



Debates

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Wednesday, 14 March 2007

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.

Emergency Services Agency—structure

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (10.31): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes:

(a) that this is the third restructure of the emergency services organisation since January 2003;

(b) the restructure has been rejected by:

(i) the Volunteer Brigades Association; and

(ii) many professional officers in other services;

(c) the restructure has been soundly condemned by many volunteers; and

(d) since becoming the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, Mr Corbell has lost seven senior officers across the emergency services; and

(2) rejects the new structure of the Emergency Services Agency and calls on the Government to immediately re-establish a statutory authority as recommended by the McLeod Inquiry and reaffirmed by Coroner Doogan in her recommendations, so as to streamline the chain of command and ministerial oversight.

Mr Speaker, I stand today deeply concerned about the restructuring of the Emergency Services Agency and the state of the emergency services in general, and, along with my colleagues in the opposition, dismayed at the way that events have taken the turn that they have which will deeply impact on the effectiveness of emergency management capability in the ACT.

The restructuring last week of the Emergency Services Agency has caused great consternation across our services, both within the ranks of volunteers and within the ranks of professional officers. I will speak more about that later. I assure this place that this consternation is widespread. The opposition has had a good hard look at this matter and is absolutely convinced that the consternation expressed within the ranks of volunteer and professional units, brigades and headquarters staff across our emergency services is deep, convincing and absolutely honestly portrayed.

It is because of that feedback, as well as our own assessment, that we know, on the basis of what we have been looking at over the last 3½ years, that a retrograde step

has been taken by the government in restructuring the emergency services. I will talk in more detail about that as we go through the morning. I want to go back, though, as a basis for the case that the opposition is presenting here today, to some of the history which is so important to underpinning the debate that we must have in this place. I go back to the Emergency Services Bureau failures of January 2003.

Mr Speaker, I would remind this place that we have a shed full of information and evidence presented by a number of inquiries in the last three years and 11 months; in fact, going back even further to the 109 recommendations put forward on the back of the December 2001 bushfires following an inquiry internally undertaken by the Emergency Services Bureau and the department of justice as to the organisational failings of the Emergency Services Bureau.

I will list the concerns, commencing with the January 2003 fires. There was clearly a lack of will to tackle the fires quickly on 8 January, and that was down to organisation. That was down to a lack of clarity in command within the services. The left hand and the right hand clearly did not know what was going on. Consequently, there was not the professional will to get the job done quickly, and the three fires at Bendora, Stockyard and Gingera simply were not tackled quickly on 8 January.

We now know that the Emergency Services Bureau bureaucracy which was integrated within the department of justice at that time was cumbersome. There were certainly too many chiefs, to borrow a term used by the minister in recent times. There were certainly too many chiefs and people simply got in each other's road. Where professional assessments and risk analysis were undertaken as to what was evolving during the January 2003 fires, people confused each other. Whilst we have been very critical of ministers in this place about what happened then, it could very well be, and it is our belief, that part of the contribution to that problem was that ministers were probably getting conflicting advice from too many chiefs.

We now know that there was great failure to assess the evolving disaster. We now know that the Emergency Services Bureau simply was not structured then to do a risk analysis of what was looming on the western, south-western and north-western horizons of the ACT. Mr Speaker, I refer you to Joe Benton's May 2003 audit report, which was presented in this place and which, very sadly, the Chief Minister decried at that time. He absolutely talked down Joe Benton's audit report. Of course, Joe Benton has now been well and truly vindicated in terms of what McLeod was to find and what Doogan has finally found about what was then a "dysfunctional Emergency Services Bureau".

Mr Speaker, the last point I would make in looking back at history is that we now know that the Emergency Services Bureau, in all of its glory, was simply dysfunctional and unable to carry out preventative planning in 2002. We now know—in fact, this place knew it then, because we debated this matter in November 2002—that the macro weather condition of 2002 was very dangerous, coming on the back of 10 years of continual drought leading up to 2002.

We knew then that the drought index was severe. We knew then that the bushfire index was severe. As I recall, the bushfire index was something like 1.4, highly dangerous. But the Emergency Services Bureau was unable to pull those factors

together and perhaps properly advise the government of this territory. Let's be fair: perhaps at the time Minister Wood and Chief Minister Stanhope simply were not getting the best advice that they should have been getting because the Emergency Services Bureau simply was not organised and structured or did not have the professional will to get to the nub of what were problems.

Going on, the McLeod inquiry later in 2003 highlighted all of the issues that I have just gone through. What was the McLeod inquiry's major recommendation? Its major recommendation was that an emergency services authority needed to be created out of the ashes of the failed Emergency Services Bureau. One of the major recommendations of the McLeod inquiry was that there was a screaming need for an independent statutory authority. That is what McLeod said at the time. He said that there was need for a more responsive and uncluttered chain of command within the emergency services organisations.

He pointed out that there needed to be clearer lines of ministerial oversight between the minister and the heads of the services. So he was not concerned simply that there be closer ministerial oversight of the heads of the emergency services organisations and the then department of justice in terms of its role in emergency management. McLeod really indicated that there needed to be a shorter chain of command, a much closer ministerial oversight of the heads of the emergency services, the heads of the rural fire service, the fire brigade, the ambulance service and what were then called the emergency services, which we now know to be the ACT SES. It came out of the McLeod inquiry that there was an urgent need for these reforms to be undertaken.

In October 2003, the opposition called for those recommendations to be implemented. In fact, we put forward in this place draft legislation seeking to have the emergency services streamlined. I must say that in May 2004 we did finally see Minister Wood implement what was a pretty good and workable act, the Emergencies Act 2004, and Minister Wood did introduce the Emergency Services Authority as an independent authority which was going to be able to meet the needs of the ACT community in providing better protection for all forms of emergency risk.

We supported that, Mr Speaker. The opposition wholeheartedly supported the government's Emergencies Bill in 2004. We certainly supported the structure that Bill Wood came out and put on the table here. We now know that, unfortunately, through 2004, 2005 and 2006 the Emergency Services Authority was suffering severe financial and administrative management concerns. We know that there was a waste of funds on the part of the ESA. So, even though we had this stand-alone, independent authority, we now know that they were mismanaging their finances and we now know that they were mismanaging their projects. We now know that implementation of the communications programs was very slow and we now know that the relocation of the ESA headquarters was bungled. We now know that there was a waste of funding in the relocation exercise. We now know that the agencies are split. The ESA's headquarters, in effective terms, is also split.

Minister Hargreaves, the minister at the time, and Minister Corbell, the minister after him, were right to be concerned about this mismanagement and they were right in undertaking reforms to try to tighten those procedures and make the Emergency Services Authority more accountable but, unfortunately, what we saw after June 2006

was the minister going much too far in this regard. To subsume the independent Emergency Services Authority in the JACS department was overkill, ensuring that the bean counters in the department got their way. Unfortunately, we had the minister being snowed in 2006 by the bureaucracy, by the bean counters, who were pretty jealous, by the way, of Peter Dunn's independent powers.

We have been critical in this place of Peter Dunn's financial and project management of the ESA, but we acknowledge that Peter Dunn went a long way in pulling the Emergency Services Authority and the emergency services agencies into what were operationally quite responsive outfits. We think that Peter Dunn went a long way, at least on the operational side, in improving matters. That rested on the independence of the emergency services to stand aside from the JACS department, to stand aside from the bureaucracy, and be able to operate.

There is no doubt that Peter Dunn did achieve those objectives which were laid down by McLeod and which have been endorsed by Doogan in recent times as to the importance of the Emergency Services Authority standing away from the department of justice, away from an arrangement which we know failed in January 2003 in terms of the failure of the Emergency Services Bureau to serve this community and to protect this community.

But what has happened, Mr Speaker? Last week, the government took a retrograde step further on the back of its decision last year to pull in bureaucratic controls by subsuming the ESA in JACS, back into the same failed arrangements. I do not buy the minister's argument that it does not matter because the Emergencies Act still gives powers and authority to the officers in the organisation. I do not buy that, Mr Speaker. If the commissioner for the Emergency Services Agency and the chief officers of the services do not have primary control over their resources and their administration, they do not have the freedom to move and they do not have the authority to lay down quickly what must be done to protect this community in terms of preventative planning, which is mostly what they have to do.

It is too late when the balloon goes up because they do not have control of their resources. They have some damn bean counters telling them whether they can go to the Q store and pick up three chainsaws, rather than being able to make fundamental operational decisions and get resources to the front line. That is what McLeod had recognised and that is what Doogan recognised, but that is what this government does not recognise. That is why our volunteers are absolutely beside themselves at what has happened. They recognise that this restructure has been a disaster.

Mr Speaker, we have heard the minister say in this place that it does not matter what Val Jeffery thinks about the restructure because, I think the minister has said, he does not have the experience in terms of corporate planning or restructuring. That is just bunkum and that is just a whack in the face for the volunteers of the ACT. Val Jeffery has been the president of the bushfire council for 12 years. For decades, he has been a bushfire fireman. For many years he has been a captain and from time to time he still represents some of the captains in the meetings that they have with ministers.

These people know bushfires in the ACT region, they know what the organisation needs to look like to meet the structures, and they know what the emergency services

authority over the top of the service agencies needs and how it has to be structured. We have seen David Prince voting with his feet. He is disgusted with the restructure. So are the professionals. So are the volunteers. Mr Speaker, we call upon the government to reverse its decision. (*Time expired.*)

MR CORBELL (Molonglo—Attorney-General, Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Planning) (10.46): Mr Speaker, the government will not be supporting this motion by Mr Pratt this morning. I would like to start by quoting directly from Mr Pratt's comments on ABC radio last Friday morning when he said:

I'm prepared to let it ... let's have a look to see how it goes.

He left it for four or five days to see how the restructure would go. Today, he is in here rejecting it.

Let me once again examine what is under discussion here today. Recommendation 7 of the report of Coroner Doogan recommends the re-establishment of a statutory authority for emergency services. Members of the opposition have expressed their support for this recommendation on the basis that it is essential to the operational independence of the ESA. The government does not agree with this view. Indeed, this view is simply incorrect.

The opposition misunderstood the position last year and it continues to insist on misunderstanding it now. That is why the government will be moving to amend Mr Pratt's motion. The opposition simply fails to acknowledge the facts as they are presented and continues to use its own misinformation to generate disquiet in our community about the status of emergency management in the ACT.

The simple facts bear repeating. The government moved the Emergency Services Authority back into the Department of Justice and Community Safety last year to reduce the duplication of administrative functions and to improve financial management. The operational independence of the ESA remains. The commissioner and the newly created deputy commissioners will have a direct line to me as minister on any matter, even within the justice portfolio.

The agency simply does not need to be a stand-alone authority to maintain its operational independence. Its membership of the department will add to the effective management of its financial and administrative requirements. The ESA's operational independence is enshrined in the Emergencies Act. It is made clear that the commissioner and other officers have statutory powers. Those statutory powers and responsibilities remain and there is no intention to change those statutory powers.

The Department of Justice and Community Safety does not and cannot, according to law, interfere with the response to emergency incidents in the ACT. The chief executive of the department has no powers on operational matters. The Emergencies Act confers those powers on the chief officers of the ESA, and emergency incidents in the ACT continue to be run entirely by the ESA, as was the case with the recent storm incident that resulted in significant damage to inner Canberra.

Mr Speaker, the government will not agree to the reconstitution of the ESA as a statutory authority because it is not necessary and it is not financially responsible. The government has agreed to implement, fully or partially, 61 of the 73 recommendations made by Coroner Doogan. Of those, 51 have already been fully or partially implemented.

The ESA's new three-year business plan which I, along with the commissioner, released recently details the direction the agency will be taking to improve its operational effectiveness and highlights the key priorities for the next three years. In conjunction with the plan, two deputy commissioner positions have been created. One deputy will oversee the ambulance service and a range of other functions, while the other will oversee the fire brigade, the rural fire service and the SES, together with some other functions.

The opposition, rather mischievously and, I would argue, downright deliberately, puts it about that this introduces another layer of bureaucracy between emergency officers and the minister. This assertion is simply untrue. A deputy commissioner will be, in effect, the chief officer for one or more of the services and, with the commissioner, will have direct access to the minister. The commissioner has direct and immediate access to me on operational matters. When I put that to Mr Pratt in our radio interview last week, he had to acknowledge that the commissioner does indeed have unfettered access to the minister. The reason he had to do that is that the facts speak for themselves.

I have met with the commissioner on at least 15 occasions since about the middle of last year—more than twice a month, on average. In addition to that, I have had regular meetings with chief officers over that period on at least three or four individual occasions each. It is simply not tenable, and there is no evidence to back it, to claim that the commissioner and the chief officers are unable to meet with me as the minister and put matters directly to me.

As I have said in question time and as I have said in other forums, there are other mechanisms also in place to ensure that the operational chiefs of our emergency services can report directly to the minister and advise the minister directly on a range of matters. For example, I have put in place new governance arrangements and have established the ESA governance committee. The governance committee meets quarterly and is composed of my chief executive, the commissioner and the four chief officers. It is a formal and direct opportunity every quarter for the heads of the four services and the commissioner to put to me directly their views, concerns, needs and requirements. It is an effective forum. It has met once already and a second meeting will be convened shortly. So to suggest that the minister is not getting the advice he needs is simply untrue, and to suggest that the commissioner and the chief officers are unable to meet with me and are stifled by bureaucracy is also untrue.

I would like to add to this by reflecting on the role of the bushfire council. When I became minister, I made a formal reference to the bushfire council asking them to report to me every year before the commencement of the bushfire season on bushfire preparedness, capacity and response so that they, as the independent experts, appointed by the government and with independence to express their views directly to

me, could put to me, as minister, their views and advice on bushfire preparedness. The bushfire council have welcomed that request and provided me with their first report just prior to the commencement of the fire season last year. Further, as members would know, the government has requested the bushfire council to oversee implementation of recommendations in relation to the coroner's report.

Mr Speaker, the bushfire council is also independent. Its members are statutory appointments. They are appointed by the minister and they have certain statutory roles which are respected and enshrined in legislation. So any suggestion that there is a lack of independent and expert advice coming to the government from those familiar with the operational needs and requirements of our emergency services is simply not backed up by the facts.

I am aware that, following the announcement of the new ESA structure last week, volunteer groups have been voicing their opinions on it. They have raised concerns at their perception of a loss of autonomy of the RFS and a lack of support within the broader bureaucracy for volunteers. They have also expressed their disquiet about the layers of reporting lines between the volunteers and the minister. I can assure them that there will be no loss of autonomy of any of the services. Each will be overseen by a separate operational command. Further, under the new structure there will be no change in the support for volunteers. Indeed, the intention through the restructure is to enable more resources to be devoted to support for volunteers, training and equipment, because management of the services will be more cohesive under the guidance of a deputy commissioner with broader objectives and responsibilities.

I understand that the VBA has yet to provide its consolidated comments to the commissioner on the restructure. I think that it is appropriate for me to await those comments before discussing its position further. The government supports the future direction of the ESA that has been put together and outlined by our commissioner. Let's remember that this restructure is on the advice of the commissioner, the independent chief of the emergency services. It is his structure, he has put it together, he has proposed it and I am endorsing it.

Mr Smyth: You did not drive it?

MR CORBELL: No, I did not drive it; the commissioner did. Again, the opposition's argument falls down. The opposition fails to recognise and fails to support the independent head, the operational head, of the ESA who is making decisions about the best possible management of the organisation. We welcome the new direction because we are committed to placing the weight of emergency service resources on the front line, on the delivery end. We are dedicated to ensuring that we have the best possible emergency services, and the government will not be supporting Mr Pratt's motion today.

I foreshadow, Mr Speaker, that I will be moving an amendment to Mr Pratt's motion. The amendment deals with the fact that the government has already implemented, in part or in whole, 51 of the 73 recommendations from Coroner Doogan's report; that the ESA does have operational autonomy, as this is enshrined in law; and that the proposed new structure for the ESA which is contained in the ESA three-year business plan does ensure closer operational command and control links between the

various emergency services. Finally, and most importantly, it congratulates the emergency service personnel on their ongoing commitment to protecting our community.

Mr Speaker, if members of the opposition were truly prepared to wait and see how it goes, which is what Mr Pratt committed to publicly last week, we would not be considering this motion today. But, quite clearly, they have already made up their minds. At least they should be honest and say so when they are interviewed on radio. As it is, the government is compelled to amend the motion to reflect a more accurate position. I move:

Omit all words after “That this Assembly”, substitute:

“(1) notes:

- (a) that the ACT Government has already fully or partially implemented 51 of the 73 recommendations from the Coroner’s report into the January 2003 bushfires;
- (b) the Emergency Services Authority has operational autonomy which is enshrined in legislation and that this is unchanged; and
- (c) the proposed new structure contained within the Emergency Services Authority’s Three Year Business Plan will ensure closer operational command and control links between ACT emergency services; and

(2) congratulates the staff of the ACT emergency services who continue to keep our community safe.”.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (10.59): First of all, I must thank Mr Pratt and the opposition for continually focusing on the fires and the structures, if simply for what it has done for my own education on these issues. It has forced me to do my homework and, since the release of the coroner’s report in December 2006, I have read and discussed these matters over and above all the other concerns that I believe also need to receive this much attention. It is very obvious, I think, that this motion reflects the opposition’s view, despite what Mr Pratt said on radio last Friday, which I do believe that Mr Corbell may agree was an aberration rather than in line with what Mr Pratt had been saying in the Assembly, where we have heard really nothing but criticism and, I suspect, some innuendo.

In a period when the opposition is continually dwelling on the flaws, fault and blame it perceives, I think it would do us well to hark back to the feelings in the community immediately after the fires. I remember these as being extreme gratitude to the firefighters, both voluntary and professional, who fought to stop the unstoppable fire and to protect lives and homes. I believe that at that time we were not dwelling on the faults and mistakes that may have been made, though I think that at that time, in our great compassion, we might have thought that people were really doing the best that they could under the circumstances. Those circumstances included structures and the situation of a fire that none of those people had seen the like of. But I do believe that we should always remember that people were doing the best they could at the time.

We also had huge admiration for the recovery centres, which set a new national standard which is now being emulated in Victoria and New South Wales. Generally speaking, the government was being thanked for that work. I think that the Chief Minister said himself that when he walked around people were thanking him. That was probably too much one way, but I do think that there is a conversation now which has swung too far the other way. Indeed, how the mighty are fallen, or how determined is the opposition to bring them down.

In addressing this motion, I do not have access to the currents of rumour which possibly Mr Pratt has. I am restricted to information which is in the public domain and, I am afraid, I have to confine myself to that knowledge base. The prime relevant documents that I have to do that are the McLeod report and all the other reports that I have read and the ESA business plan, which I know has not been referred to here by Mr Pratt. Also, of course, I have the benefit of the speeches made just now by Mr Pratt and Mr Corbell.

I absolutely agree that McLeod suggested, and the government was quick to set it up, that there be an independent ESA, but it seems to me from reading McLeod's report that the prime concerns he had were with the cultural problems of the old establishment. My reading of the reports from 1988 show that this is an old problem and one that is not going to be solved by any restructure. It requires an awful lot more than that if you are going to build a sense of people being involved in the one service. My own feeling is that, in the course of the fires in January 2003, the bureaucratic processes and policies may have stifled the fast reactions which we, in hindsight, now see may have made the difference.

To me, that is crucial. I believe that we should have a very quick response to fires and I believe that, as far as possible, resources need to be sunk into them in the first instance to put them out. *Four Corners* showed that it is not just an ACT issue; that it is an Australian issue. For the Blue Mountains fires, the McIntyres Hut fire and possibly the Victorian fires there have been issues to do with the lack of a quick response and putting the resources there. I hope that this is one thing that has been learned.

Although this is the third restructure, it is the first time since I have been in this place that the ESA has been back within a department. Although it may not be optimal, it might still be fully functional. Although it is true that there have been a number of resignations within emergency services, I do not know why these have occurred and I cannot comment as to whether they are a reflection of the restructure. So, rather than complaining about the restructure, I think it would be best if we do work, as Mr Pratt said on Friday, with the current arrangements.

In this respect, all I have to go on is this ESA business plan, and I have to say that I think that it has been well thought out. It shows that there are opportunities for discussions with stakeholders. Perhaps in this case I am going to be more positive than Mr Corbell. I have not heard too much reference to this business plan, but it is what we have. It is all we have in the public domain, apart from innuendo, rumour and perhaps conversations that have been had off the record by members of the opposition. But this plan says that there will be community comment and there will be a review

process. Let's give it a go. We are not experts. Whatever we say, we are not experts on it and we do have to take in the full information before we go judging it.

I brought up a few questions when I spoke to the no confidence motion and I do have concerns, possibly because we have never seen the Costello review document on which, I believe, the budgetary decision was made to change the ESA into the ESB. To me, that is still the basic question. We never got that functional review document and we do not know the thinking behind this change, except that it was made for budgetary reasons. I have not heard anything to convince me one way or the other and that is why my mind remains open.

I would like to know what the problems were with the ESA at the time of the 2003 fires. People are now saying that the response was inadequate. What made that happen? What happened after the restructure in response to the McLeod report? We know that there were problems with overspending. We know that there were late annual reports, revised annual reports. That indicates that there were issues there, but they have never been brought out into the open. I believe that people in the community think that there is still potential for the ESB to maintain its independence within JACS. At the moment, there is the reassurance from JACS that it will not interfere. That apparently has been the case to date. Of course, a change in the leadership of JACS could change that situation.

I want the ESB to report on exactly these matters. When the annual report comes out from JACS, if the ESB does not have the ability to present its own separate report, I want a very complete section in that annual report which shows that exactly the things the government promises have been happening, because only in that way can we judge. Too much has been going on behind closed doors here. The public wants transparency, especially after those fires, because the community is affected by these government decisions. It has not been there.

If we are going to have an inquiry, that is the inquiry I want to have. What are the cultural problems? Have they been fixed? McLeod thought that the authority was a way to fix it. Was it? Did it? Is that why it has been disbanded? Those are the questions that we need to ask. As I have mentioned several times, I do think that this business plan is light on community consultation and community learning.

I have talked about a fire guard. There is too much treating the community here like it is a passive recipient of information. That is not the case. We need the community alongside us on this. They are half the battle to making sure that we do not have another 2003, with all that destruction, those lives lost and those houses lost. Unless the community is with us, has trust in the government, sees more transparency, wants to be informed, wants to be part of the plans, then forget it—we have got a problem—and the opposition will keep on harping because they will have that opportunity, and I think the government needs to remove it from them.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (11.09): Paragraph (2) of Mr Corbell's amendment states:

- (2) that this Assembly congratulates the staff of the ACT emergency services who continue to keep our community safe."

They are worthy of congratulation but, more than that, they are worthy of being heard. This minister has a record of failure. He was removed from education, he was removed from health and he should be removed from the ESA. In all those cases he failed to listen. It is well and good to stand in this place and laud our excellent emergency services staff—and we do, in particular the volunteers who do it for community reasons—but we do not listen to them. Mr Corbell rejected the evidence of Mr Jeffery, stating that it is not appropriate to take into account what he has to say about the structure in which he will face fires. He is not entitled; he does not know.

Mr Barling, the head of the VBA, and Mr Cortese, who speaks on behalf of SES volunteers, obviously do not know either. So we will pat them on the back, stand with them and bask in the reflected glory of a job well done, but we will not listen to them because they disagree with us. The government is not up to the intellectual challenge of meeting what the volunteers and professional officers have said. The first activity on page 14 of the ESA's 24-page business plan entitled "Governance enhancement", which is all we will have, states:

Undertake and provide a gap analysis between current practices and government standards.

The government does not even know what is wrong with the ESA and why it does not work, other than that it overruns its budget. There has been no analysis of what has gone wrong but the government says, "We will change its structure. We will fit it to our financial constraints because we have ruined the budget over a number of years, and then we will do an analysis to make sure that we plug the gaps." Will we have another review followed by another change to the arrangements? No, we will not, because we have an arrogant minister who will not listen to those who know what they are saying. It is interesting that not one person, other than the minister and the commissioner, has said that this is a good thing.

Anybody else who has commented on this has decried the fact that it will fail and leave the people of Canberra at risk. That will be the minister's legacy. He may well have subjected the people of Canberra to more risk. We all heard from Val Jeffery, who said, "This will be worse than 2003." We all heard from Pat Barling, who said, "This is a kick in the guts because those on the ground who go out to fight the fires will be put at risk by these reforms." The minister's defence is to say, "We have operational independence enshrined in legislation." I carry a set of legislation when I go out on the fire ground and, Mr Speaker, I am sure that when you responded to calls from the fire brigade you took a piece of legislation in your backpack because it was really useful.

On the day it does not matter that operational independence is enshrined in legislation. Emperor Napoleon, the man who conquered all of Europe, summarised these sorts of crises into one simple line. He said, "An army marches on its stomach." It is all about logistics. Under the Corbell model of madness for the Emergency Services Authority the bureaucrats, bean counters and the department control the logistics. So let us not hide behind this line that operational independence is guaranteed by law. Operational independence is guaranteed by having the resources in the structure to do the job. If you do not have the cash you cannot do the job.

