a young person's education. Teaching young people about their rights, active citizenship, parliamentary systems and their role in elections and political life is critical to a person's education. In the ACT a number of schools have taken up the Discovering Democracy program, a Commonwealth funded program that I have witnessed at a couple of primary schools in Canberra. These programs seem to be quite effective in encouraging student understanding of elections, and their role in political processes, by their undertaking Hare-Clark student elections and other projects. These sorts of innovative programs are a good example of ways to encourage an awareness of young people's role in a political system, about how they can participate in the parliamentary system and about some of the decisions that are made in the political system that will affect them. I am happy to support the suggestion that these sorts of programs be introduced more widely into the curriculum in the ACT. Indeed, students should have regular contact with civics education throughout their education, especially closer to the time when they will leave school.

However, I do want to make a comment here. I have spoken at a couple of schools about this over the years and I know that teachers are a little bit concerned when this Assembly jumps up and says they now have to teach something else. I have certainly had that response when I have spoken at schools and to classes at schools about electoral issues. I have spoken to schools on a number of occasions about lowering the voting age; as Ms Dundas said, we have had legislation to lower the voting age. But we need to make sure that we respect the fact that teachers already have a very heavy load in terms of what they are dealing with in curricula. So, while I acknowledge the importance of civics education, I think we have to consult the teachers and the AEU about what this means for their workload.

When considering young people and enrolment, another important issue to think about is who has difficulty in accessing the electoral system. Homeless young people, for example, who have no fixed address can slip through the programs of the Electoral Commission to encourage them to enrol. With no fixed address it is more difficult to enrol. This means that for some young people in Canberra it is difficult to enrol and therefore participate in the electoral system that represents them. It should concern us that homeless people may have reduced rights in terms of participating in civic life in Canberra. I am pleased to support each of Ms Dundas's amendments. I am glad she has added that the ACT government should consider increasing the funding to the commission to enable them to undertake effective programs to encourage younger people to enrol and to educate them about the electoral system.

Ms Dundas's amendment also asks the government to conduct an investigation into the possibility of lowering the voting age in the ACT. I introduced a bill in 1996 that would have lowered the voting age to 16. Unfortunately, there was not support for the bill in 1996. I remember at the time that Young Labor were certainly lobbying the Labor Party to get behind that. But apparently they were not successful. I do not know currently what Young Labor are doing because I have not talked to them more recently about it, but it is fine for the Assembly to be thinking again about who we include as citizens and I am pleased to see that the Democrats have joined us in the push to lower the voting age.

Children and young adults have very few avenues to participate in decisions made by political institutions, despite the fact that children have quite different needs and views from those of older people. Education, youth, recreation, employment and the environment are some of the key issues that young people want to have a greater say in. Young people are also our future; they have good ideas and they should be listened to. They contribute to our society economically in sports and in the arts. If young people are so fundamental to the future of our community, they deserve to have a say. The key principle of democracy is that people affected by rules should be able to participate in changing them. Voting is one of the most fundamental democratic rights and it is time that young people under the age of 18 were included in our political institutions.

When examined in detail, arguments against lowering the voting age are usually not strong at all. We have a competency based argument, which does not apply unless you want to have an elitist system of voting. We all know that initially only landholders could vote. We could look at that issue again, I suppose. On the question of responsibility, some people even argue that if you do not pay tax you should not be able to vote. That is similar to the argument about landholders in a way. That would rule out a

lot of people in our community who are presently able to vote. Basically, all that we are asking this place to do is to consider the issue.

MR HARGREAVES (5.16): I thank members for their support for the principle of what I am trying to do here. I do not support any of Ms Dundas's amendments. Her amendment No 1 changes the focus of what I was trying to achieve here. I was trying to target 18 to 24-year-olds. Other people have got different issues as to why they are not on the roll and all the rest of it, but I wanted to target this age group specifically. Ms Dundas's first amendment refers to people not being on the electoral "role". The spelling is unusual for Ms Dundas, who is usually punctilious with this sort of stuff.