What is reflected on page 24 of this marvellous business plan under the heading “Recurrent and Capital Budgets”? Page 24 gives us an indication of what will happen. In the 2006-07 budget, capital expenditure is 28 per cent for new equipment, new networks, new buildings and new communications. By 2009-10 it drops to two per cent. It goes from more than a quarter to one-fiftieth of the budget, which will not replace very much, unless the minister sees an enormous expansion in the budget, which will not happen, because, as a result of this government’s ineptitude and financial mismanagement, we know that that is now not possible.

Currently, of the \$77 million budget for 2006-07, about \$21 million is capital. If we add in a couple of per cent each year and we scale up to 2009-10 we find that the budget will go up to about \$80 million, but the capital expenditure will drop to \$1.6 million, which is barely enough to cover the vehicle replacement program for the Rural Fire Service. So forget the ambulances, which we know we are short of, forget the SES, and certainly forget the fire brigade because there is not enough money to go around. And that is the problem. An army marches on its stomach. The SES, the Rural Fire Service, the ACT Ambulance Service and the ACT Fire Brigade can respond only in the vehicles that they have, using the equipment that they have.

As every little thing has to be justified and as every little requirement of the volunteers is scrutinised the bean counters will turn off the tap and this business plan will just go out the window like the rest of Mr Corbell’s promises.

I relay back the issue of a volunteer with a cracked helmet. Mr Speaker, you would know that a safety helmet that is cracked has lost its structural integrity. The volunteer was told, “You cannot have a new one because of budget constraints.” She took that helmet back to her crew captain, who put it on the ground, put his foot through it and said, “Take that in and tell them that it is structurally sound.” She got a new helmet. If that is what volunteers have to go through now, the madness of these reforms will put lives at risk, which is something the minister should consider. It is interesting going through this business plan, because on every page one finds errors. Page 3 of the 24-page document in part states:

... the Governments acceptance & support of the majority of the McLeod report recommendations

That did not even last for two years. Page 4 reflects a directive on high from the minister:

The Canberra Community will:

- Listen to warnings and take action to improve resilience to hazards.

Fantastic! There you are, you are all warned and you have to listen, but the warnings have to be given.

On the *Four Corners* program on Monday night a Canberra resident said, “We can’t fight this; we weren’t warned.” Last week the then head of the fire service, who resigned in disgust, said, “No, we didn’t send a warning.” So how can you expect the

Canberra community to respond when you do not have the system in place to deliver? It is beyond me. The business plan continues, and on every page there are things to be looked at.

The minister spoke about our relationship with other areas. A section on page 7 entitled “Local and Regional Relationships” states:

Canberra is in a unique position regionally as the major urban area in a predominantly New South Wales rural community.

That is the only mention of New South Wales, the effect we have on it and the effect that it can have on us. The document goes on to state:

Within Canberra, we maintain a special relationship with the Australian Government through the close working relationships with Emergency Management Australia, the National Capital Authority, the Department of Transport and Regional Services and as partners in the Emergency Service Funding Agreement, the Department of Finance and Administration.

I looked very closely to establish what our special relationship with the New South Wales RFS and the New South Wales SES was, but it does not exist because it is not in the document. Because we do not have the structure right we cannot do this properly. Appendix B on page 19 shows that there will be fewer arrangements per annum. There is a section on risk that states that we have to plan better for risk, yet I have been told that two of the risk assessment officers are also going to go.

This plan is a recipe for disaster, a recipe that is endorsed by the minister. The document deals also with the chain of command. Again the minister says, “It is okay because it is justified in legislation.” But he forgets to tell the people that, in the chain of command on page 7 of the business plan, between the minister and the ACT Emergency Services Agency, there is a small box entitled “Department of Justice and Community Safety”.

The minister did not even stand up in this chamber and state that his own structure, as outlined on page 7 of his business plan, reflects an enormous impediment between him and the people on the ground—an impediment called the department. The bean counters will get in the way, as they have often done in these matters, because planning for emergencies is an inexact science. You have to plan for the worst and hope for the best. What we are planning for here is a best-case scenario. This government will cut the cloth of ACT emergency management to fit the financial disaster that it has created, which has seen a number of deficits and continuing doubt over its ability to manage the budget.

Let us face it: Mr Corbell got it wrong when he was minister for education, and he was moved. Education is probably the most senior of all the portfolios outside that of Chief Minister, but he got the flick. He got it wrong in health where, because of his failure, he now carries the title of the minister who had the longest elective surgery waiting list in the history of the ACT. He made mistakes in planning and now he is making a monumental mistake in the restructure of the Emergency Services Authority to put in a bureaucratic structure, not one that will enhance the response of this

community to emergencies. The minister's amendment must be defeated. (*Time expired.*)

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (11.19): I support Minister Corbell's amendment to Mr Pratt's motion. Mr Pratt moved:

That this Assembly ...

- (2) rejects the new structure of the Emergency Services Agency and calls on the Government to immediately re-establish a statutory authority ...

I remind members that this is just five days after he publicly told the Canberra community that he would give the new structure a go. Mr Pratt is concerned about restructuring but he must realise that organisations go through changes, and sometimes these are significant changes. Perhaps Mr Pratt would rather the government was not tackling the ESA's \$5 million overspend. Perhaps Mr Pratt would rather the ESA did not seek to modernise and streamline its management practices. I believe that the new structure for the ESA is forward thinking and looking to a future that will result in a more coordinated approach to emergency planning and response to the community of the ACT.

I know that some volunteers have criticised the new structure, but the government is confident that the volunteers will see the benefits to them once the new structure is fully implemented. Separate silos prevent an organisation from effectively sharing its skills and resources. The territory is a small jurisdiction; therefore, it is important that we work together to serve the ACT community.

I state today that the government does not support the re-establishment of the Emergency Services Authority at this time. The Emergency Services Agency was included in the Department of Justice and Community Safety in the middle of last year to reduce the duplication of administrative functions and to improve financial management. Since this change the agency has maintained its operational autonomy and its direct line to the minister. In fact, the operational autonomy of the agency is enshrined in the Emergencies Act 2004 and this cannot be changed without amendments being made by this Assembly.

This motion calls on the government immediately to re-establish the Emergency Services Authority to streamline the chain of command and ministerial oversight. The motion seems to be based on a number of myths about the new structure of the Emergency Services Agency and about the benefits of an authority structure. Mr Pratt's public response to the restructure last week was to indicate that he is unaware that all governments across Australia, with the exception of New South Wales, are structuring their emergency services in a similar way to the ACT.

In Victoria the Department of Justice brings together activities concerned with reform, administration and enforcement of law. Members would be correct in thinking that that sounds similar to our Department of Justice and Community Safety. It is worth noting that the Victorian Department of Justice includes the police force, the court and prison systems, tribunals that protect citizens' rights, and emergency services. The structure of the department is an executive committee made up of a secretary, eight

executive directors and two commissioners—not too dissimilar to the ACT Department of Justice and Community Safety.

In the late 1990s Western Australia established a task force to look at ways of improving planning and coordination across the state's emergency services. As a result the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia was formed in 1999. Before members seize too quickly on the word "authority", I should make this observation about the structure: the authority brought together the fire and rescue service, bushfire service, state emergency service, volunteer marine rescue services, emergency management services and community safety services. All these report to one chief executive and to a board. Again this was established following an examination of options for improving planning and coordination across emergency services.

Similarly, following a recent review South Australia recommended the creation of the South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission, which operates under the guidance of a board and a chief executive. Tasmania has a Department of Police and Emergency Management, which brings together the State Emergency Service, State Security Unit, Tasmanian Fire Service and Tasmania Police. Queensland has an integrated Department of Emergency Services in which fire and rescue, ambulance and emergency management all report through a common director-general—again, not too dissimilar to the ACT emergency services reporting through a chief executive.

While some of these are statutory creations they all have a common theme: they are all established with a view to improving planning and coordination across the state's emergency services, and they all report through a common chief executive. The objective of ensuring that the emergency services work together, improve their planning processes and advance their capacity for coordination seems to be a nationwide trend. The need for the Emergency Services Agency in the ACT to be a statutory authority is not a prerequisite to improving the operational capability of the ESA. Mr Pratt, through his motion today, wants to create yet another restructure within emergency services, making that four restructures since January 2003.

Mr Pratt asserts that this motion highlights the streamlining of the chain of command and ministerial oversight. The fact that there is a chief executive in the Department of Justice and Community Safety does not mean the commissioner cannot contact the minister on a matter, or vice versa. As the minister said, he met with the ESA commissioner on 15 occasions in the past six months to discuss a wide range of emergency service matters. He also met with the chief officer of the services on eight occasions over the past six months. That is almost a meeting a week between the minister and officers from the ESA. Re-establishment of the agency as an authority would not give the agency any greater access to the minister.

I need to make some reference to Mr Smyth's earlier comments. I wish to challenge his statement that Minister Corbell was removed from health and education. He was promoted and he is now the territory's Attorney-General. That is in stark contrast to Mr Smyth's experience in the Liberal Party. Not even members of his own party support him. Even they recognise how out of touch Brendan Smyth is.

I conclude by stating that the new structure for ESA resolved some issues relating to the current structure and will ensure that the agency can focus on operational matters. The new structure will serve both the organisation and the community. It is time for us to stop debating the structure of the ESA and to let the agency, with its new commissioner, get on with its core business of protecting the ACT from emergencies.

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (11.27): It always amazes me why ministers and other people in this place do not listen to the experts on the ground. We have a huge groundswell of opposition to an administrative proposal from people at the coalface, in many instances people such as Val Jeffery, who has been fighting fires for many years.

Mrs Burke: He does not know anything.

MR STEFANIAK: That is right. As my colleague Mrs Burke just said, he does not know anything. There seems to be a tendency amongst bureaucracies to downplay or ignore the opinions of people at the coalface and others. In the past few months seven fairly senior people resigned from or left the emergency services area. Surely that should sound warning bells for any government. Surely it should sound warning bells for this government when it gets an independent agency such as McLeod to prepare a report and to make recommendations. The coronial inquest that ran for nearly four years and that had over 90 days of hearings prepared major recommendations that basically backed up Mr McLeod's recommendations.

Surely that would indicate to the government that putting the ESA back in the department was not such a good idea; that it should be a stand-alone and independent department. Clearly, that is what the practitioners in this area want to see happen. It does not have to be a lot more expensive. A body that is independent and that is run properly can achieve efficiencies.

Mr Corbell's amendment to the motion states that his government fully or partially implements 51 of the 73 recommendations. That is good so far as it goes but it neglects the key recommendation, one of the key points of concern to all those people affected by the fires and to all those at the coalface. This decision has caused much angst and anger among volunteers and other emergency service workers. Surely it is time for this arrogant government to stop and think.

Earlier Mr Corbell said that the commissioner, the deputy commissioner, or whoever, had a direct link to him. He said that he had met with the commissioner on 15 occasions and that he does not like the present chain of command. There are a number of layers of reporting. I have seen the bureaucratic structure and I, like Mr Smyth, have been a minister. I will give Minister Corbell an example of how, despite all the best will in the world by the minister or the bureaucrats concerned, things can go wrong in a second. I think there are six layers of reporting. Once we get out of the emergency services structure and we get into JACS I think someone has to report to a deputy CEO, then to the CEO and then to the minister. The chain of command shows a little dotted line from the deputy commissioner to the minister. The minister has met with the commissioner on 15 occasions, and no doubt he will meet with him on another 15 occasions, but that will not necessarily do any good.

During the general departmental restructure in about 1998 which bypassed Fran Hinton, there was a dotted line between Mark Owens, my general manager of sport and recreation, and me, and there was another line, which was not dotted, from Mark to Trevor Wheeler, then to Fran and then to me. At the time all those officers were great operators. They were good, loyal and competent public servants in the Department of Education and Training, where the Bureau of Sport and Recreation, a much bigger bureau then than the piddling little office it is now as a result of all the government cuts, was located at the time. I probably would have met with Mark Owens at least two or three times a week.

Even with that arrangement, which is not dissimilar to what the minister is talking about—although there were even fewer formal layers between Mr Owens and me, apart from that little dotted line in that bureaucratic structure; there were not six layers and it was more like two or three—and even with all the very best of intentions there were still some problems with that because Mr Owens had to report to Mr Wheeler, who had to report to Ms Hinton. Other factors came into play which took away the necessary independence for which we were aiming in the Bureau of Sport and Recreation.

A general subsumption into other areas of the department came into play—something that just happens. It is bureaucracy; it is not necessarily because people are deliberately doing the wrong thing. Invariably I am sure that people deliberately try to do the right thing but that is what occurs when layers of reporting and layers of bureaucracy are imposed. It is important that we get the structure right in something as crucial or important as emergency services. It is at the coalface to protect the people of Canberra, to put out bushfires, to stop bushfires coming into the city, and to warn us. Hundreds of volunteers who are involved give up their spare time. In this place the minister and my colleague Mr Smyth do that most admirably.

It is important that we get the structure right. It is important for us to listen to people such as Val Jeffery, the volunteers and Mr Barling. We should listen to people like that at the coalface who know, who have been there before, who have done that and who are still doing it. We have two reports—the McLeod report and the coronial inquest. When McLeod and Doogan, two competent and able individuals, make these recommendations surely even a government as arrogant as this one should listen, think again, and say, “Okay, let us get it right. Maybe we have not got it right. Let us listen to all these people rather than stick our heads in the sand, do absolutely nothing and try to justify what we have done.”

A stand-alone authority would not cost any more than it would cost if it were put into the department. We could make it even more efficient so that it would not cost as much. However, I do not think that is the main issue; it is a matter of detail that the government will have to address. In this important matter the government had ample warning. The bushfires burned over 500 houses in Canberra and killed four people. Emergency services personnel, both paid staff and volunteers, are up in arms in relation to this issue. Surely it is time for the government to stop and think and to say, “Right, maybe we have got it wrong. Let us do what we can to get it right.”

This restructure has been rejected by the Bushfire Brigades Association. Professional officers in other services and volunteers have condemned it. As Mr Pratt's motion states, we have lost seven senior officers. The opposition calls on the government to establish a statutory authority, as recommended by McLeod and reaffirmed by Doogan, that will streamline the chain of command. Efficiencies could be gained as a result. It would lead to a simpler way of addressing some of the very real problems this organisation faces—problems that potentially could be fatal to people in the territory. It is important for the government to get this right. I commend Mr Pratt's motion to the Assembly.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (11.35): I would like to speak to the minister's amendment before debate on the motion is concluded.

MR SPEAKER: Yes.

MR PRATT: The opposition rejects the minister's amendment about which I wish to make some comments. Paragraph (a) of the minister's amendment states:

- (a) that the ACT Government has already fully or partially implemented 51 of the 73 recommendations from the Coroner's report into the January 2003 bushfires ...

Some of the recommendations in the coroner's report also reflect recommendations that have been highlighted by McLeod in his report. So 3½ years later not all the McLeod recommendations have been implemented. To its credit, in early 2004-05 the government implemented a significant number of other recommendations, but in many cases it has walked away from them. It walked away from supporting the changes and the structures highlighted by the McLeod inquiry, or it simply has not followed them through. I refer, in particular, to the area of communications.

Ron McLeod had a hell of a lot to say about the urgent need to address communication failure. Three years and 11 months later there are still significant structural problems in the emergency services communication networks. Of course, FireLink is but one of them. We now know that FireLink was sourced as a single select tender. That single select tender was justified by the government because it needed to be mobilised and fielded, or put into the field, by the 2004-05 bushfire season. That just did not happen. We now know, two bushfire seasons later, that FireLink is still not operational. So the justification for a single select tender was absolutely phoney. More importantly, FireLink has now cost a huge amount of money—60 per cent more than its original budget. Subparagraph (b) of the minister's amendment states:

- (b) the Emergency Services Authority has operational autonomy which is enshrined in legislation and that this is unchanged ...

I do not want to be a pedantic wordsmith but the Emergency Services Authority no longer exists; it is now called the Emergency Services Agency. So the minister got that wrong in his amendment. The minister was correct when he said that in theory operational autonomy was still enshrined in legislation and that legislation still underpins operational autonomy. However, we argue that in practice the

commissioner, the two deputy commissioners and the heads of services will no longer have—they have not had for some time now—the management of their own resources that independent operators need to have. So in this case the act is being corrupted. The autonomy which the act enshrines is simply being corrupted by practice on the ground. So that simply does not stand up under argument. Paragraph (c) of the minister's amendment states:

- (c) the proposed new structure contained within the Emergency Services Authority's Three Year Business Plan will ensure closer operational command and control links between ACT emergency services ...

The South Australian model is often used as an example of the closer operational command and control links talked about in the minister's amendment. In the South Australian model we have seen a single fire service by stealth, in practice created by having a unified command and control system. We now see that the South Australian model is failing. That highlights the fact that we have to ensure that our rural fire services and urban fire brigades are quite separate. They must be organised separately and they must have their own commands.

Having a unified command system and trying to mix volunteer RFS officers with full-time professional fire brigade officers really cannot work properly. We are talking about different services with different capabilities, different cultures and distinctly different roles and they have to be allowed to operate apart from one another. They must be able to operate in an interoperable fashion; that is, the two services have to be able to combine operations when they can. The two services have to be able to have common command and operational structures that enable them to undertake integrated operations on the fire ground when a mission requires that to occur, but they must still be structured and they must still be respected as stand-alone entities.

Each of those two services needs its own independent chief officer. The chief officer of the Rural Fire Service still needs his own headquarters and his own independent chain of command so that his organisation can execute the task for which it was designed, and the fire brigade needs the same. The chief officer, fire brigade needs his own command structure to be able to operate in urban areas and on the urban edge in accordance with the way in which that organisation is designed to operate and in accordance with the tradition of many decades which developed the culture that is so integral and important to the operation of the fire brigade.

The opposition rejects subparagraphs (a), (b) and (c) of the minister's amendment. Paragraph (2) of his amendment goes without saying; it is motherhood and apple pie. Of course we congratulate ACT emergency services staff who are striving to keep our community safe. The problem is that under this restructure they find that that job is much harder. The opposition cannot support the government's amendment.

MR CORBELL (Molonglo—Attorney-General, Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Planning) (11.43): I seek leave to move an amendment to my amendment.

MADAM TEMPORARY DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Dunne): Have you circulated that amendment?

MR CORBELL: Not yet.

MADAM TEMPORARY DEPUTY SPEAKER: The amendment has to be in writing, Mr Corbell.

MR CORBELL: Yes, it is in writing. I am happy to table that amendment. I am simply seeking to omit the words, “Emergency Services Authority” where those words occur, and to substitute the word “ESA”.

Mr Pratt: We would accept that.

MADAM TEMPORARY DEPUTY SPEAKER: Mr Corbell, you are seeking leave to move an amendment?

MR CORBELL: I am seeking leave to amend my amendment.

Leave granted.

MR CORBELL: I move:

Omit “Emergency Services Authority” where the words occur, substitute “ESA”.

MADAM TEMPORARY DEPUTY SPEAKER: Does anyone want to speak to this amendment?

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (11.44): I congratulate the minister on rectifying his oversight.

Amendment to amendment agreed to.

Question put:

That **Mr Corbell’s** amendment, as amended, be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 9

Noes 6

Mr Barr	Mr Gentleman	Mrs Burke	Mr Stefaniak
Mr Berry	Mr Hargreaves	Mrs Dunne	
Mr Corbell	Ms MacDonald	Mr Mulcahy	
Dr Foskey	Ms Porter	Mr Pratt	
Ms Gallagher		Mr Smyth	

Question so resolved in the affirmative.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (11.48): I want to address a couple of issues raised by the Greens in this debate. Dr Foskey basically said that this is simply a political debate for the sake of having a political debate. She said, “How the opposition is determined that the mighty will come down.” I suppose that any political party in any parliament—

any opposition, any minor party on the cross benches—is always seeking to defeat its opponents; that is just the way that parliaments operate.

Mr Corbell: So it is political.

MR PRATT: But that is not the point. This is not political.

Mr Corbell: Oh!

MR PRATT: This is not completely political, minister; this is not completely political. The opposition is the voice of members of the community who have expressed their deep concern that the restructure of the emergency services is not going to work. Having assessed that the restructure is not going to work—that is the point that we take as well; that is our analysis—it is the duty of the opposition to stand in this place to represent the very many voices of our volunteer organisations and our professionals to tell you, minister, through you, Mr Speaker, to tell the government that the restructure cannot work. It will fail; it needs to be sorted out.

As an opposition, we also have a duty to raise weaknesses in the system which may very severely affect community safety in the ACT. Dr Foskey, it is our duty to stand here and raise concerns about what we see as an unworkable restructure. We are not here to simply hope that the mighty come crashing down. It is much more than that, I assure you.

As to the points raised by Dr Foskey about the business plan, I agree with Dr Foskey—I was to raise the point in my closing address—that the business plan looks okay. It looks all right. It seems to be a useful document. But we question whether it can be properly implemented in its own right. We will continue to examine the business plan; there is a lot to look at.

However, the point that we make is this: the business plan will be useless if the organisation implementing the business plan is inefficient. That is the problem we have in this place. The restructure has now developed an emergency services organisation which is inefficient. We have seen across the board that the volunteers and professional officers are severely concerned about it, so how can the business plan be properly implemented?

I make another point too: how can the business plan be implemented if the strategic bushfire management plan is not an efficient instrument? We claim that it is not. Until about 10 days ago, the strategic bushfire management plan was still a draft document. I think the minister is saying that version 1 of the SBMP has now been locked in place, but we have yet to see that as a reality. We know that only a handful of bushfire operational plans have been created, and therefore there are no plans covering the ACT in its entirety. We question whether the business management plan, the business plan, can be properly implemented.

The next point I would go to is this: Dr Foskey said that we are not the experts and therefore we should leave it to the professional experts to tell us what needs to be done. I put it that “we are not the experts” is the Nuremberg defence. It is the defence that this government—

Mr Corbell: No, it is not, actually. The Nuremberg defence is following orders; it is quite different, Mr Pratt.

MR PRATT: Well—

Mr Corbell: What an absurd parallel.

MR PRATT: So you were following orders blindly, minister?

Mr Corbell: No.

MR PRATT: Right. This is the defence that the minister and his government used in respect of their failures in January 2003. This is the defence that they used to explain away the reasons why they did not warn the ACT community and why the systems failed—because they left it to the experts. They did not inquire. The government did not inquire; the minister of the day did not have close enough ministerial oversight to ensure that they were getting quality advice from their advisers. We know what happened. We know that the community was not warned in time.

Members interjecting—

MR PRATT: I absolutely agree with the point raised by Dr Foskey that we need to see in the annual reports produced a much more transparent coverage of the state of the emergency services. Dr Foskey and I have often raised this in estimates. She has raised a very good point. Minister, you need to ensure that your annual reports are much more transparent and highlight the weaknesses and the strengths of our emergency services.

Members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! There are too many conversations going on.

Members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! There are too many conversations going on in the room. Mr Corbell!

MR PRATT: I was about to put my deputy speaker's hat on. I had better not; that would be out of place, of course.

The annual reports need to highlight the weaknesses and strengths of the emergency services so that this place can scrutinise the progress of these sorts of reforms and the way things are going. As far as I am concerned, too many of our annual reports—not all of them, but too many of them—are simply glossy magazines written to promote issues which we think need much closer scrutiny.

Dr Foskey also raises a very good point about whether we have really got to the bottom of the question as to why the ESA failed. That point has never been clarified. Why did the government restructure the ESA? The government says that it had to

restructure the ESA to remove bureaucracy and streamline it, but in fact the restructure is all about financial matters. We think that that is a very inappropriate way to undertake the restructuring of emergency organisations. The emergency organisation must be operationally respected. Any restructure—

Mr Corbell: They blew their budget for three consecutive years.

MR SPEAKER: Order, members! Mr Pratt has the floor.

MR PRATT: I've got the floor, thanks. Any restructure of the emergency services has got to be about operational imperatives—can our emergency services deliver services; can they protect our community? You do not restructure the emergency organisations simply because your bureaucrats have said, "Look, we want to control the resources. We are jealous of the emergency services."

Mr Corbell: They just blew the budget.

MR PRATT: The bureaucracy said that they were jealous of Peter Dunn's independence.

Members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! Members will cease interjecting.

MR PRATT: You listen to them, minister; you listen to them.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Pratt, address your comments through the chair, please.

MR PRATT: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

MR SPEAKER: Members will cease interjecting.

Mr Corbell: They just blew their budget; that's all.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Corbell, cease interjecting.

MR PRATT: They were simply bureaucratic reforms. Mr Speaker, their reforms have only been bureaucratic, without due understanding of the implications for the ability of the services to respond quickly.

Mr Corbell: They blew their budget.

MR PRATT: No, I do not think so. I want to refer to a letter from a volunteer. He says:

No other emergency service in Australia has as many layers between the head of the service and the Minister. No other State or Territory makes it so difficult for the head of service to access their Minister—why?—because every other State or Territory knows the importance of those emergency services and does not downgrade their importance.

We have seen this minister downgrade the importance of the services—

Mr Corbell: It is not supported by the facts. You acknowledged it last week.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Mr Corbell, please!

MR PRATT: We have seen the minister downgrade the advice. We have seen the minister kick Pat Barling in the guts. Pat Barling has said that the emergency services have been kicked in the guts. I am talking about the president of the volunteer bushfire association. We have seen this minister kick Val Jeffery in the guts. We have seen the minister kick Val Jeffery in the guts because Val Jeffery had the terrible habit of suggesting to the minister that a man who had been around here for 30 years and knows the bushfire conditions of the southern tablelands might tell you how best to restructure to have a more efficient and responsive organisation. You did not listen to him. That is why the volunteers are in an uproar. You have never consulted with them. David Prince has voted with his feet. The professional officers do not support these restructures. This is a failure.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Multiculturalism

MS MacDONALD (Brindabella) (11.59): I move:

That this Assembly:

- (1) unanimously endorses the use of the word “multicultural” in our community;
- (2) admonishes any move by governments, at any level, to move away from supporting a multicultural community; and
- (3) recognises the important role the National Multicultural Festival plays in promoting and celebrating multiculturalism in the ACT.

I rise today to speak on a topic that I believe is of great importance: multiculturalism in our community. In spite of the federal government’s abandonment of multiculturalism in favour of integration, it is important that the ACT continues to move in the direction of embracing cultural diversity in our community. In fact, I would say that it is vital that we continue to support multiculturalism because of the federal government’s actions.

Cultural diversity is the very foundation of our way of life, and not something that should be easily dismissed. Why is it that the Howard government finds it necessary to impugn cultural diversity despite its obvious contribution to the success of our nation?

There are hundreds of culturally diverse communities who call Australia home and who have made our country what it is today: an open-minded and accepting society. The ACT is home to more than 200 wonderfully diverse communities; we all have the opportunity to learn about and enjoy unique cultures, traditions, events and

celebrations. The contribution these communities make to the life of the city is immeasurable—socially, economically and culturally. Ours is a nation that has been built on a partnership involving all citizens from many countries who now call Australia home. We have proudly called ourselves a multicultural society, a country that prides itself on being inclusive of all cultures.

The Howard government has abandoned this ideal by its decision to remove the term “multiculturalism” from federal ministerial responsibility. The removal of multiculturalism is a demonstration of the federal Liberal government’s pre-1950s ideal of Australia. It typifies the federal government’s contempt for an inclusive, multicultural Australia. Instead of encouraging engagement and involvement in our multicultural community, the federal government is calling for assimilation.

The government argued that there was a need to move away from the term “multicultural” because the concept had been transformed by interest groups into a philosophy that put allegiances to original culture ahead of national loyalty. This is a ridiculous argument; it aims to stigmatise the word. Being a multicultural society is not a negative. “Multiculturalism” is not a dirty word; it simply means that all members of the community are members of the community regardless of their cultural background. These backgrounds are to be embraced and enjoyed and are not to be seen as competing with people’s desires to be Australians.

In the ACT we have always embraced and celebrated multiculturalism. We live in a community that values and rejoices in its diversity and inclusiveness. The ACT government is committed to supporting multiculturalism in our city through the extensive range of policies and programs it has in place. These include the work experience and support program, which provides skilled migrants with office training and work experience in ACT and Australian government departments. The program has a high success rate, with many of the participants gaining contract or full-time work following successful completion of the course.

Other important initiatives are the annual ACT multicultural community languages and community radio grants programs. Communities are able to apply for a share of the grants program, which in 2006-07 is \$250,000, to help carry out their important social and cultural activities. This includes radio programs broadcast in a range of different languages, cultural activities such as national day celebrations, and after-school programs for children to ensure that they are able to maintain their heritage.

Last year the ACT government also delivered the 2006-09 ACT multicultural strategy, which provides a policy framework for the ongoing development of multiculturalism in the territory. The strategy comprises 10 themes, the key focus of which is to ensure that no-one in our community is left behind or disadvantaged because of their background. The areas addressed in the strategy include ageing, young people, equity and terrorism—all diverse themes. As a member of the ACT government, I am proud to be associated with such a forward thinking document, one that helps to ensure that all members of our community have a fair go.

Perhaps one of the most significant multicultural events in our city is the National Multicultural Festival. The festival is our annual way of celebrating our city’s

diversity. The 2007 National Multicultural Festival was a great success and it will go down as one of the best on record. More than 45,000 people ate their way through food such as Spanish paella and Belgian sausages at the Fyshwick Fresh Food Markets Food and Dance Spectacular. I can personally attest to the splendour of the Spanish paella. The festival showcased the culinary delights of the dozens of diverse communities that make up our city.

There were more than 140 stalls at this year's Food and Dance Spectacular—the most on record and an increase of more than 30 per cent on last year's numbers. I overheard one man and his wife from Sydney say that they had risen at 3 o'clock in the morning to make sure that they got down in time to enjoy all the splendour of the Food and Dance Spectacular. That is a true indication of how popular this festival is becoming.

The Greek Glendi drew 9,000 people into the heart of Civic to participate in traditional games, enjoy Greek music and snack on food such as souvlaki and dolmades. It was an event that started in the morning and lasted well into the night, with thousands of people walking away with great memories and a little extra knowledge about what it is like to live the Greek culture.

At the ActewAGL Contact Canberra event, more than 7,000 people wandered through City Walk and explored the more than 70 stalls that were offering information. Organisations that participated included Amnesty International, the Human Rights Commission, Parentline ACT, the National Trust, Apex clubs, St Vincent de Paul and a variety of government agencies.

One of the happiest and most colourful events of the 2007 festival was the annual Pacific Islander showcase, which attracted more than 6,000 people. It was a fun day of traditional singing and dancing, and it truly showcased the many talented people living in our community.

The fun of that entertainment carried on later that evening in the Hellenic Club Carnivale, which attracted 30,000 people with its promise of a night filled with hot Latin dancing and music. With two stages that provided non-stop entertainment, the crowd tangoed the hours away; it was considered a highlight of the festival.

On the final day of this year's festival, the sweet sounds of opera classics, including *La Boheme* and *Rigoletto*, filled the night air at Rond Terraces, signalling the end of the multicultural festival for another year. More than 2,100 people—many armed with picnic baskets bulging with gourmet goodies—shared the experience of Opera by the Lake, and no-one walked away disappointed.

Overall, this year's festival was nothing short of fantastic. Already many people are looking forward to next year's event. I can tell you, Mr Speaker, that I am looking forward to some more paella. The festival is the physical manifestation of the ACT government's commitment to providing all members of the community with the opportunity to explore our diverse cultures.

Thousands of people took advantage of this opportunity, with excellent attendances recorded for all the events held throughout the 14 days of the festival. These included 600 people at the festival gala dinner; 1,600 people at lunchtime showcases; 1,200

people at *Show Us Your Roots*; 1,200 people at the Bollywood spectacular; 1,200 people to see comedian Danny Bhoj; 650 people at the Polish choir; 700 people at the Mongolian spectacular, *The Wind from the Grasslands*, which was a true spectacular, as anybody who went to the multicultural festival ball will know from the small taste we got there; and 600 people at the *ACTTAB International Showcase*. These figures are proof of two things: first, that Canberrans are passionate about enjoying our city's rich diversity; and, second, that multiculturalism is alive and well in the ACT.

I believe that, despite the federal government's move away from multiculturalism, our city and our country will continue to embrace the many cultures that make Australia what it is. From a personal point of view, I would like to mention that my grandparents and my mother escaped Nazi Germany and found refuge in this country because of that embrace.

I also want to mention that on Monday I represented the Chief Minister at the Commonwealth Day celebration that was held at the Centre for Christianity and Culture. It was a multifaith celebration. There were representatives from the Muslim community, the Christian community—many of the different Christian communities—and the Jewish community. The Baha'i were there; the Hindus were there. It is important to note that this year's theme for Commonwealth Day is "Respecting difference and promoting understanding". All members would have received the Commonwealth Day message, but I want to highlight a couple of bits which relate well to this motion. In the message, Her Majesty says:

In today's difficult and sometimes divided world, I believe that it is more important than ever to keep trying to respect and understand each other better. Each and every one of us has hopes, needs, and priorities. Each of us is an individual, with ties of emotion and bonds of obligation—to culture, religion, community, country and beyond. In short, each of us is special.

The more we see others in this way, the more we can understand them and their points of view. In what we think and say and do, let us as individuals actively seek out the views of others; let us make the best use of what our beliefs and history teach us; let us have open minds and hearts; and let us, like the Commonwealth, find our diversity a cause for celebration and a source of strength and unity.

That is what multiculturalism is about. It is about finding a cause for celebration; it is a cause for celebration. We should be encouraged to be proud of the many cultures that make up our country, not be fed propaganda that these differing backgrounds influence people's allegiance and loyalties to Australia. Cultural diversity is the very foundation of our way of life. As a community we should continue to support multiculturalism and endorse the use of the word "multicultural" unashamedly. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (12.11): I move the amendment circulated in my name:

Omit paragraphs (1) and (2), substitute:

- “(1) celebrates the rich diversity and harmony of ACT society, the strength of which has been the successful integration of many cultural and religious groups;
- (2) calls upon all Australian societies to emulate the ACT model; and”.

I want to speak on the motion in general, but concentrate specifically on the opposition’s amendment. The opposition thinks that this is a far more positive message to be putting out in the Assembly than what Ms MacDonald put forward here today. The opposition’s amended version is far more positive, realistic and useful than her motion. It should be debated. It is the message that should be sent out, firstly, to our own community and, secondly and more broadly, across this great country of ours. Australia is a society of diverse and rich background. That is the nature of the great new societies, for want of a better term—the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and the rich, diverse societies of southern Africa. These are the strengths of these societies.

The ACT has a very significant proportion of people who were born overseas or whose parents were born overseas. We have a very rich diversity of religious and cultural groups in ACT society. The National Multicultural Festival absolutely demonstrates that. It is the showcase of this rich, diverse society that we have, and it is an event which is well visited by visitors from around the country.

This rich, diverse, multicultural society that we have—a multi-religious society—is strong because it is integrated. Integration is the key to a harmonious society. No society on the face of this earth will ever be harmonious if people in its disparate groups, its divergent groups, are not integrated and do not love the country of which they are now citizens.

Mr Smyth: Hence Harmony Day is an issue with the federal government.

MR PRATT: Absolutely. I do not want to harp on the matter, but as a person who has had to work in some very interesting places around the world I have seen some terrible societies—of all religious and cultural backgrounds—which were not integrated, which were therefore not harmonious, and many of which were at war with themselves.

I am proud that Australia really stacks up well against the examples of societies that I have seen around this world. We are one of the leaders in this world when it comes to diverse and multicultural societies. We are proud of that, and we should be proud of it. Against the national background, the ACT stands out as a shining beacon of a diverse and harmonious society. Why? Because we are integrated.

I have often heard Minister Hargreaves refer in this place to the fact that Canberra is not made up of enclaves—or that, if we do have some enclaves, they are simply the result of bad governance in previous decades. The only enclaves I see in the ACT, which we ought to be addressing, are public housing complexes. But that has nothing to do with the diversity and richness of what is a multiracial society; it is another matter.

As it turns out, our diverse ethnic groupings have mixed broadly across the ACT. People have not hovered in enclaves. They bring a richness that we all enjoy. We all enjoy this rich background. Many towns and cities in Australia can be jealous of that; they do not have this richness that we have—be it the richness demonstrated through cultural activities, dancing, the foods that we eat and the stories that are told of old societies in other lands or, sometimes more importantly, the richness demonstrated by the values of these different groupings in our society.

As an Anglo-Saxon father, I look at other families and see that other families with other cultural backgrounds have stronger family values than even my own cultural grouping has. I put it to you that, in the headlong rush to modernise, my own traditional culture in this country has lost many of its values—hopefully, we have not lost them; perhaps we have just put them on the backburner while we race through society at a hell-bent pace.

The Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Greek, Italian, Afghan and African family groupings that we see here in Canberra have wonderful family structures from which we want to learn lessons. We should take lessons from them and try and re-learn and reincorporate some of the values that we have lost. Of course, there are good and bad values in every society—nobody is perfect—and those are issues which societies have to address.

One of the best examples I can give of integration in a slightly controversial area—one which is working and one which the ACT can be proud of—is the Islamic community. I want to talk about the Islamic community. Why? Because the Islamic community is so often the subject of controversial discussion in Australia. Why not call on our Islamic brothers here today and address a couple of issues?

The Islamic community is well integrated in Canberra—very well integrated. The Islamic community is a broad diaspora of Lebanese who came out to Australia in the 1940s and 1950s right through to African Muslims who have come out in recent times. There is a broad spectrum, but they are well integrated. Even new Islamic communities are trying their best, within their economic means. Within that sometimes terrible constraint of their economic means, they are trying their best to integrate—to get out there, live in the broader community and exploit the opportunities which are available in Australia because Australia is such a free society.

The Islamic community have rejected the politicisation that has affected other communities in other parts of Australia. If I can be just slightly political for a moment, let me say that the Islamic community have rejected Mr Stanhope's attempts to politicise a number of issues. For example, they have rejected Mr Stanhope's attempts to politicise the Islamic community around the Iraq war and around the war on terror. They have rejected those opportunities to try and polarise elements within their own community around those debates. They have rejected them, and that is a matter to be applauded.

They have also rejected other issues around counterterrorism. They have rejected some of the moves—some of the political calls—by Mr Stanhope around the debate on counterterrorism. The great majority of Canberran Muslims are Australians first,

Canberrans second and whatever they else want to be beyond that. They have fully integrated.

Let me give an example of this. In recent times the ACT Islamic Society have taken sensible and quiet steps to move on a very small but vocal group of extremists in their own community. They have moved to sort that out; they did not need our encouragement to do that. They had the backing and the support of ACT police. Our ACT police worked most sensibly and sensitively with them to sort out a number of extremist issues. The ACT Islamic Society sorted out the problems that they had with an Islamic preacher who they thought was simply not representing Australian values—who they thought was working against integration. The ACT Islamic Society took steps to ensure that Canberran Muslims continue moving down that path of integration. They were not prepared to allow a small minority of people to spoil the objective of integration. That is to be applauded. I single out the ACT Islamic Society as a group that really loves this country, that puts Australia first, and that took the necessary steps to take action. That is a concrete example.

We will not be seeing in the ACT the sorts of initiatives taken in south-western Sydney by Sheikh al-Hilali, who now seeks to organise an Islamic political party to stand for parliament. If you listen to what he and Keysar Trad, his spokesman, have said, their objectives are not Australia first; their objectives are something else. I simply make a comment in passing about that initiative being taken by Sheikh al-Hilali and hold it up as an example of where things are not integrating well in Sydney society.

You will not see that here in the ACT. Mohammed Berjaoui, Mr Ikebal Patel and people of that calibre are Australians first. They work hard to ensure that their own community is harmonious—and it is; it really is. I know that Mr Hargreaves has given some support in their direction, and I applaud that too.

The opposition are saying that the key, the cornerstone, to a successfully multiracial, multicultural or multi-religious society is the strength of its integration. Whatever we as an assembly can do, and whatever you as a government can do, to promote integration is what we must do. That is what the broader Australian community expects: the promotion of integration, by government as well as others.

I support the third element of Ms MacDonald's motion, about the National Multicultural Festival. The multicultural festival is a very important part of our celebration of community. It is a concrete demonstration of how our cultures, whilst integrated, continue to celebrate their histories and continue to celebrate the great strengths of old homelands and old societies. That is as it must be. The opposition will stand shoulder to shoulder with the government to ensure that the multicultural festival is always successful in this town—at least as successful as we have seen in recent times. I think that this year's was one of the best that we have ever seen.

The ACT opposition celebrate the ACT's diverse societal make-up. We celebrate the fact that integration is the cement in what is a harmonious society. The ACT opposition call upon other societies across Australia to look at the model which is the ACT, to emulate that, and to perhaps head off the sorts of difficulties that occur in other societies.

Debate interrupted in accordance with standing order 74 and the resumption of the debate made an order of the day for a later hour.

Sitting suspended from 12.26 to 2.30 pm.

Statements by members

Ruling by Speaker

MR SPEAKER: Yesterday the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Stefaniak, took a point of order concerning certain statements made on 28 February 2007 by the Chief Minister, the Attorney-General and Dr Foskey. The Leader of the Opposition asserted that those statements contravened standing order 54, which requires members not to use offensive words against any member of the judiciary.

Firstly, as I pointed out in my ruling last week when I was requested to rule on a matter raised by Mr Smyth, our practice, based on *House of Representatives Practice*, requires that any request for a withdrawal must be made at the time the remark is made. As I stated yesterday, the request is now more than 13 days—and three sitting days—after the remarks were made.

I suggest that members be more prompt when they wish to raise these matters. In my view it is not desirable to make rulings on debates that occurred some time ago. However, as the matters raised are not usual, in that they relate to the judiciary rather than a member, I am prepared to rule on the matter. Page 504 of the fifth edition of *House of Representatives Practice* quotes the following ruling made in 1937:

From time immemorial, the practice has been not to allow criticism of the judiciary; the honourable member may discuss the judgments of the court, but not the judges.

Later, it states:

Judges are expected, by convention, to refrain from politically partisan activities and to be careful not to take sides in matters of political controversy. If a judge breaks this convention, a Member may feel under no obligation to remain mute on the matter in the House.

Odgers Australian Senate Practice, 11th edition, also offers some rationale for the standing order protecting the judiciary, stating at page 205:

The protection of judicial office-holders under the standing orders is based on the need for comity and mutual respect between the legislature and the judiciary, and the requirement that judicial officers be protected from remarks which might needlessly undermine public respect for the judiciary. The protection, however, does not prevent criticism of the judgments or decisions of courts.

This matter is a somewhat difficult one. Some members have suggested that the magistrate concerned has not refrained from entering into the political debate in arriving at findings in relation to the role of some ministers. Equally, ministers may wish to defend their role and rebut some of the findings of the judgment. On

reflection, I believe that the comments are primarily related to the findings of the Coroner's Court. The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines "offensive" as:

repugnant to the moral sense, good taste, or the like; insulting.

I do not believe that the words and phrases are of such a character that they are offensive in nature. Nor do I believe that the comments undermine public respect for the judiciary. I therefore rule that the statements are in order.

Questions without notice

Bushfires—coronial inquest

MR STEFANIAK: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, yesterday in question time you were critical of the coroner for not looking more closely at the McIntyres Hut fire in New South Wales. You said:

Its omission from the report leaves an enormous gap in our understanding.

In her report, Coroner Doogan noted that counsel for the New South Wales government had made extensive submissions highlighting the restrictions on the coroner looking at the fire in New South Wales, including her ability to make adverse findings about an agency of the New South Wales government. In her report she states:

By and large I accept these submissions that I have no legal power to formally find the cause and origin of a fire ... in NSW.

Chief Minister, were you advised of the restrictions placed on the scope of the coronial inquest regarding the McIntyres Hut fire while in New South Wales? What actions, if any, did you take to persuade the New South Wales government to cooperate more fully in holding this inquest?

MR STANHOPE: I was not critical of the coroner yesterday. The answer is no.

Mr Stefaniak: No action for New South Wales?

MR SPEAKER: Is there a supplementary question?

MR STEFANIAK: Yes, Mr Speaker. I thank the Chief Minister for his answer—or lack thereof. The supplementary is this: Chief Minister, will you support the holding of a federal royal commission into the 2003 bushfires to fill what you concede to be "an enormous gap in our understanding" of the fires?

MR STANHOPE: It needs to be noted that the issue of the cause of the fire in Canberra or the devastation as a result of the McIntyres Hut fire is a matter the subject of an appeal to the Supreme Court of the ACT at the moment. I do not believe that that is an issue that I should be agitating in this place.

Bushfires—warnings

MRS BURKE: My question is also to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, on the night of 17 January 2003 officials from the Chief Minister's Department and other agencies were contacting as many rural lessees as possible to warn them of the threat of the bushfires. In the light of that, why wasn't your government taking action to also warn the people of the forestry settlements, Weston Creek, Kambah and Dunlop on the evening of 17 January so that they too could prepare for the bushfires?

MR STANHOPE: These matters have been the subject of an inquiry by the coroner over a period of four years at a cost of \$10 million. They are, of course, operational issues and it is interesting in the context of the debate we had this morning about the Emergency Services Authority and the relationship between government and a statutory independent Emergency Services Authority. The position of the Liberal Party in relation to this matter of the relative responsibility of firefighting officials, those with operational responsibility and others, of course is reversed depending on the particular position or the way in which the wind is blowing at the time the opposition perhaps wish to pursue an issue. This morning it was all about the need for statutory independence and those charged with functional responsibility to have statutory independence; this afternoon, of course, it is all about "let's not insist that those with statutory independence or operational authority have that independence".

Mrs Burke: Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order under standing order 118A, on relevance. Please can you answer the question?

MR STANHOPE: I had concluded my answer, Mr Speaker.

MRS BURKE: Then I have a supplementary question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Chief Minister for nothing. In light of these warnings to the rural lessees, what arrangements was your government making to prepare evacuation centres on 17 January and the morning of 18 January? And don't tell me they are in the report either—your answer, thank you.

MR STANHOPE: In a four-year coronial inquest, at a cost of \$10 million, these issues were fully agitated. I refer the member to the transcript.

Skilled labour shortage

MS MacDONALD: My question is to the Chief Minister, Mr Stanhope, in his role as Minister for Business and Economic Development. Would the minister advise the house of actions being taken by the ACT government to address the local effects of the national skills crisis?

MR STANHOPE: I am very happy to do that. It is a very important question and I thank the member for her interest in a matter of significant interest and importance to the community that goes to an issue of policy. I think it has to be said—and of course it is something that has been noted and commented on by I think almost the whole of Canberra, particularly in recent times—that one of the most significant steps that this government has taken in recent years to enhance skills and to ensure that there are

people with genuine skills in a position of authority was, of course, to tip the other side out of government five years ago, a mob with no skills then and, as time gallops on, we discover a mob with absolutely no skills now. It is an absolute rabble. Look at them—a rabble with no ideas, a rabble with no policies, a rabble with no credibility, a rabble with one policy, namely, not to collect over \$100 million worth of charges if elected to government.

Mr Smyth: At the start of your answer there were no policies.

MR STANHOPE: Well that is the policy. I think this is a matter that we need to pursue with some gusto.

Mr Mulcahy: Point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not know what the relevance is of what the Chief Minister is saying to the question that was asked by Ms MacDonald about skills. He is on about taxation reductions and all sorts of things but I would like him to be brought back to the question.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Come to the subject matter of the question.

MR STANHOPE: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, I will. Of course, when the report of the Australian Hotels Association is tabled we will see the depth of Mr Mulcahy's range of skills.

Mr Mulcahy: Point of order, Mr Speaker—

MR SPEAKER: Come back to the subject matter of the question, Chief Minister.

MR STANHOPE: There are some hidden skills there that we are all keen to discover.

MR SPEAKER: Order!

MR STANHOPE: The government has been responding to what it acknowledges as the most significant issue facing the community at the moment in relation to economic activity and the capacity of businesses around the territory, and indeed the capacity of all employers, to maximise the opportunities that are presented currently by an economy that is indisputably the strongest in Australia. As I have said on numerous occasions, to the extent that there is a significant labour force issue in the Australian Capital Territory today, it is a direct response to the fact that our economy is the strongest in Australia, that we have the lowest trend unemployment rate in Australia, trending at 2.67 per cent over the last four to five years, with a participation rate of just on 75 per cent—absolutely staggering statistics.

Over the last four to five months we have seen statistic after statistic and report after report revealing the extent to which the ACT government at every level of activity is outperforming the rest of Australia, with one or two exceptions in relation to the enormous advantage which the great commodity states in Western Australia and Queensland have in relation to commodity sales. But the downside, of course, to that is—not so much the downside; it is a wonderful position to be in, is it not, to have the strongest economy in Australia with the lowest unemployment rate, with the highest participation rate, with the greatest level of gross state product, with the greatest level

of retail trade, with the greatest level of housing start-ups—to have to deal with one implication of that, namely, a significant and particular sort of counter effect, namely, there simply are not enough people in the territory to fill all the jobs that have been made available as a result of five strong years of economic growth and activity, and of business confidence within the ACT.

We have responded through the establishment of—the only jurisdiction in Australia to appoint and establish—a high-powered task force such as the Skills Commission headed up by Professor Chubb and on which there are a number of significant and learned members of the Canberra community. They are working hard and I do expect some quite far-sighted initiatives to emerge from them. The Live in Canberra campaign, which is very successful, is now being emulated by other governments around Australia. I know that the Queensland government has picked it up. The Live in Canberra campaign essentially has been picked up by the Queensland government. It has worked particularly well. We have just come back from the Illawarra where there was a tremendous response to the Live in Canberra campaign.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order!