Mr Wood: Had a good education.

MR HARGREAVES: Indeed, almost at university too. The amendment also states that younger people "have had fewer opportunities to enrol". Firstly, fewer opportunities than whom? Secondly, they have heaps of opportunities to enrol. It is not as though they are tied to the kitchen table leg or living out in the scrub somewhere. They have the same opportunities to enrol as a one-legged, left-handed, half-blind dork living out in the scrub somewhere. The opportunities are there. The first paragraph of my motion asks that we just focus on the 18 to 24-year-olds and recognise that they are not taking up the option.

Ms Dundas's amendment No 2 goes to the major reason why I moved this motion in the first place. The Electoral Commission under Phil Green's leadership is going absolutely gangbusters in creating a whole stack of opportunities to tell people, "This is your golden gift, the golden gift of democracy: the right to vote, given to you, one of its citizens, by the community." What we have to address here is why they have not taken up that option. To throw a bucket of money at everything, even were it necessary, is not the way to go. What we need is to have the public engaged. Phil Green and his people have tried their best, along with the schools and a whole stack of other people, to engage the 18 to 24-year-olds to get on the roll. They are doing great stuff. All MLAs received an email from the Electoral Commissioner in the last 24 hours in which he quite clearly laid out what he has been doing, and he needs to be congratulated.

We need to work out why people are not engaging with Phil Green and the schools. One of the ways we can work this out is for me to enrage Ms Dundas so that she goes feral out there in the community, puts herself up there as the champion of the young person, and draws attention to the fact. If we can achieve that—wonderful. The whole idea of this motion is to put the debate into the public arena and it would appear, by some emotions anyhow, that we have been somewhat successful.

I understand the sentiments of Ms Dundas's suggested paragraph 5, but we might think about it some other time. Now is not the time for us to confuse the issue about engaging people. We cannot get the 18 to 24-year-olds to enrol. Why do you want to treble the number? Then there are the consequential issues of this. At 18 you can enrol to vote. At 18 you reach the age of so-called majority. On top of that, at 18 you can come into this place if you can get enough votes. If we drop the age to vote down to 15, do we then give 15-year-olds the opportunity to become members of the Legislative Assembly? Do not answer that question, members; I just leave it for your fertile imagination. Now is not the time to do that. Let us not blur the issue. This is all about putting out in the public

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domain to the 18 to 24-year-olds that we need them to enrol, that they are an integral part of our community: “Come and join us and exercise your right.”

As Mr Stefaniak put it, and I have heard him say it in this place before, people are dying overseas in wars to try to get the right to do what we are taking somewhat for granted. I have said that in this place before. We need to tell people out there what this is all about. This is a golden right; this is something that is to be cherished and nurtured. Let us put it out there in the public arena; but let us not grey up or blur the issue by talking about dropping the age. I am going to sit down now. I will vote against Ms Dundas’s amendments but I thank her very much for her passion.

Ordered that the amendments be divided.

Question put:

That amendment No 1 be agreed to.

Question resolved in the negative.

Question put:

That amendment No 2 be agreed to.

Question resolved in the negative.

Question put:

That amendment No 3 be agreed to.

Question resolved in the negative.

MRS CROSS (5.23): Mr Speaker, I seek leave to move two amendments together.

Leave granted.

MRS CROSS: I move:

- (1) Paragraph (2), after “examine”, insert “further”.
- (2) Paragraph (2), add “and acknowledges the initiatives the Electoral Commission currently has in place to address this matter;”.

I would like to commend Mr Hargreaves on the intention of his motion. It is a good motion, but I am just a little concerned with paragraph 2 because it implies that the ACT Electoral Commission is not doing anything to examine ways to encourage young people to enrol to vote. I have been given a document by the Electoral Commissioner himself, who has graced us with his presence in the chamber today, indicating a number of initiatives that the ACT Electoral Commission is progressing with to encourage young people to vote. I am not going to read them, because my colleague Mr Stefaniak has already covered these initiatives, but it is very important that we acknowledge the fact that the Electoral Commission is doing something—in fact, more than just something; it

is doing quite a bit. So my first amendment adds the word “further” after “examine”, to show that in fact there is existing work being done; the second amendment adds the words “and acknowledges the initiatives the Electoral Commission currently has in place to address this matter”. With that amendment, I think Mr Hargreaves’s motion is complete.