MR STANHOPE: On top of that the revitalisation of the skilled and business migration program is now beginning to show enormous effects within just the last 18 months, somewhere in excess of 200 people being attracted to the ACT as a result of that. *(Time expired.)*

Bushfires—declaration of state of emergency

MR SMYTH: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, you said in your statement to the coroner that Mr Keady contacted you to invite you to a meeting at the ESB early in the afternoon on 18 January. The time of this call was later established as 12.40 pm.

Chief Minister, was the phone call from Mr Keady on 18 January 2003 at 12.40 pm to request you to attend a meeting at ESB headquarters to consider the possibility of the declaration of a state of emergency? If not, what meeting did Mr Keady invite you to? How long did it take you to get to the ESB after this call?

MR STANHOPE: This particular issue has been covered in my statements to the coronial inquest. It was a matter before the inquest. I refer the member to the transcript.

MR SMYTH: I ask a supplementary question. Chief Minister, why did the people of Canberra have to wait until 3 pm before they received a warning about the bushfires, even though the situation was serious enough to warrant the consideration of a state of emergency at 12.40 pm?

MR STANHOPE: This matter was covered by the coronial inquest. I refer the member to the transcript.

Taxation—superannuation

MR MULCAHY: Mr Speaker, my question to the Minister for Disability and Community Services relates to her responsibility for aged care. The *Australian* newspaper reported on 8 March 2007 that the left faction of the Australian Labor Party is pressing for superannuation payouts to once again be taxed. Minister, has your department done any analysis on what the impact of this change would be on the ACT's senior citizens and, if so, what will that impact be?

MS GALLAGHER: No, not that I am aware of.

MR MULCAHY: Mr Speaker, I ask a supplementary question. Minister, are you bound in your ministerial responsibility for senior citizens of the ACT by decisions made at ALP conferences?

MS GALLAGHER: No.

Mental health

MS PORTER: My question is to the Minister for Health and concerns accreditation of ACT mental health services. Minister, given that the external review of health services conducted by the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards is one of the most valuable quality improvement and accountability mechanisms for any health system, would you please inform the Assembly on the results of the recent ACHS external review of ACT mental health services?

MS GALLAGHER: This is good news for ACT Health, and for Mental Health ACT in particular. As members would be aware, the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards currently reviews health services against a set of standards to identify areas for continuous improvement. There are five areas assessed: continuum of care, which examines clinical care and systems; leadership and management; information management; human resource management; and safe practice and environment. There are 43 assessment criteria, of which 19 are mandatory.

As a member of the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards, Mental Health ACT underwent an alignment survey for the first time as a separate entity in August 2006. Prior to that, ACT mental health services had been included in the accreditation process as part of the Canberra Hospital. This accreditation process is important to ensure that mental health services are provided within a quality framework that is continuously monitored and reviewed for the safety and assurance of mental health consumers and carers.

I am pleased to report to the Assembly that Mental Health ACT recently achieved full accreditation, following an accreditation alignment survey in August last year. That was an outstanding achievement. I take this opportunity to congratulate the management and staff of Mental Health ACT on their work and commitment that led to that result.

Mental Health ACT achieved a moderate achievement rating for all mandatory criteria, with one criterion being awarded an extensive achievement, which again was an outstanding result. In order to achieve accreditation, Mental Health ACT had to achieve a moderate achievement rating against all of the mandatory criteria, and we were successful in doing so.

For one criterion, relating to consumer/patient health records, Mental Health ACT was awarded an extensive achievement rating. That was awarded for the use of the electronic client record system. Mental Health ACT was seen as a leader in the development and use of an electronic record system for mental health services and possibly a leader in any electronic system nationally, resulting in the extensive achievement rating.

The surveyors provided significant additional positive comments on several other criteria. In relation to criterion 1.3.2, concerning the evaluation of care by consumers and carers, the surveyors commented that there had been a concerted effort to involve consumers and carers in the service and that the consumers and carers do have a voice. For criterion 2.3.1, concerning the development of a continuous improvement system, the surveyors noted that Mental Health ACT has an evolving continuous quality improvement structure, with relevant and appropriate committees. That includes clinical documentation audits, an incident monitoring and review system, satisfaction surveys, and benchmarking via the national health round table.

The surveyors made 12 recommendations in the survey report, and it is important to note that there were no high-priority recommendations. Mental Health ACT has been awarded a two-year accreditation with ACHS, valid until 12 December 2008. That is the maximum time available under this alignment survey and provides for full accreditation of the service until Mental Health ACT participates in the ACT Health portfolio-wide survey in 2008.

MS PORTER: Minister, how has that fantastic result on accreditation been supported by this government's investment in mental health services?

MS GALLAGHER: The Stanhope government has a very strong record in mental health services and investment in mental health. In fact, in 2001 the mental health budget was around \$27 million. For this budget year the spending on mental health will be \$52.6 million, representing a 92 per cent increase since we came to government. This an area that we have prioritised. It is an area which needed immense reform, and that reform work has started and is continuing. A number of pieces of work are under way.

Last year, we launched the ACT action plan for mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention. We are currently putting together, in consultation with the community, a mental health services plan which is looking at service provision, current gaps, if there are any, and recent developments in support and services for people with a mental illness. It will look at projections on demand, particularly for inpatient facilities, and look at national strategic directions. We have a number of initiatives in this year's budget targeting those areas of national strategic priority,

particularly around early intervention, prevention and mental health promotion. We are working with the commonwealth on the COAG agenda for mental health reform.

You can see from the mandatory criteria in the accreditation documents that for many of the mandatory criteria we have been successful in achieving the results that we have only because of the support that has been provided to resource the mental health budget to an appropriate standard. When we came to government, mental health spending was just over 5.5 per cent of the health budget. We have now moved that to just over seven per cent of the health budget and we are working towards increasing it to 12 per cent by 2012, in line with the wishes of peak mental health lobby groups, which have been lobbying all governments across Australia to realign the expenditure on mental health to target the areas of need that we are seeing in our community.

This is a good news story, Mr Smyth. We look forward to a media release from you congratulating Mental Health ACT. It might kill you, but you might just have to do a positive story on health. It is a good news story. I commend the staff. Lots of work goes into accreditation. There is a lot of anxiety around accreditation time, but the results which are being achieved by Mental Health ACT should be acknowledged and rewarded, because the results have been fantastic.

Emergency Services Agency—capital works budget

MR PRATT: My question is to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. Minister, earlier this month the Emergency Services Commissioner and you released a business plan for the ACT Emergency Services Agency for the period 2007-08 to 2009-10. An integral part of this plan is the analysis of recurrent and capital works budgets for each year. Minister, with the annual operating budget for the agency being around \$80 million why will the budget for capital works reduce from around \$22 million in 2006-07 to only \$1.6 million in 2009-10? Given this reduction in the capital works budget, what capacity will this budget provide for new and ongoing capital works projects?

MR CORBELL: The reason for that is that we will have completed the headquarters. That is why there is a reduction in the capital works budget.

MR PRATT: I have a supplementary question, Mr Speaker. Minister, how will the Emergency Services Agency achieve appropriate replacement and upgrading of assets with such a small budget for capital works in the outyears?

MR CORBELL: Through the budget, Mr Speaker.

Education

DR FOSKEY: My question is to the minister for education and concerns educational outcomes. The minister may recall that when I asked him, through a question on notice last November, if the government recognises that key indicators for educational achievement are the educational achievements and socioeconomic status of the students' parents and family, he said no.

Is the minister for education now aware of the wide-ranging evidence that indicates the strong link between these factors? Can he explain why the 2020 plan failed to take that inequity into account?

MR BARR: I thank Dr Foskey for the question and for the opportunity to restate the significant importance of the education reform that was undertaken in 2006. What the government sought to do through this reform process was to more effectively allocate resources within the education portfolio. We were facing a series of significant issues within that portfolio, and they have been debated at length in this Assembly.

It is very important that we are able to allocate resources in areas where there is high educational or socioeconomic need. The government sought to do that through the provision of new infrastructure in those areas. Examples would include the new facilities in west Belconnen, the provision of a \$54 million new school in Kambah and the provision of new facilities in Gungahlin.

On top of that we also sought to provide a record amount of capital injection across our education system to look after some of the issues that had been neglected over 17 years of self-government in the territory. What also comes hand in hand with that, though, is a significant investment in IT infrastructure across our schools to ensure that, no matter where you are in Canberra or what your socioeconomic background is, you are able to access high quality information technology through your school.

It has quite often been the case that schools are the great leveller in terms of access to that sort of information technology. For some students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the only opportunity they will have to access the internet and to have access to the latest information technology is through their school. So the government has sought, through this reform process, to address some of the inequities that were occurring in our education system.

But it is also worth noting that, in addition to capital infrastructure and other investments, there are a series of programs that the government has put in place in relation to support for students from a lower socioeconomic background. There are a variety of measures in place to provide additional funding to particular schools that are in identified socioeconomic areas, as well as provision of individual assistance for students.

In my term as education minister I look forward to being able to develop programs further. I am acutely aware of the need to ensure equity of resources across our system because it is crucial to the reforms. The previous arrangements were delivering resources not on the basis of socioeconomic need, not on the basis of improving educational outcomes, but on a factor really only of the size of a school. There was a huge amount of resources devoted to schools in high socioeconomic areas because they happened to be small. The students in those schools were receiving considerably more per head than students in lower socioeconomic areas.

I do not resile for a second from the fact that we have undertaken a significant reform in order to invest a huge amount, a record amount of money, into public education to address just the issues that Dr Foskey is raising here today. I share her concern about

the inequity in our education system. Certainly, through a series of commonwealth government policies, we are seeing a massive redirection of resources away from lower socioeconomic areas into private schools, and particularly a range of private schools that do not really need those extra resources.

If we are fair dinkum about addressing social disadvantage, then the education system is the way to address that. This government is investing record amounts in public education. We have the runs on the board and over the next three years we will continue a reform process that will see more money injected into our public education system. It will see better outcomes for students and it will see ACT students continuing to lead the nation in the areas where we lead the nation. We will seek to address those areas where we are not performing as well, and that is what this reform process is about.

I encourage those opposite and Dr Foskey to get on board with this. It is important for the future of our society.

DR FOSKEY: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. In that case, aren't ACT school students missing out on university scores because they are not scaled against an equivalent part of New South Wales such as the North Shore or Baulkham Hills, but are scaled against the whole of New South Wales, which has a much lower level of education and affluence?

MR BARR: This issue has been agitated by a certain individual in our community. He has sought to raise this issue and the government—

Dr Foskey: And don't be personal.

MR BARR: I am not being personal; I am just saying this issue has been, and is consistently, raised by an individual. It has been examined several times during Ms Gallagher's term as education minister and at least once—if not twice—whilst I have been minister. A series of reviews has been undertaken. There has been quite a detailed examination of the issue.

Through the course of these reviews Dr Foskey has raised a particular issue: which area of Sydney might be best to compare with the ACT. That has been a vexed issue. There are still differences between the ACT socioeconomic profile and the examples that you have raised, Dr Foskey. I do not think that it is as easy as simply answering that we should compare our results with those of the north shore of Sydney. That is not the answer to the particular issues and concerns raised.

We have had a look at it. We have made some changes. Those changes were advised by the BSSS at the release of year 12 results at the end of last year. This issue has been addressed on a number of occasions. I do not believe that there is any further need at this time to undertake a further examination of that issue.

Emergency Services Agency—equipment

MRS DUNNE: My question is to the minister for emergency services.

Mr Stanhope: Not education? You are really worried about education!

MRS DUNNE: Obviously the Chief Minister is discomfited about the level of questioning on this.

Mr Stanhope: You're really worried about education.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Chief Minister!

MRS DUNNE: I would not waste my time asking questions here about education. Earlier this month, the Commissioner for Emergency Services and you, Minister, released the business plan for the ACT Emergency Services Agency for the period 2007-08 to 2009-10. The business plan reveals a substantial reduction in funding for capital works over the outyears. Minister, the ACT Rural Fire Service has estimated that it has an annual requirement of \$1 million for the replacement of vehicles alone—simply to maintain the existing level of equipment. Minister, what impact will the reduction of the capital budget for the Emergency Services Agency have on the replacement of equipment operated by the Rural Fire Service?

MR CORBELL: As I have indicated in the answer to Mr Pratt's question, the reduction in the capital works budget is because the headquarters will be complete by that time. The major component of capital works is for the relocation of the headquarters to Fairbairn—and the construction of those facilities and the upgrade of those buildings at Fairbairn.

I would have thought that blind Freddy would have understood that, when that money is spent, it is not going to be an ongoing cost; therefore the capital works budget will reduce. I would have thought that that would be pretty obvious to anyone looking at the big chunk of capital works that currently sits in the ESA budget, but clearly it is not obvious to Mr Pratt or to other members opposite.

That is why the capital works budget reduces—because the money has been spent on a new headquarters. Unless you are proposing to build another headquarters, another headquarters and another headquarters, the money is going to stop at some point. Maybe Mr Pratt wants a purpose-built headquarters here at the Assembly, for him in the prospect that he becomes minister—complete with radios, computers, TVs and so on.

In relation to Mrs Dunne's question about the RFS fleet, the RFS fleet matters will be considered by the government through the normal budget process.

MR SPEAKER: Do you have a supplementary question, Mrs Dunne?

MRS DUNNE: Yes, Mr Speaker. Minister, given that the plan shows that in the outyears the capital works budget will be \$1.6 million and taking into consideration that last year we budgeted \$1.5 million to replace one item of equipment, the Bronto, how will you be able to make provision for the upgrade of facilities when you are clearly running down the capital works budget for the replacement of any sort of equipment?

MR CORBELL: In relation to the Bronto, that was funded through the budget.

Mrs Dunne: Yes, and it took all of the money that you are proposing to spend on capital works.

MR CORBELL: It was funded through the budget. The government took the decision that the primary capital works expenditure it was prepared to authorise in this financial year was the replacement of the aerial appliance, the Bronto. We will take the same approach—

Mrs Dunne: It is going to cost \$1.5 million.

MR CORBELL: We will take the same approach in relation to the replacement of other items. It will be considered by the government through the capital works program as part of each year's budget development.

Vocational education and training

MR GENTLEMAN: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Education and Training. According to the latest statistics from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, how is the ACT performing on apprenticeships and traineeships compared with other states and territories?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Gentleman for the question and his keen interest in vocational education and training. I am very pleased to advise the Assembly that the latest statistics from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research show that the ACT is leading the nation in increases in new apprenticeships and traineeships, as well as in completions. The report shows an increase of 10 per cent in the number of commencements in apprenticeships and traineeships compared to a one per cent increase nationwide. The ACT has the biggest increase of any jurisdiction in the nation.

Mrs Dunne: And so has the drop-out rate.

MR BARR: The ACT also leads the nation when it comes to the completion of apprenticeships and traineeships, Mrs Dunne. Over 7,000 apprentices and trainees in the ACT completed their VET qualifications in the September quarter of 2006, an increase of 16 per cent over the same quarter for the previous year and compared to a national increase of four per cent. So young people are completing their apprenticeships and traineeships at a higher rate in the ACT than anywhere else in Australia. We can also be very pleased that so many Canberrans are committed to obtaining higher level skills. Students enrolled in level IV certificates have increased by 26 per cent compared to 15 per cent nationally.

The report shows that the majority of those in training in the ACT at this time are in industries that have been targeted by the government, in cooperation with industry, to address skills shortages. The ACT government has been working very closely with industry to identify training priorities and targets in the ACT vocational educational

and training plan. The government has developed a number of strategies to meet these targets.

One strategy has involved the innovative restructuring of apprentice training. An example of this is the accelerated chefs program, developed in consultation with industry, unions and the CIT. This allows apprentices to complete their training in two years. This innovative program is a national first. It is worth noting that this program could only have worked with the full cooperation of all parties. We are very fortunate in the ACT to have employers, unions and training providers willing to try new approaches to deal with skills shortages.

In terms of other strategies, the government continues to support vocational education and training in schools. In 2006 there were 2,463 vocational certificates issued and 2,185 statements of attainment were awarded across ACT high schools and colleges. Also, 322 students undertook Australian school-based apprenticeships. The career education support service has proven to be another important government initiative. This service supports student participation in vocational learning and career education programs. In 2005-06, \$472,000 was allocated to this in-school program.

So, Mr Speaker, as the Chief Minister outlined earlier, the government is committed to working with industry to address skills shortages. These latest statistics show that our efforts are paying off but we will need to continue to work with all stakeholders to continue to develop innovative programs. This government is committed to providing comprehensive pathways for all students. I think we can all be very proud of the territory's performance in vocational education and training.

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

Supplementary answer to question without notice

Animal welfare

MR HARGREAVES: Mr Speaker, on 7 March Dr Foskey asked about battery cage egg production. For the information of members I provide the following information. A ban on the keeping of hens in a battery cage system for the production of eggs has a complex history. Implementation of the ban is equally complex, and I will explain.

The 1997 amendment to the Animal Welfare Act 1992 prohibits the keeping of hens for egg production in a battery cage system. This provision remains uncommenced. The reason it remains uncommenced is that a complementary provision under the Eggs (Labelling and Sale) Act 2001 prohibits the sale of eggs produced by a hen in a way that is an offence against the territory law or that would be an offence against the territory law if the hen were kept in the ACT.

This means that if a ban on the use of battery cages for layer hens in the ACT was implemented there would be consequential implications for interstate trade in battery cage produced eggs. National competition policy and constitutional issues relating to freedom of interstate trade arise here. The Animal Welfare Act recognises this in the following terms: before the Eggs (Labelling and Sale) Act provision can be applied, an exemption for the ACT has to be recognised in schedule 2 of the commonwealth's Mutual Recognition Act 1992. For this recognition to occur, each state jurisdiction

must agree that a special case for the ACT has been established. No such agreement has been forthcoming.

In summary, a ban on battery cage production of eggs in the ACT can only be implemented after an exemption for the ACT is recognised in the commonwealth's Mutual Recognition Act. The government remains committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for the welfare of layer hens. However, as I have outlined, there are a number of constraints on what may be achieved. The government is also conscious of the fact that the single battery cage enterprise in the ACT is a significant economic asset with strong operational links to the New South Wales egg production industry. In this context the government does not support unilateral action that would impact in an unfair way on a legitimate business.

In relation to 1 January 2008, which was part of Dr Foskey's question, I would advise members that at a meeting of the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand in 2000 it was agreed to mandate new standards for the housing of battery-caged layer hens. These standards require more floor space per bird, with enhanced watering, feeding, perching and waste management facilities. While still a battery-caged system, there is agreement nationally by governments and industry that the welfare of caged birds will be improved. January 2008 is prescribed as the deadline for introducing the new standards. The government amended the Animal Welfare Act in 2001 accordingly.

Finally, the government has not undertaken any estimate of costs to government of implementing a ban on the caged housing of layer hens after 1 January 2008.

Papers

Mr Corbell presented the following papers:

Legislation Act, pursuant to section 64—Legal Profession Act—Legal Profession Amendment Regulation 2007 (No 1)—Subordinate Law SL2007-4 (LR, 26 February 2007), together with its explanatory statement.

Multiculturalism

Debate resumed.

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (3.15): Mr Pratt's amendment celebrates the rich diversity and harmony of ACT society, the strength of which has been the successful integration of so many cultural and religious groups here, and calls upon all Australian societies to emulate our model.

We have about 160 different nationalities in Canberra. It is an absolute tribute to people's ability to live in a harmonious society. We have been enriched by that, and these people coming into our community have been very important steps in the evolution of Australia.

Modern Australia was founded by basically people of Anglo-Celtic stock, and in the 19th century there were some other—

Ms MacDonald: What about the people who lived here before that?

MR STEFANIAK: I said “modern Australia”, Ms MacDonald—listen. In the 19th century there were people from some other parts of the world who came here—people especially for the gold rush, people of Chinese extraction who came out here in the 1850s—and we see some old, distinguished families in the Canberra region from that particular migration. I refer, in fact, to the Nomchong family from Braidwood. I had the pleasure to go out and see some celebration at Braidwood on Saturday; it was pleasing to reflect on that famous family of Chinese extraction which has done much for the Braidwood region but also the ACT. I think they must be up to the fifth or sixth generation.

There were a small number of people from various other ethnic backgrounds who came here up until World War II, a not insignificant number of people from the Italian and Greek communities who came here between the wars, and of course after World War II the first amount of mass migration from Europe, and especially of people from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. That is probably something reflected in the Assembly, with families such as mine and Mr Seselja’s, who were from that postwar generation who came out to Australia and made their homes here. Since then we have seen people from other parts of the globe. We have now got, as I said, about 160 different nationalities in Canberra.

Ms MacDonald had a swipe—possibly slightly more gently than I thought she might, but nevertheless a swipe—at the federal government in relation to this, which I think is somewhat inappropriate. In a way, it is: what’s in a name? That is why I think Mr Pratt’s amendment to the motion is a very good one because it talks about the rich diversity and our harmony and the successful integration. It talks about people emulating our model. It keeps in the important role of the National Multicultural Festival in promoting and celebrating multiculturalism in the ACT and it is very much a more inclusive motion, which is so important in this area. It is rather cheap, in a way, to have a go at the federal government on this.

There have been a number of significant milestones in terms of migration to Australia in recent times, starting off with Arthur Calwell—“Cocky” Calwell—and his immigration scheme after the war. It was the scheme that saw my father, amongst others, come out here. That was picked up and enhanced by the Menzies government and since then we have seen further emphasis placed on inclusiveness, harmony and building on our strengths as a community of many, many different diverse cultures through the seventies, through the Whitlam government, through the Fraser government, through the Hawke and Keating governments and now of course through to the Howard government.

Australians are a very inclusive lot. We have developed our own unique culture here. It has been greatly enhanced by all groups who have come here, ranging from the first human habitation of this country 45,000 years ago, through to the colonisation of Australia by the British and the Anglo-Celts and to other diverse groups that have come here over the last 200 years. It is interesting to reflect on perhaps some words spoken by Dr George Zubrzycki—of Polish extraction with a name like that, obviously—who, I think, coined the term “multiculturalism” in 1968 but in more

recent times has sort of refined the issue and has come up with what I think is a very good phrase. Accidentally, almost, I think it is a phrase reflected by our Ethnic Schools Association. Zubrzycki states that Australia is a case of many cultures, one Australia, and I think that is very, very true. That is something that is laudable, desirable and something we should celebrate.

It is interesting that the ACT Ethnic Schools Association has a phrase, which I think is “Many languages, one voice”, and that is very, very true too, because the ethnic schools teach, to whoever wants to go along—I had the pleasure of going along to a Polish one once in 1998—the culture and the language that the old country migrants come from and they speak, though, with one voice. It is a very similar message to what Zubrzycki was talking about there. I think that is a very, very true and accurate statement of where we are at in Australia and particularly where we are at in the ACT.

Mr Pratt has most eloquently talked about how Australian society should emulate the ACT model and he has highlighted the great benefit from the efforts of the Canberra Islamic societies—and there are many—in terms of what they are doing in our community. That is true, I think, of all groups in the ACT and that is something that Australia could emulate, because it is worrying when we see things like the Cronulla riots, the retaliating tactics taken by certain groups on that night and the damage and the violence against people caused by both of those incidents. That is something we strive to stop in Australia.

It is because of our own unique culture, which has been moulded over centuries really—but moulded probably even more quickly over the last two centuries, and even more quickly over the last half-century as a result of so many groups coming into Australia—that we have the Australia that we have today. It is a place people want to come to and, despite what some might say, we have a proud record, too, in terms of migration. There are countries in the world that do not allow people from other lands to go and live there. Despite some of the criticism that might have been made in terms of even our refugee policy, Australia takes many more refugees than many, many other countries in the world. I saw some statistics—admittedly a couple of years old—which indicated that per head of population we are about second in terms of the numbers we take. That is something that we can be proud of and something the federal government can indeed be proud of.

There are so many people who want to come here and start a new life, for obvious reasons. They are always going to keep their culture. They are going to pass that culture down to their children. That is just human nature and it is desirable; it is laudable. But they are also going to bring their own attributes to our Australian culture and they are going to meld into our Australian culture as so many groups have before them. It is a unique culture. There are some countries which are not dissimilar—probably mainly the countries of the British commonwealth, such as New Zealand, and to an extent perhaps Canada and maybe several others—but it is a culture that is the envy of many, many people in the world. Mr Pratt’s amendment and the third paragraph of Ms MacDonald’s motion really encapsulate that.

There have been a few problems in the past. Ms MacDonald is having a bit of a swipe at the federal government. I have praised Arthur Calwell; I think he did a wonderful job. But I think few people today would probably agree with his comment, “Two

wongs don't make a white" in terms of the White Australia Policy which was established, I think, in the early 1890s.

Malcolm Fraser started a significant migration into the country of Vietnamese people, and I think that was a noble and honourable thing to do. They were our allies in a war where we went to their aid. That war was lost and Vietnam was reunified. Maybe it was a war that should never have happened, but there you go—it did and it lasted 30 years. Malcolm Fraser opened our doors to assist our former allies to come to Australia—and what a magnificent contribution they have made. So many students at our universities are of Vietnamese extraction and so many have done so well in the professions. They have brought a rich culture to Australia. It was sad to see Gough Whitlam refer to them as “Asian Balts”; I doubt very much if he would do that again now.

We have a very rich, diverse culture here in Canberra. It is the envy of the rest of Australia and the world and I commend Mr Pratt's amendment to the substantive motion.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (3.24): I should say at the outset that I will not be supporting the amendment. I will be supporting the original motion and now I would like to explain why. Everybody knows that the Greens are passionate supporters of multiculturalism, but we are concerned at some of the ways that people interpret that idea. It is important to reiterate that no-one is multicultural. More accurately, the idea of multicultural is about the way we all live together, not about who we are as individuals. Too often someone who has a Greek background, for example, or who has a black skin or who comes from Singapore is described as multicultural, although indigenous people in the country, I hasten to observe, are not described as multicultural. Somehow when we use that word “multicultural” we are leaving out indigenous people.

Indeed, the issue of indigenous cultures, and how important they are and must remain for us to live together and develop as a nation with real cultural connections between us, and our extraordinary failure to do that over the past 200 years, underpins any debate we might have about national identity, multiculturalism or any selection of values that we wish to claim as our own.

I noted in Mr Pratt's speech this morning that, while he used the word “multicultural” quite frequently, he refrained from using the word “multiculturalism”. So I can only assume that multicultural is okay but multiculturalism is not. But of course culture is not just about ethnicity. There are significant cultural differences between rural and city Australians, for example, and there can be grander differences within ethnicities than between them. There are issues of class, gender, upbringing, income, geography and age. There are all these ways in which we differ from each other. No-one is multicultural, but we all have cultures and we all need to understand our own culture and learn to understand others.

Furthermore, culture is a process. It is not a concrete immovable thing; it exists in how we do things and who we do them with—what we eat, how we work, what we work at, the spirit we bring to our relationships and how we play together. So what we need from multiculturalism is not merely a celebration of cultural plurality but

interaction among cultures. Too many people imagine that others—people from non-English-speaking backgrounds usually—come from somewhere and have a culture while they themselves come from nowhere and have no culture. That is one aspect of the division between those whose lived experiences ensure they are sensitive to the various cultural perspectives that people in our society have and those who simply see it all as a question of us and others.

The words we use to describe our society are not purposeless. Multiculturalism, in the Greens view, is an important statement to Australians that we value cultural activity and the diversity of cultures in our community, that we look for connections and dialogue between cultures—between people in fact—and that the richness of diversity, like biodiversity, is an invaluable resource.

Probably the social challenge human beings face is that of empathy, of being able to put ourselves non-judgmentally in the metaphorical shoes of others. That means that when we hear about a boatload of refugees being refused access we put ourselves in the minds of those refugees. If we all did that I believe we would approach these issues with a great deal more compassion. Those who continue to judge and treat refugees as others in fact lack that really important quality of empathy, the ability to see something from someone else's point of view, the ability to feel what they feel.

Without the multicultural project, that essential goal for our society is so much harder to prioritise. Indeed, there are only two things that we need to get our heads around in this world, to talk in generalities: one is our place on the planet and our responsibility for it and the other is our care for others. In that context the Pauline Hanson phenomenon, and the Liberal and National parties' appropriation of it—with the Labor Party, in my view, more or less tagging along—has been extraordinarily damaging. And now we hear that Fred Nile has jumped on the bandwagon; I can only suspect that when you are desperate for votes you will seek out any fringe minority that you can find, especially ones who fear difference, and build on a fear latent in the community.

In contemporary political parlance the word “multicultural” has become tied to a derogatory notion of someone else's political correctness. Any discussion of values, the whole game of imagining an Australian values test and much of the discussion about the threats or terrorism act as a dog whistle for racism and xenophobia. When we have most needed political leadership we have had from both major parties a failure of leadership.

And so commitment to the word “multiculturalism” is important and a commitment to a project that grows from multiculturalism is more important again. In that context the Canberra National Multicultural Festival is both important and limited. It is important in what it does but too limited in what it hopes to say. That is in part a failure of concept to my mind, but it also reflects a lack of resources and a lack of commitment to grow those resources.

If this festival is to become something significantly more than a celebration of different nationalities in Australia and beyond—through dance, food, costume and local and overseas performance—it needs to be funded so that it can select and commission projects, develop the occasional piece of new work over years and step

beyond the local community association or take them further. I would have thought that this year or even last year we could have seen some exciting work that explored perhaps the common heritage of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The time would seem to be right for that work.

I have got to say that I enjoyed many aspects of the multicultural festival, and particularly the fringe because in a way it did allow for that spontaneity of new acts. Perhaps we could look at a project about bored youth—in East Timor, the South Pacific and parts of Sydney, for example. I do not know if ideas like these are what the existing team would want for our most substantial festival here in the national capital, but I do not believe it is resourced or envisioned to reach that far; nor do I feel it has the independence from the bureaucracy to act as swiftly as one needs to in the arts world.

Perhaps the tragedy of our age, exacerbated by the last decade of conservative politics at the federal level and too much complacency at state and territory levels, is that multiculturalism, which is a process—not just a label—has not been able to evolve to its next stage. It keeps being talked about in terms of national loyalty, which is loyalty to the constructed idea of the nation, and that has been made the beacon rather than the healthy, tolerant, diverse and welcoming society that the Greens would want.

The Greens see the next stage, as I have explained, as moving from tolerance and celebration of diverse cultures—that is, multiculturalism as we see it—to greater interaction between these cultures, which I believe would be a natural evolution. Multiculturalism is not set in time; it is something that I believe is part of a process moving onwards to that better inclusive society. This is not equivalent to the federal government's spin of integration, where in fact we see some communities feeling more alienated than they have in decades.

So it is a pity that we have to stand here and defend multiculturalism from bigots. It is a word that had its place in our culture, and it was a right place and a politically correct term that all parties adhered to. But now I believe we have gone way backwards. We should not have to defend it; we should let it evolve as it could. We need cultural projects that move us forward in all sorts of ways and that explore how we connect and give us tools to support and work with each other. That is something that our multicultural festival does have the potential to be, and in some ways it is, but to do that I believe it needs more resources and possibly more independence and more ability to act as a festival sort of commission, because we do need to move fast in the arts community.

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (3.34): Mr Speaker, I rise to support Ms MacDonald's motion, and I will not be supporting Mr Pratt's amendment. We often hear that we should tolerate those who come from backgrounds that are culturally and linguistically different from our own. This is a view that I reject. Tolerance indicates that we are prepared to put up with something, to just let it happen because we cannot be bothered to do anything about it, or are just willing to let it wash over us and get on with other things that are more important to us.

I suggest that we no longer just tolerate people who have come here from distant shores, and I take Dr Foskey's point about our indigenous people as well; I do believe

that they also may suffer under this attitude. We should not just tolerate people; we should accept and understand people, and in doing so embrace and accept, with enthusiasm, their differences and their similarities, because by accepting and embracing their differences and their similarities we will become a richer community and a stronger community. Let me ask you this question, Mr Speaker: would you prefer to just be tolerated by people or would you prefer them to accept you for the person you are?

I also thank Dr Foskey for her reference to refugees and their recent treatment in Australia by some. Thankfully, Canberra opens its doors and supports refugees that come here, and the Chief Minister has declared that this city is a welcoming city for refugees. Since I have been in this place, one of my greatest pleasures and absolute privileges has been to be able to attend many multicultural events. Indeed, I have been honoured to have the opportunity to speak at a large number of them. In fact, the first function I officiated at following my election was to be chief guest at Diwali, the Festival of Lights, and since then I have attended many Indian community functions and have enjoyed learning more about their customs and traditions, as well as, of course, enjoying much of their wonderful food. Indeed, I recall speaking at the Hindu Temple and Cultural Centre's annual Navrang event.

Another event at which I represented the ACT government was the graduation of 20 participants from the work experience and support program, WESP, in November 2006. WESP is an ACT government initiative that provides unemployed skilled migrants with the opportunity to expand their experience in the Australian work force. Each participant receives four weeks intensive office skills training and eight weeks on-the-job experience. It is a wonderful program, and at the end many come out with renewed confidence and new contacts, and a high percentage gain employment as a result of their involvement in a WESP program.

During the November graduation ceremony at the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre I met with and presented the latest group of participants with their certificates. It is heartening that we are able to assist on a practical level in such a way. At that time I explained the story of my parents, who arrived in Australia with very little money but who were able, with opportunities that were presented to them, to enjoy success and enjoy seeing their daughters flourish in their new professions.

Australia has become a land of opportunity for many individuals throughout the decades. Some have come here from across the world with very little money but have made a life for themselves and contributed greatly to this country's development. That contribution has been made in the form of not only skills and labour but also culture and cuisine. The national capital has benefited from this in farming and construction, small and large business, technology and ideas. This has contributed to the vibrant, cosmopolitan and interesting place that our city is today. We are indeed privileged that so many people from so many diverse cultures have chosen to make Canberra their home.

To reject multiculturalism is to reject the very foundation of modern Australia. As Ms MacDonald has so rightly said, the ACT government supports and celebrates our rich multicultural traditions through the National Multicultural Festival, as well as many other initiatives. This year saw our city play host to the 11th such festival,

which was a great success, as those before me have said. We all know that there are nearly 200 culturally and linguistically diverse groups in the ACT. Staging the National Multicultural Festival provides yet another opportunity to showcase the wonderful diversity of cultures that we have in our city.

I will be speaking next Tuesday at the Harmony Day celebrations hosted by the Migrant Resource Centre, just across the square. The theme for the day is “We are different, but we are the same” and whilst it is true that much about us is different it is equally true that we share many things in common, and it is this combination that makes our community in Canberra and the region such a strong one.

We have seen in other places in Australia symptoms of intolerance and a lack of understanding and acceptance of people from different backgrounds. We are fortunate in Canberra that we live in a truly multicultural society, which demonstrates that many people from many countries are able to live together in harmony and with an understanding of each other’s unique differences as well as the things about us that are the same.

However, as members have already mentioned here today, unfortunately there are many examples of violence and the scapegoating of people from diverse backgrounds who have recently arrived here. These take place in other cities and towns in Australia but, thankfully, not here. That is why we must remain vigilant at all times and use every opportunity to create and nurture a positive environment for all people of all nations to live together and to share their varied cultural interests—interests such as food, arts, craft, music and dance—and, of course, national dress.

I have often commented that Australian national dress would be hard to define unless perhaps it is stubbies and thongs or a Drizabone and an Akubra. At many of the functions I attend I have the opportunity of seeing many women, and on occasions also men, in wonderful colourful national dress, particularly those from southern Africa and the Asian subcontinent.

Another feature referred to by Ms MacDonald when she spoke earlier was the opportunity we have to sample the great diversity of culinary delights. How boring would it be if our daily diet was still restricted to the meat and three veg that were staples when I first came to this country as a migrant in the mid-fifties. It is impossible to go anywhere in Canberra or Australia without rubbing shoulders with people from all around the world, and we are much the richer for it.

So I join with Ms MacDonald in endorsing the use of “multiculturalism” in our community and I admonish any move by any government at any level to move away from supporting multiculturalism in Australia. As I have said, to reject multiculturalism is to reject the very foundation of modern Australia.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (3.42): I am appalled at the lack of intellectual rigour during the debate on this motion. This outrageous motion starts with the words “unanimously endorses the use of the word ‘multicultural’ in our community”. This is like McDonalds getting the heart foundation tick. Food that complies gets a tick. Acceptable words will now get the Karin MacDonald stamp of approval: you can use this word. We should look at the history of the multicultural movement before we

start saying, “We should endorse particular words. Indeed, we should admonish any government that chooses not to use those words.”

I expected a bit more vim and vigour in the argument. Clearly, the motion was framed to target changes to the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and was designed to admonish the federal government in particular. But that was not apparent during the debate this morning. I think the attack has evaporated over time because there was never a need for an attack in the first place.

The true father of multiculturalism in this country, Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki, has said that perhaps it is time we moved on. The man who introduced the word multiculturalism to the lexicon, who in the late sixties advised the Labor Party and then the Liberal Party, has said that the word has reached its use-by date.

I think it is really quite dangerous to start setting words in stone. Forty years ago the word “gay” meant to be happy. It is now widely used by the homosexual community. “Sick” when I was a child meant you were trying to get mum to give you a day off school. Today, if you are “fully sick”, you are really cool. John Hargreaves—there he is over there—is fully sick. We could get into the lingo.

But when parliaments start to endorse words, it is going to a level of political correctness that I think is dangerous. Look at the way we have used words that describe those that follow Mohammed. They used to be Moslems, then they were Muslims and now we talk about Islamists. These words are integrated into the language.

The word “terrific” comes from the word “terrify”. It used to mean to be scared. Now the word terrific, like sick, means something totally different. The English language is one of the great languages of the world. It is not rigid; it evolves. The dictionary grows every year, and we have to be very careful.

Mr Hargreaves: You can do better than this, Brendan.

MR SMYTH: I want Mr Hargreaves to listen very closely to what Professor Zubrzycki said.

Mr Hargreaves: What is the name of the book?

MR SMYTH: The book is called *Australian Citizenship: See You in Australia* by Brian Galligan and Winsome Roberts, published by Allen and Unwin. It is a scholarly tome that those opposite obviously have not consulted. The authors say:

While multiculturalism was largely subsumed by the notion of cultural diversity, the word itself was now questioned by its original architects. Zubrzycki, who had given the term its fullest ideological rendering and embellished it in numerous reports, now dismissed it as ambiguous and pompous. Speaking at the 1995 Global Cultural Diversity conference, Zubrzycki admitted that the introduction of the term “multiculturalism” to Australia was “almost accidental” and an “on-the-spot” decision of a politician who thought it would be a suitable tag for a range of policies dealing with migrants. He questioned whether it was still necessary to use “the clumsy, pompous word ‘multiculturalism’ to celebrate the

diversity of our cultural makeup". The derivative "multicultural" was still necessary to refer to the actual demographic diversity of Australia, Zubrzycki said, but the "polysyllabic noun 'multiculturalism' had outlived its purpose" and was associated "with all kinds of negative attitudes and incidents of political separatism". Instead he proposed the slogan: "Many cultures, One Australia".

This is the danger of this motion. Ms MacDonald, in her wisdom, is seeking the endorsement of the ACT Assembly to lock the word multiculturalism in place for all time to ensure that it can be used in only one way. That would be a terrible thing. It would erode the very meaning of the word because, as we all know, the meaning of words change over time.

Actions speak louder than words, and if you have to rely on the use of a word to assert or prove that something exists, then there is a fallacy in your argument. For instance, in 1972, when the Whitlam government came to office, they claimed to be in favour of multiculturalism. In 1971, 140,000 people immigrated to Australia. The first act of the incoming government was to slash the number from 140,000 to 110,000. So much for encouraging cultural diversity! But there is more. Remember that the figure went from 140,000 to 110,000. In 1974, it went to 80,000. In 1975, the planned migrant intake was reduced to 50,000 people, the lowest under Labor since World War II.

What was the first action of the incoming Fraser government when it won election in 1975? In 1976, the new government immediately increased the size of the migration program by 40 per cent to 70,000.

Mr Hargreaves: Go, Big Mal!

MR SMYTH: Go, Mr Fraser! There would be many who would attempt to take from Jerzy Zubrzycki his title of the father of multiculturalism. We have to be careful about modern legend. Those that have not done it like to talk about it and write it, but history is always accurate. In an article entitled "Popular Support Not Required" for the Institute of Public Affairs, Michael Warby writes:

Some questions to test your understanding of recent Australian history: which was the first major Australian political party to adopt multiculturalism as official policy? Who was the first Federal politician to refer to multiculturalism in Parliament? Who was the second? Which Federal Government was the first to make multiculturalism public policy? When did multiculturalism achieve the support of the majority of Australians?

The answers are: the Liberal Party; Malcolm Fraser when Liberal Party immigration spokesperson; Michael MacKellar as his successor; the Fraser government; and not before the mid-1990s. So we need to be very careful when we start endorsing individual words.

This motion lacks intellectual rigor because to have a truly multicultural country you actually need to have a multicultural society; you actually need to have diversity. You cannot have a multicultural society without first having a culturally diverse society. How was that achieved post-war? Yes, John Curtin had a part in it, but who for 23 years fostered and improved it and built up the intake to Australian society? The

answer is successive Liberal governments. Successive Liberal governments created and supported this culturally diverse society, and they do so today.

Ms Porter said she was going to go to Harmony Day on behalf of the government. Congratulations, Ms Porter. It is a Liberal Party initiative, funded since 1999 with increasing vigour by the Howard government. This is the tradition of all Liberal governments. They have built on our culturally diverse multicultural society. They do not make speeches about it and they do not crow about it. They actually do it, and that is the difference. Their actions speak so much louder than words.

What did the Whitlam government do? Michael Warby continues:

Conversely, multiculturalism was never the official policy of the Whitlam Government. It had begun to seep into government documents and reports, and Al Grassby did give a speech entitled *A Multicultural Society for the Future* in August 1973, but Grassby himself did not become a multiculturalist until after he ceased to be Immigration Minister. Nor did the Whitlam Government take the final step and adopt multiculturalism as a policy, though events—

to give them credit—

were moving in that direction.

There was a lot of work done in the sixties under Liberal governments to get rid of the White Australia policy, and in 1978 the Fraser government's review of immigration laws removed all vestiges of the White Australia policy. In 1978, the then Liberal government adapted recommendation 2 of the Galbally report, which can be considered to mark the beginning of multiculturalism in Australian government policy.

The underlying principles of that policy were: equity, that is, the right of all Australians to maintain their culture without prejudice or disadvantage; the need for special services and programs for migrants and the principle of full consultation with clients to encourage migrants to become self-reliant as quickly as possible.

The real danger is that, by having silly, intellectually bereft motions that want us to endorse a word unanimously, we will trivialise the whole debate in Australia. Words change, and if this word came to mean something else 10, 20 or 30 years from now, we would be stuck with a resolution that says we cannot touch it.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (3.52): I have to say that it really is news to Mr Smyth that the word multiculturalism is a very, very important word to our multicultural community here in Canberra. In fact, Mr Smyth would have it removed from the lexicon.

Mr Smyth talked about Malcolm Fraser doing all these wonderful things because he actually wants to own the word. I do not mind if you want to embrace the word, Mr Smyth. It suits me. But it is really a coincidence, is it not, that what Malcolm Fraser buildeth, John Howard wants to taketh away. Of course, John Howard was one of Malcolm Fraser's biggest fans. We all know that. What

absolute rubbish! He cannot stand the thought that Malcolm Fraser will go down in history as a much bigger man in the international world than he is.

Mr Smyth said that multiculturalism has outlived its purpose or its usefulness. He read from a book called *Australian Citizenship*. Well, I am convinced. Game over. Mr Smyth said words to the effect that multiculturalism has outlived its purpose or its usefulness. Tell that to the boat people. Tell that to the former Nauru inmates. Tell that to the children in the Baxter Detention Centre. Tell that to those subjected to an English test to get citizenship. Tell them that if it has outlived its usefulness.

Mr Pratt: Some of them became citizens.

MR HARGREAVES: Mr Pratt is representative of the way this Liberal Party thinks. I recall being absolutely aghast some years ago when a bunch of boat people turned up in Darwin harbour. There were only about 4,000 a year, for heaven's sake! The president of the Victorian Liberal Party at the time was quoted in the newspapers as saying that the way to deal with them was to take them out into Darwin harbour and let the navy use them for target practice. To me, that says it all. That was an appalling piece of work.

I endorse the sentiments of my colleagues, Ms Porter and Ms MacDonald. The ACT government strongly endorses multiculturalism, an ideology and a set of practical policies that, over the past 30 years or so, have been integral to the process that has built a harmonious and culturally diverse society around liberal democratic values.

This is seen by the Prime Minister as such a threat to his vision of a back-to-the-fifties Australia that he wants to remove the word from government use. Members will know that the Prime Minister has recently removed the term multicultural from the title of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and replaced it with citizenship. He must have read the same book that Mr Smyth has. This move to devalue multiculturalism is deeply concerning. It does so in both ideological and practical terms. This action is strongly condemned by the ACT government.

There is also a widely held view that the action of the Prime Minister is doomed to fail. The Prime Minister might like to think he can engineer the Australian national identity in his own image, but he is mistaken. The Australian people will define their own national identity regardless of what any individual politician might say. Given the diversity of our backgrounds, our food, dress, speech, names and leisure activities, that national identity will inevitably be multicultural.

Multiculturalism recognises and promotes cultural and ethnic diversity. It has been one of the strongest forces in shaping the social and economic fabric of Canberra. Multiculturalism in this city will continue to be supported through the provision of services and facilities such as the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre and events such as the recently concluded National Multicultural Festival. I was privileged to attend more than a dozen events through the two weeks of the festival and joined some 150,000 fellow Canberrans and visitors in celebration of our cultural diversity. The festival is a manifestation of the success of multiculturalism. It supports the sharing of customs and heritage and encourages partnerships and community building.

Since the festival more than seven ambassadors from our city's foreign embassies have approached me and highlighted the significance of the event. One said that the ACT has led the way in Australia in showcasing multiculturalism. In the few weeks since the festival I have also received an overwhelmingly positive response from community organisations involved in the festivities.

In support of multiculturalism, the Stanhope government has introduced a range of policies and programs. They are underpinned by the ACT multicultural strategy 2006-09, which was introduced last December. The strategy was developed through extensive community consultation and defines how multiculturalism will continue to be strengthened over the next four years.

This strategy was borne out of the six ministerial multicultural forums and the ministerial multicultural summit in 2005, as well as subsequent community submissions. It is a document the ACT government is very proud of, not the least because it was devised with the community addressing their express needs. Our support for multiculturalism is also embraced through the overarching Canberra social plan.

In a very practical way in 2005 the government was able to support multiculturalism through the establishment of the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre in Civic. Over 30 multicultural communities use the facility on a daily basis for a broad range of reasons, some for meetings and social events and others to provide guidance and support to vulnerable people.

Since its opening the multicultural centre has become the hub—some might say the headquarters—of cultural diversity in the ACT. The robust and enthusiastic way in which the community has embraced the centre has been wonderful to see. While many great strides have been made in promoting and maintaining multiculturalism in the ACT, this government will continue to promote multiculturalism and work with individuals and groups within our community to ensure that it is fostered. We will vigorously oppose any move by the Australian government to devalue multiculturalism and impose a new set of prescriptions that will, in effect, deny its importance in shaping contemporary Australia.

In her speech Ms MacDonald referred to a message commemorating Commonwealth Day from Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II dated 12 March this year. The message stated:

... the Commonwealth to me is still at heart a collection of villages. In close-knit communities like these, there are beliefs and values we share and cherish.

The message continued:

... I believe that it is more important ... to keep trying to respect and understand each other ... Each of us is an individual, with ties of emotion and bonds of obligation—to culture, religion, community, country and beyond. In short, each of us is special.

The message concluded:

By respecting difference and promoting understanding that future will be a better one for all of us.

These sentiments are at odds with the notion of one culture being absorbed into another. John Howard uses the word “integration”. Clearly, the Prime Minister is at odds with his head of state. The Queen has described the essential elements of multiculturalism, not a policy of absorption or of integration. Canberra is a society of dual cultures with Polish Australians, Mexican Australians and Lao Australians. The aggregation of those dual cultures is multiculturalism. We enjoy our multiculturalism and we will defend and cherish it.

John Howard wants to indulge in the social engineering of absorption, the denial of mother country. His most recent move is to remove the word from the lexicon, and we reject that move. The word multiculturalism sticks in the Prime Minister’s throat. Even the parliamentary secretary does not carry the title any more. How I hate xenophobia! This is back to the fifties, back to the Olympic Games of 1956. Mr Howard ought to be ashamed of himself. It certainly would not be the first time somebody has advised John Howard to learn the lessons of Malcolm Fraser.

In conclusion, I listened to what Dr Foskey said about the Multicultural Festival. Clearly, she has missed the point a little. I thank her very much for her promotion of it, but she might like to know that, in respect of funding, it is a partnership arrangement. In cash and kind about \$1 million goes toward that festival. Its central theme is the promotion of multiculturalism. If Dr Foskey has a good look at the program—and I invite her to do so—she will see that central theme of multiculturalism threaded all the way through it.

It is funded by public and private funds, and those funds must be managed properly. We also have the artistic management of the festival, and that theme is managed by Dominic Mico. He makes sure that the thread of multiculturalism through the arts is presented at the Multicultural Festival.