MR HARGREAVES (5.25): Those amendments are acceptable to the mover of the motion, Mr Speaker.

MR STEFANIAK (5.25): And to us.

Amendments agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Leave of absence

Motion (by **Mr Wood**) agreed to:

That leave of absence be given to Ms Gallagher (Minister for Education, Youth and Family Services) for today, 31 March 2004.

Residential Tenancies (Assisted Tenants) Amendment Bill 2003

Debate resumed from 10 December 2003, on motion by **Mrs Burke**.

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Wood**) adjourned to the next sitting.

Pharmacy Amendment Bill 2004

Mrs Cross, pursuant to notice, presented the bill and its explanatory statement.

Title read by Clerk.

MRS CROSS (5.27): I move:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

I present the Pharmacy Amendment Bill 2004, a bill to amend the Pharmacy Act 1931. The purpose of this bill is to ensure that pharmacies in the ACT are owned and operated by registered pharmacists, as is the current legislative requirement. Currently, the Pharmacy Act restricts the ownership and control of pharmacies to registered pharmacists or companies controlled by registered pharmacists. These provisions are laid out clearly in sections 9A, 42, 48 and 48A of the Pharmacy Act.

If pharmacists were allowed to operate as sublessees, this would create doubt as to who was actually controlling the pharmacy. Indeed, it would be naive to assume that a sublessee would not be subjected to influence by the lessor. This is the point of the

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matter. Clarification is needed within the legislation to ensure that pharmacists are the only controllers and operators of pharmacies. I believe this bill does that.

The primary intention of this bill is to ensure that healthcare remains the chief focus of pharmacists and that the professionalism of pharmacists conforms with the highest standards. This is done by ensuring pharmacists are properly qualified, are accountable to the supervisory board and are required to own, operate and be responsible for their own pharmacies. Thus the role of pharmacies in society is different from other retailers and service providers because pharmacists are not just sellers of medicine, drugs and medicinal medical supplies. They are not just retailers like butchers or greengrocers or bakers.

Pharmacists are often the first point of health advice for many in our community. Pharmacists often act as de facto doctors and nurses, patching up cuts and abrasions, providing basic advice and making medical recommendations. Pharmacists understand the history of their clientele and are best equipped to provide the best combination of drugs and medicine that will improve the individual's overall health. Pharmacists also provide a number of community based healthcare programs such as the methadone program that provides significant benefits to the community.

In sum, pharmacists combine the roles of health supply retailer and primary health care provider and adviser and monitor. Pharmacists must also make judgments about what medicines and drugs to supply—decisions that have significant ramifications for the clientele of the pharmacy. The annexation of such judgments to a supermarket or some outside party would have a definite and most certainly negative effect on the community.

It must be acknowledged that the profession of pharmacy is unique, as are the outlets from which the pharmacists operate. This uniqueness came about not as a matter of professional preference or an idiosyncrasy in the legislative framework within which pharmacies operate but out of necessity—out of the necessity to ensure only qualified and responsible people dispense these potentially lethal medicines and drugs; the necessity to ensure that only the most qualified people are in charge of healthcare in our community; and the necessity to ensure that the health of our community is placed in the hands of professionals whose priority is healthcare, not professionals whose priority is profit.

It is, therefore, quite plain that the intention of the bill is to have pharmacists in full control of the ownership and operation of pharmacies. Any attempt to remove total responsibility away from the pharmacists through clouding the issue of ownership and operation of pharmacies will no doubt create a greater danger in our community where drugs and medicines could or will be distributed by unqualified people and where medical supplies and medicine varieties will be severely limited based on economic considerations.