We have to be careful that it does not grow so big that it becomes a festival of the arts and not a festival promoting multiculturalism. That is why we are having an evaluation program in a week or two to actually make sure that the 2008 festival concentrates on promoting the embracing of multiculturalism and that it uses as the thread for that promotion the arts in the ACT and all the other pleasant events that we actually encounter.

I fully commend Ms MacDonald’s motion to the Assembly. I reject the amendments.

MS MacDONALD (Brindabella) (4.02): I will address Mr Pratt’s proposed amendment and close the debate. Firstly, I would like to thank everybody, including Mr Smyth, for their contributions to the debate. I have enjoyed this debate immensely, possibly more than any other debate I have participated in in my time in this place. I think it speaks volumes that, as well as me, six members of the Assembly contributed to the debate. So I thank members for their contribution to the debate.

Obviously members on the government side do not accept Mr Pratt's amendment. Mr Pratt would have got a bit of a feel for that from—

Mr Smyth: So what are you against celebrating—the rich diversity of ACT society?

MS MacDONALD: Mr Smyth, I did not interrupt you. Please do not interrupt me. Opposition members would have got a feel for the reasons why we are not supporting Mr Pratt's amendment from the speeches by Ms Porter and Mr Hargreaves. However, I will say that the main reason I do not support Mr Pratt's amendment is because he does not seem to understand—and this is the key to the entire debate—the difference between the words integration and multiculturalism. I do not mean the dictionary definition, Mr Pratt, but the political definition and the connotation that attaches to the word integration, which is a negative connotation. Historically there is a negative political connotation attached to that word in Australia, and that is why we are rejecting Mr Pratt's amendment.

I have to say that I agree with a lot of what Mr Pratt said, especially about the contribution that people from many different multicultural backgrounds have brought to Australia and how we could all learn a lot from them. I think that is a legitimate and very positive comment that Mr Pratt made. Mr Pratt also made a comment about Sheik al-Hilaly setting up a political party, and I think the point he was making was that a reason why we should not support multiculturalism is because here is a man who is clearly—

Mr Pratt: No, no, no.

MS MacDONALD: This is my interpretation. I could be wrong.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! Members of the opposition will come to order.

MS MacDONALD: I understood Mr Pratt to be saying that this political party was being established and that, because Sheik al-Hilaly and Kayser Trad clearly did not have Australia's best interests at heart, this was a problem. I believe the electorate will sort this out. It is up to the electorate to sort it out. It is not up to us. What are we going to do? Are we going to start condemning political parties that do not conform to our own views? This is an echo of the days when we tried to outlaw the communist party?

Mr Stefaniak raised concerns about the Cronulla riots. I absolutely agree with Mr Stefaniak, and I have spoken in this place about the Cronulla riots. I grew up in the part of Sydney where the riots took place. I lived in Maroubra. The riots are a concern, and they are the reason why we should be making a contribution and retaining the concept of multiculturalism.

I absolutely agree with Dr Foskey's comment that it is also about the different cultural communities talking to each other. Mr Stefaniak mentioned Arthur Calwell, and I agree with Mr Stefaniak. I am sure it is the case for people on the other side as well

that there are things that people in my party have said in past times that I do not agree with. There are things said at the Labor Party conference every year that I do not agree with, and I have an argument with colleagues or speak to them about it. Views that were held at an earlier time are not necessarily the policy of today's Labor Party.

I want to thank Dr Foskey for her contribution. I thought it was a very considered contribution and I really enjoyed listening to it. Dr Foskey said that we need to move on and have interaction between different cultures. She also mentioned Pauline Hanson. I might have misunderstood, but I thought that Dr Foskey suggested that there might have been implicit support by the major parties for Pauline Hanson.

I have to say that, from the Labor Party's perspective, that is absolutely not the case. My father-in-law lost his seat in federal parliament to Pauline Hanson on the basis of comments she made about Asians coming in and taking over Ipswich, as well as too much aid being given to indigenous people. My father-in-law argued against that point of view and he is still aggrieved and horrified at the comments that that woman made.

I thank also Ms Porter and Mr Hargreaves for their comments. Mr Smyth said that there was a lack of intellectual rigor in the motion. Maybe so, but it would be good if he had brought intellectual rigor to his speech as well. Mr Smyth said that actions speak louder than words and that agreeing to this motion would set a dangerous precedent. Words—in this place, in the federal parliament and in the state legislatures—have the power to make a great deal of difference. That is why I brought this motion to the Assembly. Attitudes are changing—

Mr Smyth: No, you misrepresent what I said.

MS MacDONALD: Mr Smyth, please stop interrupting me. I did not interrupt you.

MR SPEAKER: Order, Ms MacDonald! Direct your comments through the chair.

MS MacDONALD: I have referred many times to the inaugural speech of Tony Burke, the shadow minister for immigration. Tony Burke is a great supporter of multiculturalism and he spoke about it in his inaugural speech. Mr Smyth could probably learn a bit from studying it. Tony Burke said:

... but there is something about the federal parliament that goes way beyond the legislation we pass here and way beyond our constitutional powers. I realised this one day about eight years ago when Cathy came home from work and told me the children were playing differently at the community based child-care centre where she taught, and racist taunts had suddenly crept into the language of the children as they played. It did not happen because any law had changed. It did not happen because of government spending. It happened because a speech had been made by an Independent member in this chamber which was seen to legitimise racist comment in the name of free speech. There is something about what is said in this chamber that changes the mood of the nation, that gives us a role in affecting how Australians relate to each other. Just as we have the capacity here to run our politics in ways that appeal to the worst of the attitudes in Australia, we have the capacity to appeal to the best as well.

I appeal to all in this place to appeal to the best of our society. I urge members to oppose the amendment and support the motion.

Question put:

That the amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 6		Noes 9	
Mrs Burke	Mr Stefaniak	Mr Barr	Mr Gentleman
Mrs Dunne		Mr Berry	Mr Hargreaves
Mr Mulcahy		Mr Corbell	Ms MacDonald
Mr Pratt		Dr Foskey	Ms Porter
Mr Smyth		Ms Gallagher	

Question so resolved in the negative.

Motion agreed to.

School and library closures—use of facilities

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (4.17): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes:

- (a) the recent closure of a number of ACT government schools and the Griffith library; and
- (b) the Government's confirmation that it is following its Surplus Property policy and guidelines in determining the futures of these sites; and
- (c) the high demand by community organisations and groups for affordable accommodation; and

(2) calls on the ACT Government to:

- (a) ensure that its school premises that were closed at the end of 2006, or will be closed prior to October 2008, and the closed Griffith library, are not sold or permanently modified for other uses until after the 2008 ACT election;
- (b) make the Property Board's Options Papers and Cost/Benefit Analyses for these sites available for public comment; and
- (c) in the short term to medium term, look to provide these surplus sites to community organisations and groups at affordable rents, where they meet health and safety standards and are suitable to their needs.

Mr Speaker, in the last four months our community has been left reeling as a result of the ACT government's decision to close the Griffith library and a number of schools. While the immediate reaction from people affected was to protest loudly, question the basis on which these decisions were made and hope that they could be repealed, we are now starting to wonder what will become of those premises that once served a community purpose.

There is a strong proposition, supported by the ACT Greens, that the Labor government made the wrong decision in many of these cases, and there should be an opportunity for the decisions to be revisited once a more thoughtful and transparent analysis has been conducted and made public. The decision to close so many schools and facilities is unprecedented. The community land on which they are sited is a limited resource. Any decision to permanently change the use of those buildings and to sell off or develop the land should come after the next election, when the electorate has had the time to consider properly the options before it. We must remember that people who voted for the ALP at the 2004 election had no idea it had plans to make access to education more difficult in some communities.

I think these are important issues, and I have not moved this motion in order to simply say the government has got everything wrong. My argument is that the level of change and reorganisation is so great, and to date has been so much the province of internal government analysis and decision, that it needs to be tested at the 2008 election.

What is the future of our local communities? Some ingredients of that mix must include: rapidly increasing oil costs and climate change producing a compelling imperative to reduce energy use; the need to restructure our lives, particularly the lives of children, around healthier lifestyles; and the community's desire for lifelong learning. Surely we need profound engagement across our community on the future of essential community services such as public education, access to information, libraries, health services and local shops, before we are locked in to the sale or redevelopment of community sites for aged care or private housing.

Recent damage to the Griffin Centre as a result of the supercell storm reminded the Canberra community how vulnerable its community groups are, especially when it comes to accommodation. While this was an emergency situation, many community groups and vulnerable citizens are facing similar crises every day. ACTCOSS, for instance, is faced with having to move as they are unable to provide necessary services due to difficulties with accommodation and infrastructure. We know that they are operating under extreme difficulties.

The ACT government has a policy, referred to in its 2004-05 property report, to help the non-government sector, where possible, through the use of its properties within the strategic and financial framework of cost-effective property administration. I understand that the property group within TAMS has a community groups waiting list for sites that the government leases out and that that list is long. The application guidelines state:

As demand for access to accommodation within these facilities is high, the number of facilities limited and turnover low, Property Group runs an application register to manage interest from community groups for accommodation in multipurpose buildings ...

As offers of accommodation are made on a first come, first served basis, it could take some time before an offer of accommodation is forthcoming. Furthermore, I have heard that community groups are queued up for the closed school sites, so there is certainly no shortage of potential tenants.

ACTCOSS notes in its submission to the 2007-08 budget process that in 2003 ACTPLA published the first stage of the "community facilities needs assessment" which covered northern Canberra, followed in 2004 by the report for stage 2, which took in the second half of the city. There was to be a final report, stage 3, but this has not yet been publicly released. Another report has also been completed for the City West area but it is also yet to be made available. I hope to see those very soon. To quote from the ACTCOSS budget submission:

This process has now been in progress for well over 5 years, and yet we are still to see any response to any of these investigations from the ACT Government. ACTCOSS calls on the government to formulate a meaningful response to these issues with a strategic action plan to improve access to appropriate premises.

While the Greens would like community organisations to have access to more sites in the long term, we also recognise that communities of many of the closed schools want to have the option of the schools being re-opened. It is quite evident that demand for these sites from all sides, be it members of the public, community groups or private business, is very strong.

Thus far the ACT government has confirmed that its property group within TAMS is considering the future of these sites in accordance with its surplus property policy and guidelines. But the Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services is yet to explain the time frame that the group is working to or what progress it has made. The policy paper requires a property evaluation and options paper to investigate:

what the best future use options are for that Property. Additionally, the evaluation will determine the best possible use of the Property having regard to the requirements and needs of the:

- (1) Agency;
- (2) ACT Government; and
- (3) community.

In addition, the evaluation guidelines state:

To determine what represents the "best economic value" for the ACT Government, all properties identified as potentially surplus must have a cost benefit analysis prepared. This should address all proposed options to enable adequate consideration of the options prior to making a decision.

Section 2 (b) of my motion calls on the ACT government to make the options paper and costs-benefit analysis for the sites available for public comment. This is appropriate, given the controversy surrounding the future of these sites and the resulting lack of community trust in its government. I believe that if the government was confident that it was making the right decision for the community in the right manner there would be little reason to keep these documents a secret.

I note that the government's surplus property policy and guidelines do not require a community consultation process unless significant planning and land use changes are proposed. If this is the case, community consultation will only occur under relevant statutory and administrative processes such as ACTPLA's territory plan variations. That is patently inadequate in this context, as the community will be consulted on only one option, not a range of options, and too late in the decision-making process.

It has often been suggested that the sites in question should be developed for aged care and supported housing. This comes under the umbrella term "community use". While the Greens are absolutely supportive of an increase in the supply of these facilities, we see no justification for simply turning over the land to an organisation, be it for, or not for, profit and justified by our need for residential aged care. I was pleased that the Assembly recently amended the territory plan to make school sites somewhat more secure. But in the context of recent changes, I think we need a more certain, consultative and transparent process than the guidelines require prior to the sale or demolition of any buildings on these sites or the construction of any new ones. My fear is that any amendments to land use will simply legitimise the fait accompli of internal government process and decision-making.

In the absence of public information, rumours are circulating that the ACT government plans to increase community rental rates to the point where community groups will be unable to afford to move into closed schools, thus giving the government an excuse to sell the land to developers. Mr Speaker, if that is true, it is an indictment of the process that people believe in. Groups are also wondering if community rental rates will increase in other premises or just in those schools. I certainly hope there is no truth to this rumour and that the minister will quash it in this debate.

If and when the government decides to lease these sites to community groups, I would expect this government to abide by its community rental rates, as set out in its current application guidelines, or implement an affordable rental rate below this which recognises the inadequacies of these sites in their current state. After all, this was stated as a reason for closure.

Section 3.4 of the ACT government's surplus property evaluation guidelines states:

In the situation where the property has been vacated before a property evaluation has been completed, Property Group will attempt to tenant the property on a short-term basis to ensure that the building continues to remain in a satisfactory condition and to reduce the risk of vandalism.

Since the minister was unable to detail yesterday what progress has been made in processing these sites, I assume the property evaluation, options papers and cost-benefit analysis are yet to be completed. The government has no time frame for deciding on these sites, and members of the community, including the Greens, are requesting that the sites not be sold until after the 2008 election. It seems appropriate, though, that some sites are leased out on a short to medium-term basis to community groups. This is a win-win situation, for the government will lose little to no funds, the sites are more likely to remain in satisfactory condition with a reduced risk of vandalism, and community groups will have an increased capacity to provide essential community services. However, it should be recognised that sites the government does choose to lease out should be appropriate to the needs of the community groups obtaining a lease.

The ACTCOSS 2007-08 budget submission called on the ACT government to ensure that community organisations have equitable access to safe and appropriate premises. The submission stated:

Effective community services require quality and appropriate premises. In many cases, community organisations are forced to locate in residual premises—locations and buildings that are excess to the needs of government and not suitable for businesses. This situations means that opportunities to engage with consumers are not maximised, and on occasion, that organisational staff and volunteers are working in primitive or unsafe conditions.

I also draw attention to ACTCOSS's concern that the government appears to be pushing community groups out of Civic. Take the QE2 and Westlund House, for example. Providing closed school sites and the Griffith library to community groups does not provide a long-term solution to all the accommodation problems that community groups are suffering. Accessibility of their premises to people without cars should be a core criterion for location.

ACTCOSS and the Greens support ACTPLA's 2004 recommendation that "the provision of community facilities needs to be a diverse and adaptable supply of accessible facilities, which are affordable to meet government goals for building social capital in the Canberra community". It is inappropriate to assume that community groups can be given the scraps and that they should be happy with whatever they can get. They deserve much greater respect than that.

Mr Speaker, these closed sites are potentially part of the solution to a complex problem, which includes community services, education and accommodation. I hope that the government is able to recognise these difficulties and has enough faith in the community not only to be open in its processes but to seek advice on these issues. Most particularly, its own processes require it to prepare an options report on all sites with a full cost-benefit analysis of the range of uses and with all costs and benefits explicitly included.

There is no rationale for this government to do that work and to fail to allow the ACT community to participate in its development and comment on it when it is finished. The government might have argued that the Costello report needed to be confidential

and then implemented promptly. I do not believe that approach was justified then and there is no rationale whatsoever for taking the same approach now.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (4.31): First of all, Mr Speaker, I would like to move the amendment circulated in my name. I move:

Omit all words after “accommodation”, substitute:

“(d) that no decisions will be taken by the Government until advice is provided on the best use of any surplus Government property.”.

Before I go into detail, I would like to address some of the things that Dr Foskey said. She has called for a cost-benefit analysis to be available for comment. The Greens are not part of the governance of this territory—they are part of the parliament of this territory. In fact, they received only 12 per cent of the vote in one of the electorates and they were rejected entirely in the other two. That tells me that the Greens party has been rejected by the community in two electorates and been rejected by 88 per cent of the electorate in the third. So nothing will convince me that the Greens party has any mandate at all from the community.

We may have a discussion with those opposite about community issues and community consultation, because at least they have a mandate from a substantial part of the electorate. The Greens have no such thing. In fact, they have had no such thing for at least the three elections that I have been involved with in this place. This is just a political ruse to take the promise to reopen schools to the 2008 election. Mr Speaker, the Liberals may very well attempt to do that—and we would probably try that, too, if we were in the same position—but the Greens will never be in a position to make one decision in government. They will never have one. The Greens ought to understand that the schools are closed. They are closed, the doors are closed and the resources have gone elsewhere—they have gone into the education system. I just wish they would understand that even the students have gone somewhere else.

Dr Foskey, speaking on behalf of ACTCOSS, said that the government is pushing community groups out of Civic. Well, tell that to the 30 community groups sitting in the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre; tell that to the people in the newly refurbished Griffin Centre. The fact is that ACTCOSS is having to move out of Civic because of a leasing arrangement. And to whom did they turn for assistance? They turned to the government. The government, recognising that this is a community advocacy group, who we appear to be paying to belt us, offered two premises fairly quickly—one at Ainslie Village and one in the former Griffith library. The government has come, as it were, to the rescue. So I reject absolutely and vehemently this notion—this silly, silly notion—that we are pushing community groups out of Civic. What an absolutely absurd and silly notion.

Mr Speaker, on the closure of schools: three preschools and seven primary schools were closed at the end of the 2006 school year. Of these, the Causeway preschool in Kingston has been transferred to the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services to be utilised for community education programs. It did not come to TAMS. The remainder of the sites were declared surplus by the Department

of Education and Training and were transferred to the Department of Territory and Municipal Services on 31 December 2006. The Department of Education and Training has advised that a further 11 schools and preschools are to be closed, declared surplus over the next two calendar years, and in turn transferred to my department.

Mr Speaker, I want to dispel up front any suggestion that the government has decided to sell any former school site. Frightening the horses does not impress me. It makes good media copy but it does not impress me. All it really does is exacerbate the discomfort of the people out there in the community. No decisions about any usage, whether rental or sale, have been made at this stage.

Mrs Burke: At this stage.

MR HARGREAVES: Mrs Burke whispers into the ether, “Not made at this stage.” Well, guess what? We will make one. Have no fear, Mrs Burke, we will have one. We will make a decision. Do not worry. We will not be like the Liberal Party—we will actually make a decision and stand by it.

Mr Speaker, the government has a surplus property policy that is used to evaluate and determine how properties that are either surplus or potentially surplus should best be utilised. Accordingly, the government has commenced an evaluation program for the nine schools and preschools that have already closed and the 11 that are to be closed. There are many alternative use options that can be considered, including use for other government purposes. For example, the former Holder primary school is now the home of Therapy ACT. We could use them for community tenancies. For example, the former Hackett primary school contains a number of community tenants, including ACT Sports House, and ACTCOSS is moving into the former Griffith primary school. Another option is disposal. For example, the former Yarralumla preschool, which had a problem with asbestos and lead paint, was demolished and the land was sold last year for a childcare centre.

The evaluation will be conducted in accordance with the surplus property policy and will include full consultation with the Canberra community before the government decides what to do with each property. In this regard, I can confirm that the government will provide the Canberra community with all relevant information about the options and the cost benefits of retaining all or part of each site. In undertaking this evaluation process the government is committed to taking as long as it requires to arrive at an outcome that is fully cognisant of community attitudes and aspirations for the sites. The government will make its decision at the time that it is appropriate to do so, and will not agree to deferring the decision until after the ACT election, as such a deferment may preclude a decision that could benefit the territory.

In order to have an effective evaluation process, the government has established an interdepartmental committee to conduct an initial review of the sites and advise the government of strategic priorities associated with the potential use or disposal of the sites. The IDC will provide the government with an effective community consultation program. This IDC will also review and report on the condition audits prepared for the schools and preschools that have already closed. Depending upon the findings of this review, it may be concluded that one or more of the buildings on the sites cannot be

cost-effectively reused. Such information could limit the types of uses available for these sites. What would need to happen before a site is sold? As I have said, the government is committed to a comprehensive evaluation process for all sites. Therefore, no site will be offered for sale unless and until the evaluation process concludes that disposal is the preferred option.

The Griffith library was one of several tenants previously occupying the former Griffith primary school buildings. That point is missed by a lot of people. They think Griffith library was a freestanding building. It was not; it was a tenant of the former Griffith primary school. The government has on several occasions committed to retaining the former school as a community facility, and I did that on the steps of the library. Accordingly, I once again confirm that the government has no intention of selling this facility. In fact, work is under way in the Department of Territory and Municipal Services to tenant vacant areas in the buildings as they become available. At present, the buildings house the East Timorese Embassy and the administrative unit of the ACT Library and Information Service. The administrative unit is being relocated to Macarthur House later this year, and the space vacated will be offered to community groups that are already on the Department of Territory and Municipal Services' community tenancies application register. In addition, negotiations are well advanced with three community groups, including ACTCOSS, for the small amount of space that is currently vacant. Announcements about these tenancies are expected to be made shortly.

The government provides extensive accommodation options for community groups through both the Department of Territory and Municipal Services and the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services. Between these two departments, accommodation is provided for in excess of 250 community organisations—250; get it through your head! Community organisations usually utilise government accommodation in one of two ways. The first is as a casual user, but this requires a person such as a janitor to oversee the opening, closing and use of a facility. With the closure of the schools and preschools, there are no longer people employed for this role, and accordingly the premises are not available for casual hire.

The second option is to provide a form of full-time tenancy, and this is undertaken through the provision of a licence for unleased land or a sublease for leased land. This type of tenancy arrangement is a major undertaking for a community organisation and is used for tenancies with a duration of between one and three years at a rental substantially below the commercial rate for equivalent private sector rent—annoyingly, something not acknowledged by Dr Foskey. Furthermore, organisations taking on such tenancies have an expectation that the tenancy will be renewed upon expiry.

To offer all or part of a vacant school premises to community organisations and groups before the evaluation process is completed would create a level of expectation about the continued occupation of that space and therefore possibly compromise the evaluation program. Accordingly, the government has decided against utilising the vacant school premises, except to accommodate community groups that were either already permanent tenants at the time the school closed or have been asked to vacate space in ongoing schools. The latter tenants are being asked to vacate because the

space occupied is now needed for school programs under the schools revitalisation program.

I want to assure Dr Foskey, the Assembly and the community that the government is following a rigorous process to ensure that the possible use options for all former school sites or any other surplus government property are properly evaluated before the government comes to any decision about what to do with them. I do not know how many times I have to say, either in this place or in the public arena, that there is a process in place for this evaluation. The community will be consulted in relation to each of the sites. We have to do a condition audit on the whole lot. It may very well be that when one looks at the fabric of a building—and I gave an example of this in respect of a former preschool—it will be found to be not fit for habitation by other people and should be removed.

It may be that when we talk to people on the list we will find that their physical needs cannot be accommodated in the short term and that there would need to be some adjustment of the space contained within a building. It may be—and I will almost guarantee this, Mr Deputy Speaker—that, in any event, some of the infrastructure in schools will need to be adjusted to take these community groups. For example, some of the toilet facilities in primary schools and preschools will have to be taken out and others put in to accommodate an adult population in these buildings. So it is not so straightforward that we can just say, “Yes, anybody can go in. We will take just any community group.”

Mr Deputy Speaker, I take umbrage at the suggestion that we have not been talking to the community at all. Some groups in the Flynn community have had something to say about the closure of the Flynn primary school, and Mrs Dunne may be able to assist in the process. There is the group of people who challenged the closure of the school, as is their right, and I am not going to say they should not have done that. I have had conversations with the John Flynn Association. A gentleman from the Flynn P&C came into my office and we developed together six or seven different options for a community use for the Flynn primary school which would benefit the people in Flynn. I put them in touch with the property group, which is processing options with them.

So, Mr Deputy Speaker, are we talking to the community? Yes. Will we be taking any precipitous decisions? No. Am I going to be rushed into doing anything because a person with 12 per cent of one electorate decides to try and push the government into a hasty decision? No. Mr Deputy Speaker, I have moved an amendment to the motion which I believe describes the situation a little bit better. I commend the amendment and, if it is accepted, I commend the amended motion to the Assembly.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (4.46): I thank Dr Foskey for bringing this matter to the Assembly’s attention, because it is a matter which is of considerable concern and interest out in the community. I listened very carefully to what the minister had to say about the process and all of the things that were going on, and I am heartened by what he said—as long as he did not have his fingers crossed behind his back at the time.

I am heartened especially about what he said about Flynn primary school. That was one of the things that I was going to ask him about. I would ask him to clarify

something; I would even be inclined to give leave for him to clarify it. There is a spectacular amount of scuttlebutt in the community about the future of Flynn primary school. It has been put to me and to others that there is almost a done deal to sell Flynn primary school for units. If that is not the case, I want the minister to rule it out today, on the record.

This is an extraordinarily contentious issue. Every school that has been blighted by school closure is very concerned and covetous and wants to maintain the school infrastructure in their community. The task ahead for the Property Group is a very difficult one, and we should not underestimate it. There are a whole lot of things that need to be done. Every community group that I deal with says, "What do you reckon they are going to do with our block of land, where our schools are? Do you reckon it is going to be sold for units?" Every school group thinks that their site is going to be sold for units. If the government do not have a proposal to come up with a war chest for the next election, which is what I think that they will do, it is incumbent upon them to come out and say that they do not have an intention of selling off large slabs of previous school buildings to be turned into units.