This amendment bill is necessary because a loophole exists in the current legislation that would permit a pharmacist to operate as a sublessee, and this would create confusion about who actually operates the pharmacy. This loophole has led to a case where a supermarket and a pharmacist attempted to negotiate terms where the pharmacist would operate as a sublessee of the supermarket. This is a clear breach of the intention of the Pharmacy Act, even if not of its wording as it stands at present. Prohibiting a pharmacist

from running a pharmacy as a sublessee will not affect any pharmacist operating out of a shopping centre; rather, it will stop pharmacists operating as sublessees of other businesses such as supermarkets. I commend this bill to the Assembly.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Smyth**) adjourned to the next sitting.

Adjournment

Motion (by **Mr Wood**) proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

Mr Brian O'Reilly—retirement

MR BERRY (5.32): I would like to let the Assembly know that today is Brian O'Reilly's last day as secretary of the plumbers union in the ACT. He has served the union movement in the construction industry for 32 years. Appropriately, he will be taking his long service leave from tomorrow onwards. Brian is married to Ann; he has three children and four grandchildren and I think in the future he will be taking a closer interest in his family and his other interests such as golf and fishing.

Brian emigrated from England with his wife and their first child in 1963. He joined the plumbers union in 1964 and worked on construction in the ACT and surrounding areas. Whilst working on the construction of the Woden Valley Hospital, Brian was encouraged by his fellow workers to start part-time organising as an official of the Plumbers, Drainers and Gasfitters Employees Union of Australia.

In 1972 Brian became a full-time official of the union and has vigorously served workers in the construction industry and government for the past 32 years. Brian's achievements for better pay and conditions for his members are well recognised, along with those routine pay struggles which have gone on throughout industry over many years. In 1981 he had the vision and foresight to help establish the ACT Construction Industry Long Service Leave Board which had their first meeting on 1 October 1981 and this provided of course, as members well know, an administrative body to manage the assets for employees in the construction industry and, later on, the cleaning industry. Brian has, of course, provided me with a great deal of assistance in putting together legislation to establish the contract cleaning industry fund, which was established here during the period of the former government. His wisdom on these matters is well known. He has been associated with the construction industry board since its beginning. I do recall Brian's strong commitment to these particular benefits over many years when I served with Brian on the local Labor Council, and I have come to regard Brian as a loyal friend.

Brian also provided me with some sound advice in relation to the Long Service Leave (Private Sector) Bill, which is before this house. I know that he would be disappointed that this did not come to fruition before he retired because for over 20 years he has been a strong advocate for these schemes and he has seen the success of them at first hand. For example, none of the members of the scheme that he became so closely associated with could lose their entitlements in the way that those involved in the Ansett collapse did.

Brian was a foundation member of the newly-formed Plumbers, Drainers, and Gasfitters Licensing Board and he still serves on the board as chairman, protecting the plumbing industry. In 1983 and 1984 Brian helped the Construction Building Union Superannuation Scheme, the CBUS scheme as it is called, to form in the ACT, ensuring workers' savings were protected for retirement. He was instrumental in the development of training schemes for apprentices in the construction industry. He is a member of ANZRA, the Australia and New Zealand Reciprocity Association, which organises plumbing credentials between New Zealand and Australia. He has been national president of the Communications, Electrical, Electronic, Energy, Information, Postal, Plumbing and Allied services Union, plumbing division, for five years. He was a founding member of the building trades group, which provides support for building workers in the region, and is still a current member. He was involved with the Construction Industry Training and Employment Association, CITEA, to assist apprentices in the development of trade skills, and he is a plumbing school board member at the CIT. He has been a member of the Trades and Labour Council for some 30 years and has organised the picnic day golf event for about 20 years. So good luck in your retirement, Brian.

Mental health

MR SMYTH (Leader of the Opposition) (5.37): Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise to comment on things that Mr Corbell said in question time today. He reaffirmed his previous claim that spending on mental health was \$67 per capita when this government came to office. He got this figure from the national mental health report 2002, but he failed to make it clear to the Assembly that the figure referred to the 1999-2000 year, not the year of the change of government. In fact, the budget in force in November 2001 estimated that the spending would be \$82 per capita and the actual result for that year seems to have been around \$87 per capita, showing the ongoing large increases in funding for mental health under the previous government.