There is a lot of pressure being put on the government by organisations like the Housing Industry Association, which came out at the end of January and encouraged the government to sell off the land as soon as possible to address housing shortages. I congratulate the minister on his presentation today, because it gives me some hope that the process will be an orderly one, will be a thoughtful one and will involve the community.

Dr Foskey's motion is an important one, and it goes to the heart of the matter. The opposition supports the tenor of Dr Foskey's motion and would be happy to support its passage in its present form. But I note very closely the commitments made by the minister, especially the commitment that he essentially makes in relation to his amendment. The only thing that I would welcome—again, Mr Deputy Speaker, I encourage members to give the minister some leeway to speak again if he wants to—would be for him to give an undertaking. In his amendment he says:

... no decisions will be taken by the Government until advice is provided on the best use of any surplus Government property ...

I would welcome an undertaking that that information will become available to the community. If the minister is so inclined, I propose to move an amendment to add to the minister's amendment to make that the case. The test will then be how good the minister is about that openness and consultation. Then we could probably have a workable way forward.

It would be better if we had a commitment from the government not to sell the land this side of the election, but I can count the numbers and I know that that will not be the case. I think that each community, and we in this Assembly, need to be vigilant to ensure that we are not creating a situation where the government can just have a huge war chest for the next election, which is what I suspect they will do.

All through the consultation, Minister Barr very cutely said, "This school renewal project"—it is the funniest thing, Mr Speaker, to talk about a school renewal project

that actually means closing down schools and pulling down the school buildings—“is not predicated on any land sales.” He used to add things like “by the department of education”, “at this stage” or some sort of weasel words that indicated that they really had their fingers crossed behind their backs. He said, “This will be a difficult process.” Yes, it will be a difficult process; it will be a lengthy process.

I make a prediction here today that substantial tracts of that land will be sold out of the community sector, out of community use—that there will be land use changes. That will have a big impact on housing and planning policy in the ACT. There needs to be considerable consultation between Property ACT and the planning and land development agencies in relation to this.

Whether the process is Dr Foskey’s process or the minister’s process, the important thing is that it has to be open and accountable. I foreshadow that in a moment I will move an amendment to Mr Hargreaves’s amendment to ensure that, if we go down his path, which we certainly will, the advice provided in relation to government schools and surplus property will become available to the Assembly and, through us, to the members of the community.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (4.52): In speaking to Mr Hargreaves’s amendment, I will reiterate some of Mrs Dunne’s points, because I do not believe that the minister heard what she was saying.

Mr Hargreaves: Yes, I did.

Mrs Dunne: No; he was talking.

Mr Hargreaves: I still listened to you. I can think and breathe at the same time, unlike others.

DR FOSKEY: Anyway. Thank you very much. I will speak now. I am disappointed in the government’s amendment because I think it means that the government did not understand what my motion was about. In fact, after listening to the speech given by the minister, I think that is confirmed.

My motion was not an attack on the government. It was meant to be a constructive proposal that would, as far as I am concerned, have helped it regain valuable and lost trust, which I think every government should seek to build with the community. It was really asking the government to follow its own process as set out in its own policy and guidelines, but make that an open process and have consultation on it at the early stages so that the community is not brought in just at the end when it is practically a fait accompli.

My concern, and the reason I felt it was necessary to move my motion, is this: we have seen that the government often follow their own policy and guidelines only when it suits them and that they stick to the statutory requirements and do not go any further. My belief is that the statutory requirements on consultation are inadequate.

In this case, I believe that the government’s amendment means that the government will take advice. Guess who from: the government. What gives the government the

idea that it is the most capable entity to provide advice on this issue? There are many important organisations such as the community sector groups themselves that could do so. I was pleased to hear that ACTCOSS has been found a home in what was the Griffith primary school—sadly, at the expense of the Griffith library, in a way. But I want to reiterate the point that an organisation like ACTCOSS, in particular, should be in the city, so I hope this is just an interim step.

I am concerned that the amendment opens the process to more controversy and distrust. There was talk about community consultation, but we have no timelines and no indication of how that community consultation will occur. We know that the statutory obligation requires consultation only when there is a change in lease purpose. I am still seeking assurance from the minister that that is not the case here.

There is still an indication that sites may remain unused for a long time. I would be interested in knowing what meetings, correspondence and other consultations the ministers for TAMS and for planning have had with property developers and their representative bodies on this issue. They have not had consultations with the groups.

Even with respectful consultation, what happens if we cannot see how the consultation feeds into the process and the impact that that consultation has? Mr Hargreaves began his speech with various comments. I am quite impervious to the sort of comments that Mr Hargreaves throws at me, which are really totally beyond the pale. But to say that he will not release the documents to us because we are not either the government or the opposition indicates contempt for a whole lot of organisations that did not get elected into the Assembly in huge numbers. That is what it boils down to. Apparently they are the only ones worth listening to.

It made me wonder whether this is the only way that you can counter our proposition. Has the minister forgotten minority government and the role of the Greens—and, in the last parliament, the Democrats and an independent—in decision making? Some people might feel that that led to preferable outcomes; it certainly meant that a lot more documents were made public.

In relation to Mr Hargreaves's comment that they are not pushing people out of Civic, let me say this: no, maybe not deliberately, but the cost of renting in Civic is beyond most community organisations. I agree that the multicultural community has done very well, and I have congratulated the government on the Theo Notaras centre several times. But I am sure that Mr Hargreaves will remember that the current Griffin Centre was not built to the specifications that the community organisations wanted. I have been there several times—many, many times—because it is still a centre of community activity in Civic, but it is an office building that houses a number of community organisations and it suffers from those kinds of problems. I am very happy to sit down and talk with the minister about the issues that have been raised with me. The situation has probably been greatly exacerbated by the impact of the super-cell storm.

It is good that consultation has begun. But it is not so good to hear arrogant statements such as “we will make decisions when we decide we want to make the decisions”. It is good that an initial review of sites is being conducted, but I had to move this motion here today to hear that. The essence of my motion is that the consultation should be

open and public. We are just asking the government to follow its own process, but in a transparent way.

I want to reiterate Mrs Dunne's comment about Mr Hargreaves's amendment. I find the amendment totally unacceptable, but the problems would be somewhat alleviated if, as Mrs Dunne suggests, the information that is referred to in the amendment is made available to the Assembly and, through the Assembly, to the community. No doubt the minister will speak again and will say whether that is going to be the case. It would make an amendment that is currently unacceptable slightly more acceptable, in my opinion.

I totally agree that some of the infrastructure will need adjustment. I know that some of the toilets in the preschools might be too low for the bums of many of the adults in the community organisations that will use them. That is not at issue. The issues that we are talking about are more complex than that. The situation is not simple. We are saying that we want a process in which the community can work with the government, where school communities can have a say.

Mr Hargreaves referred to his conversations with people at Flynn about the Flynn school. I am really pleased that those conversations are happening, but it is an indication of what I am talking about that it has not been made public that the government is having these discussions. Somebody has been involved with the government. My concern now is this: good ideas are taken up, but perhaps those ideas could have been better if everybody knew that they could discuss those things.

Let us not have an ad hoc process. Let us have an open process where all the players that want to be part of the action can be involved—not just those that manage to get the ear of the minister. That is the way it sounds at the moment. Mr Hargreaves is looking a little shocked at the implication of what I am saying. He has every opportunity to reassure me—and, through me, the communities that I represent—about the integrity of the process, the openness of the process and the governance that is involved here: that there is listening going on and that there is going to be full disclosure. Again, the government's own documents say that there has to be a cost-benefit analysis. I do not see any evidence of that in here, the government having taken out all the words that refer to the government's own processes. It makes me wonder what is going to actually be happening.

MS GALLAGHER (Molonglo—Minister for Health, Minister for Disability and Community Services and Minister for Women) (5.03): I will, of course, be speaking in favour of Mr Hargreaves's amendment. This is a difficult issue and one that is at the forefront of the government's mind. I have listened to the last few minutes of Dr Foskey's discussion and I do not think there is too much that we are in disagreement over in terms of doing the analysis of need and talking with community groups—in fact, being lobbied quite extensively by community groups over the potential use of surplus school properties.

I will probably restrict my comments, because the issue crosses a bit into my area as minister for disability and, especially, community services. But, even prior to the government making any final decisions leading up to *Towards 2020*, I can name quite a number of non-government organisations that were in my office lobbying for use of

potentially excess school sites. That lobbying went on for most of last year and has been accelerated in the first part of this year. Some quite sophisticated project plans have been submitted to government from organisations wanting to use particular schools for particular things. Some are very worthy projects—almost collaborations between organisations.

The government recognises the opportunity that we have here to really assess the pressure of accommodation in the community sector and look at where we can assist. I think, as the community services minister, that it is crazy that for some organisations 40 per cent of the grant that we provide them goes to rent and administration overheads. It seems crazy to me that organisations with one or two people have to pay money for an IT provider, a photocopier lease and a receptionist when, if we could have a more strategic look at how the sector operated, we could release quite a bit of money to go back into the sector and back into service delivery rather than going into duplication of administration and accommodation costs.

It seems crazy to me that we have got community organisations paying commercial rent. Some organisations are paying \$100,000 a year for commercial space because accommodation is tight. We acknowledge all of that. Of course it is in our interests to look at where we can work with the sector—not just in relation to surplus government property, but in relation to the strategic future of the community sector and the sustainability of the sector into the future.

A number of organisations have approached me seeking those discussions. They see the benefit in looking at co-location and at more cooperation between small organisations that are really doing it quite tough—having to carry the overheads, insurance, administration and accountability for government funding. That weighs much more heavily on small organisations than it does on larger ones.

We can look at it from the point of view of employment relations as well, in terms of advice and where we can support the sector. It is in our interests to work strategically with them. The opportunities that are afforded to us through the potential use of surplus government property to start some of that work are there. That is why we are not rushing. That is, in a sense, why the process is yet to be determined. It is very much in the early stages of government consideration.

We have been pretty up-front that there has not been a decision taken about any of these school sites at any point. Mrs Dunne laughs at that, but she has not been able to uncover any proof of it, through her searches under FOI and the 3,000 pages she has already received. There has been—

Mrs Dunne: No, no. I have only received 1,800 pages.

MS GALLAGHER: That must have been the pay parking one of Mr Smyth. That was about 3,000. There has been no decision taken. The process is in those early stages. The government needs the opportunity to have those discussions with the sector.

I take Dr Foskey's point that she is not aware about those discussions. For many of the organisations, they are confidential discussions with government, because they are

actually lobbying us for something and trying to seek a benefit or expressing a view that they would like some accommodation to be delivered and they do not necessarily want it delivered to another organisation down the road.

All I can say is that I have met with a number of organisations around this. There are some good proposals on the table. The government are keen to assist the community sector where we can—to have that strategic outlook, to make sure that we are looking at how we can support the sustainability of the sector into the future. Part of that is around accommodation. I know that the Griffin Centre has its critics, and perhaps it was not everything that it should have been, but if we had enough—

Mrs Dunne: It is a damn sight better than it was.

MS GALLAGHER: If we had another four of them across the ACT, we would be in pretty good standing, I think. We could probably fill them. It is a good model in the sense of co-locating a number of organisations and having that capacity to share if they choose to.

This work is under way. It is in those very early stages. The government need some more advice about the best way forward, but we are very conscious of the opportunities that are afforded to us to support the community sector in any decision that the government may take.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (5.10): I seek leave to amend Mr Hargreaves's amendment in the terms of the document circulated in my name.

Leave granted.

MRS DUNNE: I move:

Add:

“(2) calls on the Government to table this advice in the Legislative Assembly before any decisions are made about surplus school properties.”.

I thank members for their indulgence and I apologise for a change to the wording of my amendment. The Deputy Clerk pointed out a couple of problems with my original amendment, so I am now speaking to the one that says, nicely, “amended” in the top right-hand corner.

This amendment to Mr Hargreaves's amendment is really to put the wood on the government. Mr Hargreaves spoke well about the process and how it was going to be a thoughtful process. I think that many of the misconceptions or suspicions that members of the community have would be allayed if this amendment were agreed to. While the government says that it will not take any decisions until it has got advice on how to best use surplus property, I think that, given that this is such a contentious community issue, the government should make that information available to the Assembly and, through it, to the public.

The amendment is self-explanatory. It will be a test of this government as to whether they accept the amendment. If the minister does speak on the issue, I would like him to use that opportunity to rule out the sale of land at Flynn.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (5.11): The government will not be supporting this amendment, as Mrs Dunne would have guessed.

Mrs Dunne: I thought so. You could knock me down with a feather!

MR HARGREAVES: No, no. Mr Speaker, we have all the confidence that the process is an open one and a transparent one. There will be significant amounts of community consultation, as I indicated earlier.

Mr Speaker, you might recall that earlier I said that we would consult with the community site by site—consult with the people who are affected by the issue and the communities themselves. Let me take Flynn as an example. There seems to be some confusion around Flynn. It is an interesting thing. I think Dr Foskey was making a point—and it is probably a good one—about how the community at large knows that we are having conversations with a specific community. Clearly, I cannot go public when I have had conversations with certain parts of the community; that would breach their confidentiality. I only do so today with respect to the John Flynn association because this debate has been brought forward into the chamber.

I have had conversations with quite a number of community groups—personally, through letters, through email and on the telephone. I am not going to outline every group that I have had conversations with. Predominantly we have said, “Go and see the Property Group. The Property Group have the criteria. If you work up a proposal and it is only half baked, the Property Group will assist in the process of putting that thinking into shape so that it actually does meet the criteria and does change.”

Let me turn to the Flynn group. I know that Mrs Dunne is particularly interested in the Flynn group. Some of the proposals that have been put forward will not fly. They just will not fly. But let me talk about what has come out of the discussion on the options that I developed with a couple of gentlemen who came to see me representing the two organisations.

It was quite clear that a segment of that community was keen to have activities relating to that community go on in that series of buildings. They were not particularly interested in some other things. For example, they were not interested in us saying, “Yes, okay, ACTCOSS can go and live out there.” They were interested in services or activities which would have a benefit to their community—and possibly to a few surrounding communities or to that part of Belconnen. I think that is admirable. Some of them were talking about childcare activities. That was discussed. I said to them, “You need to have those options developed a little bit more clearly.” I put them in touch with the Property Group, and that is exactly what went on.

I do not know the currency of it, but I can say this: no decisions have been taken with respect to anything. For me to stand up now and rule out a particular school would actually be to give a decision on it, and I have not got any decisions made at all.

Furthermore, as I think Dr Foskey said, the decision to close all these schools is one of the most significant decisions that have affected this city for a long time. I can assure this chamber that, if there is going to be a recommendation to sell off a property, that is the sort of decision, in its seriousness, that I would take to cabinet. I would take that to cabinet.

I reiterate that there has been no decision taken on any of the properties other than those that required moving from one school to another because those premises are now needed again. With respect to ACTCOSS, that is not into a school; that is into the former Griffith library premises within the old Griffith primary school. Remember that the Griffith primary school has been closed for years and years.

There is another possibility—whether some of the existing community groups in current government owned accommodation want to move because of the location of their clientele base. That is not beyond the realms of possibility. Let me give an example. Sometimes, where we had schools closed earlier on—years and years ago—there are now community groups. For example, there is the Holder high school, now the Grant Cameron centre. It is full of community groups. I do not know off the top of my head exactly who is there. I know a couple of them—VOCAL, for example. But there may be some in there who think, “A school is going to be closed; that would be better for us to move to.” We need to consider their needs properly, because they will then create a vacancy for someone else.

Quite clearly I do not want to be rushed in this. By the same token, what happens if the condition audit tells us that the best thing to do is knock the building down and sell the land, because it is unsafe—for example, if we found out that a preschool had asbestos in it? When the condition audits come out, we will know some more and we will be in a better position.

I was working for Education in about 1997. I was working there from 1996 to 1997 and during a bit of 1998; then I got a better job. There were condition audits being conducted at that time. Those condition audits need to be updated. Then we can decide for ourselves whether government agencies need accommodation and whether community groups need accommodation.

But we also need to recognise this—I put it on the record yet again: when community groups go into government owned accommodation, generally speaking they go in at a community rental rate. There are two types of community groups. There are not-for-profit community groups, and there are groups which are for-profit community groups. The latter are providing a service—quite a legitimate one—that adds value into the community, but they actually make a profit. They, of course, will have a different model.

There is nothing different about that—nothing that does not already exist in our government owned accommodation. For example, if you have a look at the people

who occupy most of our accommodation, you will see that they are on a community rate. It is a very cheap rate. But we have to consider how much it costs to allow those buildings to be opened on a cost break-even basis. It is a serious issue, and it has to be costed out because the amount of floor space we let out has to be recovered in the rent. Then we have the situation where community organisation rates will be applied.

We have also got the capital cost to go through, to amend or adjust the floor space to make it suitable for people to go in there. We do not just let out a whole stack of classrooms; they have to be configured differently—and, as I mentioned, some of the infrastructure has to be looked at. We also need to understand that there are planning rules—for example, about the number of car parks per person and all that. All those things have to be satisfied when it is determined whether people go in there or not.

Site by site the community consultation will go on. I can assure everybody that, if it is determined that a school should be sold off by reason of its condition, the consultation process will kick off again.

Once that happens, though, the process is this: my department hands the land across to the LDA. In selling off the land, the LDA would need a territory plan variation. If, for example, older persons' accommodation or some type of residential use were mooted for the land, there would need to be a territory plan variation.

Mrs Dunne: No, not for APUs.

MR HARGREAVES: We believe there would. Then it would go to the planning and environment committee. Again the LDA would do a community consultation on that. So before a school morphs into an older persons' accommodation complex there is an enormous amount of community consultation to be gone through.

The government rejects Mrs Dunne's amendment to my amendment.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (5.21): Mr Speaker, I believe that while I am speaking to Mrs Dunne's amendment I am also closing the debate on my motion.

MR SPEAKER: That is if nobody else is interested. I think nobody else is interested, so it is over to you, Dr Foskey.

DR FOSKEY: Thank you. I was interested to see Ms Gallagher brought down to bolster the government's arguments in this debate. It is unfortunate that she heard only the last few minutes of my response to the government's amendment and was not really able to consider the substantive parts of my motion, which I believe she may have agreed with. Anyway, given that she participated in the debate, I want to respond to some of the points that she made.

Ms Gallagher said that community groups have been lobbying and submitting plans for use of some of the empty premises that were schools even while the so-called 2020 consultation was in progress. She also made the point that 40 per cent of some organisations' grants from the government go straight to rent and overheads. Of course that is the problem. That is the problem that we are all keen on addressing.

There would be some concern if there were any compulsion for organisations to move to cheaper premises just because they had become available with the closure of schools. I think here we see a lesson that the government failed to learn when it inflicted cost cutting on community organisations with the budget last year. We could have got much better outcomes if the community groups had been worked with to identify where there were cost savings. We need to work with the sector—and not just those that have got the resources, the gumption, the personnel and the spare time to come and lobby a minister.

That is what I want to point out here: it does concern me that we do not have that open process here with a level playing field. What we have is a situation where some organisations get to talk to the minister and others do not. We have had it said here today: this organisation does not want that organisation down the road to know that it is in discussions with the minister. But hang on, isn't that just going to add to the difficulties? Let us acknowledge it. We have competition in the community sector, just as we have it everywhere else, especially when there are scarce funds. We have some groups seen as being favoured by government over others. I would like the government to cut that kind of process—to open the process up so that we have a clear and transparent process.

That is what my motion is about. I have not had that addressed today. The government is in a position where it needs to build that trust, especially with the community sector. It could also play a role in increasing the trust between groups. Surely it is not in the government's interests to have a divide and rule approach to community organisations.

Let me respond to Mr Hargreaves's final comments. When Mr Hargreaves rejected Mrs Dunne's amendment, he was once again saying, "Trust us; we are the government." The trouble is that the community does not trust the government. Here was an opportunity to build that trust. When you refuse to do that—when you refuse to be open at least with this Assembly and to table documents here—we have to think that there is something going on that you do not want us to know about.

Mr Hargreaves: What, don't you trust me?

Mrs Dunne: No.

DR FOSKEY: I think that says it all. We do not trust you, and if we do not trust you then the community is not likely to trust you either. It is interesting and pleasing that the Flynn community has an opportunity to continue to have some of the services that it was getting when it had a school—

Mr Hargreaves: Well, there goes our relationship. Our marriage is over.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Dr Foskey has the floor.

DR FOSKEY: and that they sound as though they have the ear of the minister in at least having some of their community activities which were provided under the auspices of the school, perhaps under the new arrangements with TAMS. I am sure that a lot of the services that they will be having in this now empty school building

will be similar to those they were able to provide when it was a school. And that is what they want. It was a community facility—a community meeting place as a school—and they want that, at least, to continue.

My motion did not speak about specific schools, as Mr Hargreaves implied it did. My motion is about a process, not its outcomes. If the process is good, we will accept the outcomes. I do not think the process is good.

I will finish there. With my motion there was an opportunity to have a good process—one that is already in place—made better. It would have increased trust in the government. As it is, there will be all those processes—everything that Mr Hargreaves outlined, with the land being passed to LDA when the decision is made and then a territory plan variation being made if that is required. It sounds to me like a political hot potato, because I would say the timing of that is going to be some time around the next election.

As far as I can see, the only justification from a political angle for selling this land is to provide the funds so that more promises can be made at the next election. Whether they will be kept is another matter. It looks as though this process will coincide with the next election. It is very likely that we will have what we wanted anyway, which is an election about the closing of schools de facto. If that is what the government wants, that is what the government has got, because that is what this minister has promised us.

Question put:

That **Mrs Dunne's** amendment to **Mr Hargreaves's** amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 7		Noes 8	
Mrs Burke	Mr Pratt	Mr Barr	Mr Gentleman
Mrs Dunne	Mr Smyth	Mr Berry	Mr Hargreaves
Dr Foskey	Mr Stefaniak	Mr Corbell	Ms MacDonald
Mr Mulcahy		Ms Gallagher	Ms Porter

Question so resolved in the negative.

Question put:

That **Mr Hargreaves's** amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 8		Noes 7	
Mr Barr	Mr Gentleman	Mrs Burke	Mr Pratt
Mr Berry	Mr Hargreaves	Mrs Dunne	Mr Smyth
Mr Corbell	Ms MacDonald	Dr Foskey	Mr Stefaniak
Ms Gallagher	Ms Porter	Mr Mulcahy	

Question so resolved in the affirmative.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre—proposed statue of Mr Al Grassby

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (5.34): I move:

That this Assembly:

- (1) notes the inappropriateness, cost and lack of community consultation in respect of the Government's decision to commission and erect a statue of former Federal minister, Al Grassby, in the foyer of the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre; and
- (2) calls on the ACT Government not to proceed with this project any further.

Mr Speaker, firstly let me say that I knew and I liked Al Grassby. I knew the man for a considerable amount of time, I enjoyed his company, and I make no bones about the fact that I liked him. In fact I like quite a few people. But just because you like someone is not any reason to put up a statue. For example, I might like John Gorton, but I do not think it would be particularly appropriate at this point in time for a statue of him.

Why isn't it appropriate to put up a statue? And why is it that so many people have been incensed by this decision by the government—or, rather, by Mr Hargreaves, backed by the government it seems—at this point in time? I do not think I have seen before quite so much community anger and disappointment and indeed interest, not only locally but nationally. A number of reasons spring to mind for this.

Firstly, even though I was very good friends with Al Grassby, I would have to concede that he was a controversial figure. The government, it seems, hatched this idea and committed public moneys to it without any community consultation. The first people knew about it was that it was announced as a *fait accompli*; it was mentioned in a government multicultural newsletter. It is a somewhat insensitive decision too, as we have found out. It is insensitive to the Mackay family, who have certainly not been consulted by the government. In fact, they were so upset that they wrote to the newspapers this month. I am not going to go into all of their concerns, but they are on the public record. They state:

As the children of the late Donald Mackay we welcome the development of a multicultural resource centre. We are, however, disappointed with the ACT government's decision to erect a monument to Al Grassby as its centrepiece.

They went further in terms of criticising Mr Grassby there. The children cited are James Mackay of Canberra; Paul Mackay of Griffith, New South Wales; Ruth Fletcher of Cooma; and Mary Martin of Canberra.

This is a very divisive issue and it has put national media attention on the ACT for all the wrong reasons. There has been editorial comment on it in the last few days right around Australia. The *Herald Sun* editorialised it, as did the *Australian*. Even the *Canberra Times*—hardly a Liberal rag and indeed often accused of being a fellow traveller, perhaps, with my comrades opposite in the chamber and indeed of barracking for the Stanhope government—noted that it was a monumental waste of money. It is probably useful to read out the *Canberra Times* editorial of last Tuesday, 6 March 2007, because it does sum up a number of the concerns in relation to this issue. It stated:

When the ACT Government discussed a cabinet proposal last year to erect a statue in Civic Square to honour the former Whitlam government minister Al Grassby's contribution to Australian multiculturalism, it must have seemed like a good idea.