The minister also failed today to address the issue I raised in question time that the current budget's much larger figure of \$117 per capita is based on adding in administration and policy-making costs which were not included in the past years. In fact, it appears that this government has increased mental health funding by around \$10 per head over its two budgets. On this basis, the comparable level of funding in the year the government changed must therefore have been around \$107, not \$67. So the minister is clearly using different figures in a way that vastly exaggerates the growth in mental health funding during this government. I hope the minister will have the courage to admit his error and correct the record on this matter.

Today the National Mental Health Council called for all state and territory governments to increase the mental health share of their health budgets by 1 per cent each year until it rises from the current 7 per cent, which is the average, to 12 per cent, which is exactly what the Canberra Liberals are proposing to do. So the policy of the National Mental Health Council is very similar in its effect to the policy that I announced a few days ago and which the Minister for Health has ridiculed. I hope the minister can read the National Mental Health Council documents because what he is saying also ridicules what they are seeking to achieve.

For the record, it is about \$35 million a year now and about 7 per cent, so a 1 per cent increase would be \$5 million. Under our policy it will go up \$5 million a year. So it will be \$40 million next year, \$45 million the year after that, \$50 million and then \$55 million. The total effect is \$50 million extra for mental health over the next four years. I sincerely hope the government will join the opposition in supporting increases in mental health spending to dwarf the efforts of past governments, both Liberal and Labor.

Anti-Semitism

MR STEFANIAK (5.40): Mr Speaker, 21 March was International Harmony Day. I was going through the emails today and saw a very good debate in the Senate initiated by Queensland Senator Brett Mason and Labor Senator Stephens from New South Wales.

Mr Wood: Just tell us the page and I can read it.

MR STEFANIAK: No, I am not going to just tell you the page, Minister. It was a debate about anti-Semitism—

Mr Wood: Are you going to table it or read the whole damn lot?

MR STEFANIAK: You are pathetic, Bill. I will actually paraphrase a little bit; I am not going to quote much of it. The debate was unanimous, but some speeches were certainly better than others. There were some rather startling statistics, even in terms of what is happening in Australia.

Senator Stephens indicated that, although we pride ourselves on our harmony and religious freedoms here, there is an alarming rise in the incidence of violence and anti-Semitic acts. He stated that there were 36 reports of physical violence and property damage, 58 reports of face-to-face harassment and 23 incidents of threatening and abusive phone calls. He spoke of a number of other incidents, including swastikas burnt into the ground with weedkiller, the smashing of windows in synagogues and physical attacks on individuals.

He said this offensive behaviour in Australia took place against a backdrop of massive increases in reports of harassment and attacks on Jews in Western Europe. Senator Mason also referred to those in his speech. One of those attacks involved a soccer match in Belgium where people were waving Hamas and Hizbollah banners and chanting, "Jews to the gas chamber!" A woman was attacked in Switzerland because she was wearing a small Star of David necklace, and in France there have been so many attacks on Jews in recent months that the Chief Rabbi urged religious boys and men to wear baseball caps in public instead of yarmulkes. Those countries, incidentally, Mr Wood, all have bills of rights. I make the comment: so much for bills of rights protecting people.

Senator Mason made a very telling point. He quoted Pastor Martin Niemoller. For those of you who have not heard of him, he was a famous German anti-Nazi activist—a Lutheran—and his words ring true once again. Senator Mason quoted:

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then Senator Mason said—in his words, not Pastor Niemoller's:

The last time we did not speak out—the last time that Europe allowed itself to freely demonise and dehumanise its Jewish population—was a prelude to the Holocaust. Sadly, today there still exists a significant constituency which wants to see Israel wiped off the map.

I have read some very disturbing facts in relation to anti-Semitism in France and rising anti-Semitism in Germany. I find rising anti-Semitism in Germany an abomination. That country has got much to answer for in what it did in World War II, to the Jews but also to a large number of others, such as Slavs.

Those are very disturbing details indeed, but I was particularly concerned to see the increase in Australia when we pride ourselves on tolerance and community harmony. I hope most people here respect the right of Israel to exist within secure boundaries and the right of its people to go about their business without the threat of being pushed into the sea and being exterminated.

There are a lot of moderate people in Israel and, indeed, in the Arab world who basically want to get on together. I do not think anti-Semitism helps one jot, and it is disturbing to see it on the rise in Europe in recent times. There is another quote from the French Ambassador to London, who made disparaging comments about Jewish people. All in all, that is very disturbing.

Anti-Semitism is a great scourge. It is one of the worst forms of racism, given the damage that was done to the Jewish people over many years, culminating in the Holocaust, and it is most disturbing to see it on the rise again. I hope that at least in Australia next year we will see a diminution of these gross and offensive attacks. I hope everyone in this Assembly condemns anti-Semitic acts, just as I do here today. I thank my friend Senator Brett Mason, with whom I had the pleasure of working in the DPP, for being a co-sponsor of this motion, together with his New South Wales Labor colleague Senator Stephens.

Anti-Semitism **Senator Ursula Stephens**

MS MacDONALD (5.45): I thank Mr Stefaniak for bringing that motion of Senator Mason and Senator Stephens to the attention of the Assembly. Any rise in racist behaviour in Australia is a grave concern, which is why Harmony Day is so important. The main reason I wanted to rise was that, as a very good friend of Senator Ursula Stephens, I want to point out that Senator Ursula Stephens is actually a woman. I am sure that she would like everybody to know that she is a woman and that she is very concerned about the rise of anti-Semitism and racism in Australia and would like to see harmony and tolerance prevail within the country.

Ms Tracey Lianos **Bushfires—land management**

MR PRATT (5.46): I rise to pick up on two issues. First of all, I want to congratulate

my senior adviser Tracey Lianos, who was married on Saturday to the indefatigable—and he will have to be—Matt. She was quite beautifully presented and, if you had seen the sweet Marilyn Monroe silver-blond curls, you would have been mightily impressed, given what we normally see around here, which is the out-of-control, spiky, blond, angry bush. She presented quite well.

Since Tracey has been in my office, she has been a real powerhouse and she has turned my chaotic operation into something almost effective and normal. Along with the quiet-as-a-mouse but solid anchor, Skye, who works in my office, and the other dynamo who sorts me out, Diana Bryant, Tracey has served my cause and that of the opposition well. We MLAs depend mightily on our staff. I wish Tracey and Matt a long and happy marriage.

The other point I want to raise is that I had a nice little trip last week out on the other side of the Cotter to have a look at the western approaches to Canberra—that track followed by the fire. I went with Robert Campbell and Robert Tanner.

MR DEPUTY SPEAKER: Take any photographs?

MR PRATT: I did indeed. The families of those two gentlemen have been here since Canberra first began, so they are very experienced in land management. They really wanted to show me the state of the country, and they showed me two very different results. We were able to observe on the western banks of the Cotter the fact that the country had been burnt to the soil because there had not been sufficient fuel reduction management. The fire was so intense that it burned straight to the soil.

Both Roberts said to me that on the adjacent properties in that area there is no wildlife any more; the habitats have been totally burnt out. There is not even any bird life. Apparently, the birds are quite territorial and very fussy about where they go. So, when the fires were on, they flew back into the smoke and perished. In those 10 square kilometres that we were looking at we could not see a living thing. Indeed, weeds have taken over because weeds will thrive on that burnt to the soil level destruction but grass will not.

Yet on the eastern banks of the Cotter we were able to look across and see Tanner's property where, because he was grazing all the time, there has been a good rebirth of growth. When you travel to that side you do see bird life and you do see the habitats of animals. These two gentlemen were quietly angry about what had happened, and they wanted to point this out. It was a very instructive tour, to make those comparisons. I thank them both for opening my eyes to the problems we now have to deal with.