The idea belonged to Multicultural Affairs Minister John Hargreaves, who later announced that sculptor Peter Latona had been commissioned, at a cost to taxpayers of some \$72,000, to portray Grassby in life-size bronze, complete with trademark multicoloured tie.

But despite Grassby's claims to be the "father" of Australian multiculturalism, the Government—and Hargreaves in particular—has had to weather a stream of complaints about the decision to memorialise him, with many condemning the extravagant expense at a time when the Government is busy closing schools and libraries and cutting back on other services. Others have disputed Grassby's contribution to multiculturalism and questioned the wisdom of honouring a politician once accused of criminal defamation for implicating the family of drugs campaigner Donald Mackay in his disappearance and death.

A former federal minister for immigration, and later commissioner for community relations, Grassby remains a polarising political figure—not least because he was a high-profile member of the most controversial federal government in Australian history. It is true that Grassby was a passionate and vocal advocate for the rights and recognition of Australia's immigrant population, even if he rather too eagerly accepted the mantle of "father of multiculturalism" when there was evidence that other individuals were equally deserving of the title—perhaps more so. The term itself was one borrowed by Grassby from Canada. And if Grassby was skilful in promoting multicultural values, it was Malcolm Fraser who implemented them as government policy and perhaps has greater claims to their paternity.

Grassby's radical ideas as immigration minister (including a proposal that Australia accept more immigrants from non-English-speaking countries), and his outspokenness were deeply unpopular amongst conservative voters fearful at the pace of ethnic change, and he lost his seat of Riverina in the 1974 election.

Grassby settled in Canberra after his political career ended, becoming something of an elder statesman of multiculturalism. He was ultimately cleared of charges that he had tried to smear the Mackay family, and by his death in April 2005, was honoured with a state funeral. Yet despite his achievements, and his Canberra connections, his choice as an emblem of multiculturalism in Canberra was always going to grate with some people. Until now, the Government has ignored the complaints, but it was forced on the defensive at the weekend when

the Mackay family issued a statement saying it did not approve of the memorial, and that it had been “heartened by groundswell of community anger at this proposal”.

Hargreaves defended the decision, but over-egged the pudding by suggesting that Grassby, like John F. Kennedy, should be judged solely on his achievements and not be the subject of constant carping and fault-finding. Hargreaves was at it again on the radio yesterday, invoking no less than Abraham Lincoln as another politician whose foibles had (rightly) been overlooked by an adoring American public—just as those critics of Grassby should get with the program.

Whatever Hargreaves might think about the importance of the Grassby legacy, his obsession with immortalising a divisive figure from the political past is making him and his Government look foolish. Erecting expensive monuments to dead worthies is an anachronism, but if we must do it there are plenty of candidates more deserving than Al Grassby.

I do not think anyone would dispute the contribution that Al Grassby made in terms of multiculturalism or in terms of helping people from an ethnic background. But the *Canberra Times* editorial is probably quite a good summation of the concerns that have been expressed about this. Canberrans discussing the statue are overwhelmingly candid. One put on an internet forum:

When Stanhope falls we should take Grassby’s statue and install it outside the gates of the Alexander Maconochie Centre.

Mr Hargreaves has said that the figure of Al, with bronze arms outstretched, is supposed to “provide a welcome message to all the people coming to Canberra”. I would humbly suggest that taking proactive action, Mr Hargreaves, to reduce high property taxes would be a much better welcome, or maybe reopening the Griffith library, or perhaps reversing the cutback in library opening hours, or reopening some closed schools. Maybe a Civic shopfront would be a better welcome—or perhaps something as simple as just cleaning up the city would make a great start, as the government apparently cannot afford to maintain the city to its previous high standard.

Let us face it: this is probably just another political stunt by this government to glorify all things Labor, even if they have to exaggerate it or invent achievement in doing so. Perhaps there is also a bit of a tilt too at the Howard government here and it is this government’s way of deflecting attention from their own gross failures at management.

I am not going to go into too much about who founded multiculturalism or whatever. The actual term was coined in 1968 by George Zubrzycki, as my colleague Mr Smyth pointed out, and it continued under the Whitlam government and then of course under the Fraser government.

It seems that the Stanhope government are simply not interested in what they see as the pedestrian business of providing basic services like roads, schools, libraries and hospitals. The statue is one of the many vanity projects of this government. The Chief Minister and his ministers behave sometimes like 18th century grandees, splurging public moneys on their own pet projects while leaving the population with fewer and fewer basic services and amenities.

This statue has captured the imagination of a lot of people, because it represents the completely misguided policies of the government of Jon Stanhope and his colleagues—a government that in fact failed to warn the people of Canberra in relation to the fires some years ago and has run down basic services, but now wants to honour one of its own with a statue that will cost \$72,325—and I understand there are further costs involved in the installation of this statue.

One woman who rang my office said that the St Vincent de Paul Society has been trying to get 10 extra homeless beds for years. Maybe this amount of money would not pay for all those beds, but it would go some way towards helping. The woman also spoke of the 40 per cent hike in taxes in the ACT just for ordinary people in the latest budget. Most people in Canberra have been impacted in a very negative way by the government's last budget.

The government have removed \$9 million from public housing and services for the homeless. People are now queuing for most of their lunch hours to pay for car registrations and the like at the shopfronts that remain open after the government closed the Civic shopfront. And what did the government say? The minister said there was an increasing use of the internet for making payments. This is their way of saying, perhaps in the immortal words of Marie Antoinette, "Let them eat cake."

The minister who wants to put this statue up has closed the Griffith library, without consultation, six weeks after announcing it, at the end of November last year, to save several hundred thousand dollars. The community from far and near who used that library were angry at that and disappointed, and the minister said that they could use the new Civic library and that at any rate more people were using electronic services. He did not say anything about the old and the young who are not able to go into the city to use the library. Library hours on weekends and evenings have also been savagely cut, which means libraries are simply not as accessible as they were to a working population.

Then we have the chaos with the bus services where people have immense difficulty getting from A to B, and we are even getting outrages such that some poor bus driver had his nose broken yesterday amid the outflow of anger from the public, who are sadly at times taking it out on bus drivers.

So there are some huge problems that this government should be addressing, rather than going off on a tangent and addressing vanity projects and focusing on absolutely the wrong priorities. Of course we also have the closure of 23 schools and the \$128 million prison, which will cater for a very small and, it seems, diminishing prison population of not many more than a hundred. Again, perhaps the government's policies there might have some impact on that in terms of continually knocking back attempts to ensure that people who commit serious crimes actually do serve the time. The government of course also are still not off the hook with the Civic to Belconnen busway—to save three minutes, at a cost potentially of over a hundred million dollars. Then there is the arboretum.

The government think nothing of spending money on things people do not want. They also recently spent \$68,000 on a glossy brochure to advertise their wonderful deeds,

neglecting to mention a number of things such as the closed schools and the fact that it is very difficult for people even to rent accommodation now. They also got the number of beds in the prison wrong. The government push their ideological barrows at the expense of the bread and butter services that the community need and despite the fact that the ACT economy remains buoyant. But that has got a lot more to do with the federal government, which is creating another 5,000 jobs in the public service in Canberra, than anything this government is doing.

I have already mentioned briefly the complete lack of consultation, which I think annoys people so much about this government and is exemplified in this particular decision. Another issue is that not many of Australia's great are immortalised in statues in the nation's capital. There is only one statue of former Prime Minister Edmund Barton, the first Prime Minister of Australia. Sir Robert Menzies only has a bust. Even Walter Burley Griffin, who did most to shape the capital, does not appear to have the honour of a statue. He has got a lake named after him.

The curious thing about a statue is that it is such a conservative type of monument and one that has fallen out of favour over the last 30 years. Perhaps the Chief Minister is fond of Stalinist style monuments. Totalitarian states have also been very keen on statues. Indeed, people can remember some Stalinist statues coming down, such as the Saddam Hussein statue. Mr Hargreaves also, by using the Kennedy/Lincoln analogy, has made the statue a laughing-stock around Australia—and it is not even erected yet.

If the Stanhope government wants to honour one of its own, I would suggest it could do so virtually free of cost to the taxpayer. It could name a place after Al Grassby. It could name a room, perhaps a meeting room in the multicultural centre, if it wished to do so. What my motion does is urge this government to scrap this statue, which I think does symbolise your government's disregard for the community. Many, many people are annoyed that you are wasting so much money on things like this and not providing the basic services people need. It symbolises your disregard for the community, and that is exemplified by the fact that you have not even consulted in relation to it.

I do not believe in opposition for opposition's sake; often I like to suggest solutions to problems here. In terms of what you can do with the statue, given that I understand it is in seven parts and you have probably already paid for it, or are committed to pay for it, perhaps you could get the Canberra Labor Club to buy it. After all, Al Grassby was a longstanding and honoured member of the Australian Labor Party. Perhaps the Canberra Labor Club could pay for it to go up in the club, and in that way ACT taxpayers would not have to fork out for what is an outrageous expenditure of taxpayers' money for a statue that no-one seems to want and that has become a very, very divisive issue in this community.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (5.49): Obviously the government opposes Mr Stefaniak's motion. I did not hear a peep from Mr Stefaniak or other members of the opposition when the decision was made and publicised in August 2005, but a desperate Mr Stefaniak will jump on any passing bandwagon if he feels that there might be a vote in it. He has joined those that want to

destroy multiculturalism and want to go back to the White Australia policy of the 1940s and 1950s.

It is difficult to deal with individuals who operate as opportunists, rather than being consistent. We have already heard about Mr Stefaniak's inconsistency on this issue, but it is worth repeating. Yes, the Liberal members that sit before us today denouncing the installation of a bronze statue of a great advocate of multiculturalism were, not so long ago, lauding his life achievements. Shortly after Mr Grassby's death in April 2005, on 3 May 2005 Opposition Leader Bill Stefaniak, during a condolence motion in the ACT Legislative Assembly, declared:

... Australia has lost a magnificent man ... I wonder if we would have the pleasure of having so much diversity in our community and all the benefits that go with it were it not for the sterling efforts of Al Grassby ...

Mr Stefaniak was not the only Liberal to extol the virtues and the many achievements of Al Grassby. Opposition members Steve Pratt and Brendan Smyth had plenty of positive things to say about the great man during the condolence motion. Let's revisit those comments. Mr Pratt noted:

There is no doubt that Al Grassby was a pioneering influence in the development of multiculturalism as a meaningful force in Australian society.

Mr Smyth stated:

I think the reforms that the Chief Minister has outlined are a testament to Al. For me the one that really stands out is the repeal of section 64 of the Migration Act 1958 to 1966. That was the last of the old discriminations against the indigenous people of Australia. It is something he should be remembered for for a long time.

The opposition members who deride Al Grassby now continued their highly vocal and public support for him at the time of his passing.

Mr Pratt: Deride the statue, John, not the man.

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mr Pratt! You will get a chance to speak; perhaps not today.

MR HARGREAVES: The day Mr Grassby died, former opposition leader and now ACT Liberal Senator Gary Humphries urged the federal government to facilitate a state funeral, occasions which are reserved only for those whose contribution to Australia is truly great. Of course, the request was granted. In a media release issued hours after Mr Grassby's death, Senator Humphries stated that the 78-year-old had left a powerful and enduring legacy in pioneering modern multiculturalism in Australia. He said:

Although his tenure as a minister was very short—less than two years—he made a huge contribution to Australia, turning its attention to the world beyond our shores and to understanding the value diverse cultures could make to the quality of life here.

Senator Humphries also noted the impact that Mr Grassby had on the national capital when he said in the media release:

He was a distinguished Canberran and he deserves to be acknowledged, especially by this community, for his work in promoting community awareness and cohesiveness ... Although a political opponent, Al's work over several decades profoundly influenced the values and norms of Australian politics. I hope his historic role will be appropriately acknowledged by the government and the broader community.

I would like the Leader of the Opposition to pass on my thanks to Senator Humphries for recognising Al Grassby's contribution to multiculturalism.

While the Liberal Party has spent much time commemorating the life and work of Mr Grassby, prominent members of our community also paid tribute in the days after his death. At his state funeral, former Canberran of the Year and Aboriginal elder Matilda House rightly described Mr Grassby as a "true friend" of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Chief Executive of the ACT Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Chris Peters, honoured Mr Grassby with a statement on the Multicultural Business Chamber's website firmly declaring: "Al Grassby is the father of multiculturalism in Australia."

In the papers today, Dr James Jupp, visiting fellow and director of the centre of immigration and multicultural studies at the ANU, wrote a letter to the editor saying that it was Al Grassby—not the Liberal Party, as claimed by Mr Stefaniak—that first used the word "multiculturalism" in a speech in 1973 and that he was indeed the father of multiculturalism. As Australia's father of multiculturalism, isn't it only appropriate that his contribution to furthering diversity in our city, and indeed our country, be recognised? I can definitely say that the decision to commission a statue of Mr Grassby was made in view of his long and dedicated service to community relations and multiculturalism.

I would like now to talk briefly about what Al actually achieved as a tireless advocate of multiculturalism over the last 40 years. Here are the facts. He organised the establishment of bilingual broadcasts on the New South Wales radio station 2RG in Griffith in the 1950s and played a vital role in the early years of the National Multicultural Festival in Canberra. During his years in federal parliament, Al was a popular and well-known minister who expounded the benefits of multiculturalism and encouraged migrants from non-English-speaking countries to take out Australian citizenship. From 1972 to 1973, Mr Grassby oversaw an increase of almost 50 per cent in citizenship requests.

Al Grassby banned racially selected sporting teams from playing in Australia and repealed the law that required indigenous Australians to seek permission before going overseas. He also removed restrictions on the amount of non-English programming on TV and radio. Al Grassby fought tirelessly to advance the cause of multiculturalism at a time when the White Australia policy was still seen as a good idea by significant portions of the Australian community. His views on multiculturalism have directly and indirectly improved the lives of countless thousands of Australians by fighting discrimination and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Al was appointed the first Commissioner for Community Relations, administering the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 that he championed while in parliament. He was recognised for his continued work in promoting peaceful coexistence through multiculturalism by being honoured with the Order of Australia in 1985 and the United Nations Peace Medal in 1986. From 2001 he was a founding director of the Multicultural Business Chamber of Australia. I ask members of the Assembly to name anyone else who has done so much for migrants in this country.

Although Mr Grassby had died by the time the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre in London Circuit opened its doors, December 2005, he would have been proud to be associated with the concept and the reality that it has become today. The centre, which was named after another great pioneer of multiculturalism in the ACT, Mr Theo Notaras, was built in the vision of Mr Grassby.

The cost of the statue is just over \$72,000, which was available because the multicultural centre came in under budget. There was no need for a specific budget allocation because it was regarded as an artwork associated with the building works. You do not get much for \$72,000 in reopening schools, reopening libraries. What a stupid suggestion! That was a stupid suggestion.

Mr Pratt: You can bank it towards essential infrastructure.

MR HARGREAVES: That is an even more stupid suggestion. You guys are taking stupidity to great heights.

With more than 20 communities from varying backgrounds inhabiting the centre and dozens more visiting it on a daily basis, his dream and vision have been realised within the bricks and mortar of that very special building across Civic Square. A centre such as the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre, the first of its kind in Australia, would not be possible without the pioneering work of Mr Grassby. Shouldn't his contribution be recognised, rather than his reputation tarnished by such a targeted smear campaign by the very people, the Liberal Party, who were so sympathetic and so supportive of his life's work at the time of his passing?

This decision has been public since August 2005, and only now have we heard the Liberal Party comment on the statue. We look forward to unveiling in the coming months this permanent tribute to multiculturalism in Australia. The statue is a symbol of multiculturalism in this country, who we are today and how we got here. At a time when multiculturalism is under attack in this country, it is important to remember that multiculturalism was not always the norm. It is not only a tool for educating today's youth but also an important reminder not to take what we have for granted. I hope to see members of the ACT opposition at the unveiling, supporting multiculturalism in this country and formally recognising how far we have progressed in the last 30 years.

Mr Speaker, I do not particularly mind how much members of the opposition malign me, take my comments out of context and want to pour dirt on me from a great height, because they do that regularly, but I will not stand here and see these people furthering this smear campaign against Al Grassby's good name. I will not countenance it. This man was a pioneer. This man put multiculturalism on the map in

this country and it is his vision that we actually enjoy today. We will be commemorating that with this statue when it is unveiled.

The fact that the ACT is an island in Australia in a sea of racial discrimination fostered by the Prime Minister is why we are commemorating Al Grassby. Talking about statues, the statue of little Johnny Howard the digger is standing on the sands of the beach head of Bermagui. Don't we feel safe! Mr Speaker, this motion is a joke. Al Grassby was a bigger man than are the people opposite collectively.

At 6.00 pm, in accordance with standing order 34, the debate was interrupted and the resumption of the debate was made an order of the day for the next sitting. The motion for the adjournment of the Assembly was put.

Adjournment

Public art

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (6.00): I really think that the politicians in this place need to lighten up about our public art. We have had today a motion opposing the installation of a statue of Al Grassby. I think that that demonstrates a very po-faced attitude to our public art and also, I would say, a kind of a discrimination against who is allowed to be the subject of a statue. I might say that I oppose the statue being erected, because Mr Grassby was not a woman. Where are the statues in Canberra of famous women? But I will have to be satisfied with the very grand statue of Ethos outside. I do not think anyone would argue that she is an inappropriate woman to have.

Why don't we set up a veritable rogues gallery, Mr Speaker? Let us start with Mr Grassby. Some people do not like Al Grassby, and they will never like Al Grassby. That is the way it is with politicians. We seem to inspire hate in some and, apparently, reverence in others. Let those who will hate, hate; and let those who will love, love. Let us bring little Johnny up from the coast. I was very saddened to see that the artist Greg Taylor does not think Canberra is worthy of this fantastic statue. Mind you, it is one that he cast in bronze, so that it will not suffer the same fate as Elizabeth Regina suffered when she was sitting on a bench beside her Prince Phillip, all ready for a skinny-dip, and somebody took off her head. If that one had been made of bronze, that head would still be there and we would have been able to genuflect, as we wished, as we did our morning runs along the lake.

I can envisage any number of people. In fact, Mr Stefaniak listed some of them today. I would be very happy to have all of them in our rogues gallery. That is what I would call it, because I do not have any particular reverence for politicians above other people. In fact, I celebrate the ordinariness of politicians, and I think that the more ordinary we are, the better we will be liked.

The second thing that I would like to say is: are we having a discussion about multiculturalism again? Who owns the word? That is what I think the discussion has been about today. Is it Mr Grassby? Is it Mr Fraser. Is it Jerzy Zubrzycki, who, as we know public servants do, beavered away for years before a concept actually entered the public arena? Mr Zubrzycki, however, is a man who probably would not be commemorated, because the essence of a good public servant is that he remains behind the politicians that he serves. So there we go: let's have Mr Grassby up there.

Let's consider Peter Latona, the sculptor who was selected to do this work. It is ready to go. He is just being caught in this political melee. Sculptors need work. Let's face it: if some of that \$72,000 keeps an artist in work for a while, I think that, in itself, is a good thing. Bring it on, I say. Let's have more public art. Let's have more discussions about public art. If this is the only way that we can discuss public art, let's have this kind of argument. I am very sorry that we have not heard anybody just talk about how we need to lighten up, how we need to brighten our environment, how we need to accept that not everyone will ever love any politician, no matter what good deeds they did. Let's put it up, let's move on and let's get the next one lined up, too.

Communities@Work

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (6.03): Mr Speaker, today I would like to talk about an element of the Communities@Work program currently operational across the ACT. The Friday before last I was fortunate enough to attend the Communities@Work Greenway early childhood centre trivia night at the Southern Cross Club in Tuggeranong. The event was organised to raise money to provide equipment and resources for children at the centre. At present, there are up to 60 children, aged from birth to five years, enrolled at the Greenway centre. The night, hailed as a success by the area manager for both Tuggeranong and the Greenway centre, Sharon Mathers, raised approximately \$3,500 for the cause.

These trivia nights have had a long history with the Greenway early childhood centre and, with the success of the most recent event, have shown strong support from all parts of the community for the development and sustainability of the Communities@Work program. Prizes for the evening were donated by various businesses and organisations. They included a hot lap ride in the new Toyota rally car with Neal Bates, who is recognised as a great supporter of the local community and those initiatives. They also included Questacon family passes, carpet cleaning by Morgan's, Bodyworks fitness memberships and vouchers for local restaurants, to name just a few. It is encouraging to see such a diverse range of local Canberra businesses getting behind such an important community service.

The Greenway centre itself falls under the Communities@Work umbrella and it has nine other early childhood centres across the ACT. This centre was opened in 1995 by Annette Ellis and Molly Rhodin, a former manager of the centre. Communities@Work is a not-for-profit organisation that assists families across the ACT in caring for young children and their families. Other services that are of importance are family day care, family support, youth services and community development.

It is supported, as the title suggests, by the local community and its vast array of volunteers, of which approximately 150 are registered. The local community and the families that are involved with the organisation of these events are to be congratulated on their achievements in raising both awareness and the much-needed money for such a worthy cause. The government plays its part in the success, making available accommodation for these centres through territory and municipal services. It is also important to mention the minor works project grants that are given to maintain and upkeep these facilities.

Bringing children into today's world is not easy. Balancing the needs between work and looking after family is always confronting for new parents and is a challenging task. Any affordable assistance offered to these families and the local community should be encouraged and supported. If not for centres such as the Greenway early childhood centre and its senior body, Communities@Work, parents and families would find it difficult to seek advice, help and support when raising their children. It is well known that I have long been a supporter of community services, especially when dealing with working families. I encourage all members of this Assembly and the community that we represent to continue the support necessary to maintain this level of valued early childhood care service.

The Tuggeranong early childhood centre later this year will host a trash and treasure sale to which the local community will donate possessions that they no longer require. I urge members to donate any used household items or similar. I have some interesting used car parts that I will be donating. The opposition may have a used leader or two that they are able to donate to assist in raising money for important resources for these children.

Lanyon community medical facility Tharwa bridge

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (6.08): Mr Speaker, I rise briefly to pick up a couple of matters relevant to my own back garden. Firstly, I was pleased to see that Dr Nathem Al-Naser was able to win an auction to identify a piece of land in the Lanyon medical centre precinct, on which it looks like he will be able to build a full medical centre, a centre that can provide the full services, if you like, of an outlying medical centre capability. If that comes to pass, that surely must be good for the Canberra Hospital in terms of removing at least a bit of the load from that hospital. It must also be a very good thing for the Lanyon Valley. That is an area where there are lots of families with lots of young children.

Dr Al-Naser is an Iraqi doctor by background who owns a significant practice in Belconnen. In anticipation of establishing a broader medical centre practice in the south, he has been running a small surgery at the Lanyon shops for about six months. He says that he has been overwhelmed by families with all the types of issues that families currently take to the emergency section at Canberra Hospital. Lots of kids are presenting with twisted ankles, broken legs, abrasions and things requiring stitching up et cetera, and he has been able to address some of those things, but I am not too sure how, in his very small—two rooms—surgery. Good luck to him.

I know that he is having some difficulty at the moment with the LDA in identifying the entire scope of the project that he has now won, for the 1,600 square metres of land that he has purchased. I think that the tendering document said that the land which might form the footprint of the building was in the region of 400 square metres. He was then told by the LDA that, unfortunately, he would be confined to something like 260 square metres, which would not allow him to build within budget what he thinks is needed for that community. I gather that the LDA was having discussions with him on Monday. I do not know how those have gone. For the sake of the Lanyon community, I wish him well. We will see what happens. If the interested parties run

into obstacles, I would call upon the government to be at least open-minded about reviewing that situation. It is very important that a centre of that calibre be built in that place.

The second point I want to raise is that I am yet to hear from the government on what is going to be happening with the bridge project at Tharwa. I am still far from satisfied that the government cannot quickly build a temporary low-level structure to assist a community which is rather barricaded at the moment and feeling a little bit bruised, given the issues that have been visited upon the community by what I would call very poor management on the part of the Stanhope government. I am still not convinced that the government cannot engage with the federal government, the commonwealth authorities, about borrowing military assets to assist in the rapid installation of a low-level bridging structure.

Mr Speaker, I say again to this house that it is so important and it is so necessary that a temporary low-level crossing be installed, something that can be done within weeks, if not a month or so, because I think we will see that the permanent bridging solution, which I am very pleased to say has now been pretty much set in concrete, will take a lot of time. That is time that this community cannot wait for. I would again urge the government, firstly, to visit the temporary solution and bring some relief to a beleaguered community and, secondly, to move quickly to ensure that the permanent solution is built on budget and in good time.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.13 pm.