Gungahlin Drive extension

MS TUCKER (5.50): Yesterday in question time I asked the Chief Minister a question regarding the consultation process on the Gungahlin Drive extension. I asked him whether there had been a request for feedback from the Natural Resource Management Committee or the Flora and Fauna Committee. In his answer Mr Stanhope explained that he had received a letter that day from those two committees, which he said he assumed I had.

I want to put on the record that I did not know that he had received a letter from those two groups. I want to make that clear because the implication Mr Stanhope was making was that they had sent me a copy. I want it to be clear that in fact that was not the case. I think it would be quite compromising for them if that were thought to be the case. I just want to make it quite clear that that was not the case; I did not know that a letter had been sent at all until Mr Stanhope told me.

Youth information referral resource service

MRS BURKE (5.51): I would like to praise the efforts of two very committed and passionate women in our community. I have mentioned them in a previous debate today but I think it is worth expanding a little more on what they do. Tanya Keed and Christine Darcy are working very hard at this time to secure services to assist young people between the ages of 12 and 21 who may be in crisis and at risk from homelessness, domestic violence and family breakdown. They manage and operate—on, I have to say, a shoestring budget, using their own money and resources—the youth information referral resource service, a service based in the ACT.

Whilst both Tanya and Christine are Aboriginal, their purpose is to provide a service not solely to the indigenous community but to all Canberra's youth in need—a very commendable project and worthy of support. They are currently desperately seeking funding to continue the service, and I know that they have made submissions to the government to try and get some money to make sure that this valuable service continues.

It just seems to have snowballed. Word gets around very quickly amongst street children; they soon know who is on their side and who is not. These women are up at all hours of the day and night—and they are trying to hold down jobs as well—to make sure that young people in our city are not left vulnerable. We talked about that earlier in a debate today about the youth night shelter, which Ms Dundas brought up.

The youth information referral resource service would be based in the ACT and would be utilised by people in the ACT and surrounding area. It would take referrals from government and non-government organisations to assist youth in crisis and youth at risk from homelessness, domestic violence and family breakdown for whatever reasons. They would have contact with organisations within the ACT and surrounding area and have access to ongoing programs to assist young people between the ages of 12 and 21 and engage them back into the community.

The commendable part of this program is that it is not simply throwing money at young people; it is making them be responsible in part for their own actions and helping them to reintegrate with society and the community. We need to look very carefully when we fund programs that we are not just funding a program for the program's sake. But I think we should give the service the support that they need because they realise that young people have to be a part of the solution.

It is not good enough to say, "We'll pander to your every whim." These women are making young people responsible by teaching them things like basic living skills, personal hygiene, safe sex, healthy relationships and housing options to combat homelessness. They are putting them through self-esteem courses and helping them with

legal matters, domestic violence and nutrition. They are giving them the support they need with information about Centrelink, or other avenues of support funding, budgeting, drugs and alcohol education, family support, transport, anger management and so on.

There would also be a referral service, and access would be via a youth crisis line between 6 pm and 12 pm Monday to Friday. I have talked about that too and talked with them about my suggestion for a 24-hour Canberra-based crisis line to integrate all the great organisations that we have—20 of them in Canberra at the moment—which are fairly fractured and disparate. Often in a time of crisis people do not know whom to ring, so one number for young people to remember would be helpful.

The service will also develop an initiative to address crime prevention in youth gangs in the ACT by outreaching within the community to support workers from 6 pm to 3 am, Monday to Sunday, together with on-call support outside these hours if needed. They will work in conjunction with the youth crisis line.

It is also worthy of note that the Youth Coalition very strongly supports what these women are trying to achieve. I ask other members to try to help these people. I am speaking in particular to the Treasurer, if he is approached to help, and I ask the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Ms Gallagher, to look carefully at this proposal too. I think there are some good solutions to problems that face young people today.

The Assembly adjourned at 5.56 pm.