



# Debates

WEEKLY HANSARD

Legislative Assembly for the ACT

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**Wednesday, 13 September 2023**

**MADAM SPEAKER** (Ms Burch) (10.00): Members:

Dhawura nguna, dhawura Ngunnawal.  
Yanggu ngalawiri, dhunimanyin Ngunnawalwari dhawurawari.  
Nginggada Dindi dhawura Ngunnaawalbun yindjumaralidjinyin.

The words I have just spoken are in the language of the traditional custodians and translate to:

This is Ngunnawal Country.  
Today we are gathering on Ngunnawal country.  
We always pay respect to Elders, female and male, and Ngunnawal country.

Members, I ask now that we stand in silence and pray or reflect on our responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory.

### **Legislative Assembly—unparliamentary language Ruling by Speaker**

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Yesterday during debate on the Appropriation Bill, Mr Hanson was making comments on part 1.7 relating to the Justice and Community Safety Directorate. In his remarks he pointed to some comments made by Mr Braddock where he quoted from a report on ACT Policing and referred to the words in the report that stated ACT Policing was operating “below capacity levels”, compared to other jurisdictions.

Mr Hanson then drew attention to the difference between the report’s findings and the number of times “Mr Gentleman and others” had stated in the Assembly “we have enough police”, and then made the comment:

... and that was not true. That was not true, and now everybody says it and it is on the record. The fact that he has had to put in this budget 125 police proves that it was porkies being told in this place for years.

The Assistant Speaker asked Mr Hanson to withdraw the words “That was not true” and also the word “porkies”. Mr Hanson subsequently withdrew the word “porkies”, with the Assistant Speaker indicating that the *Hansard* would be examined in relation to the words “That was not true”.

I have examined the proof transcript of the proceedings, together with the relevant provisions of Assembly standing orders. Standing orders 54 and 55 state:

A Member may not use offensive words against the Assembly or any Member thereof or against any member of the judiciary.

All imputations of improper motives and all personal reflections on Members shall be considered highly disorderly.

Standing order 57 also provides:

When the attention of the Speaker is drawn to words used, the Speaker shall determine whether or not they are offensive or disorderly.

In reaching my decision on this matter I note the text of *House of Representatives Practice*, at page 490, where it quotes an explanation by Senate Deputy President Wood. In interpreting a very similar provision, he stated:

When a man is in political life it is not offensive that things are said about him politically. Offensive means offensive in some personal way. The same view applies to the meaning of “improper motives” and “personal reflections” as used in the standing order. Here again, when a man is in public life and a member of this Parliament, he takes upon himself the risk of being criticised in a political way.

Having considered the matter raised, I decline to rule that the words used were offensive or disorderly. While the word “untrue” has been ruled unparliamentary on previous occasions, context is important in determining if there is a personal reflection. In doing so, I must advise the Assembly that I am reluctant to get involved in the nuances and emphases in what, on the facts available to me, appears to be essentially a political matter. If any member believes that a member of this place has misled the Assembly, the appropriate course of action is to move a substantive motion, which I note that Mr Hanson did in relation to this exact matter on 9 February this year.

On another matter of yesterday, I was also asked to check whether Mrs Kikkert used unparliamentary words during question time. As I stated at the time, I did not personally hear Mrs Kikkert’s comments. However, it was raised with me by both Mr Davis and Ms Cheyne. Despite Mrs Kikkert telling the Assembly that she did not use the word “lie” or call someone a liar, on reviewing the *Hansard* it is quite clear that Mrs Kikkert said:

Wow! Try to justify yourself. Keep telling yourself lies.

Based on my earlier comments on imputations, improper motives and personal reflections being considered disorderly, I will be asking Mrs Kikkert, when she comes to the chamber, to withdraw that. I hope that deals with those matters members.

## **Appropriation Bill 2023-2024**

[Cognate bill: Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2023-2024]

### **Detail stage**

Schedule 1—Appropriations—Proposed expenditure.

Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate—Part 1.12.

Debate resumed from 12 September 2023.

**MS LEE** (Kurrajong—Leader of the Opposition) (10.06): It was around this time last year that I announced and took on the portfolio of shadow minister for housing

affordability and choice. It is an undeniable fact that the ACT is experiencing and continues to experience a housing crisis, and the Canberra Liberals were and are committed to addressing this head on.

In contrast, the Labor-Greens government has totally failed Canberrans when it comes to housing. The latest example is their watered-down version of the Canberra Liberals infill policy. I would go so far as to describe the Labor-Greens watered-down policy as ambitious, as Mr Cain has already said. It will not go far enough in addressing Canberra's housing crisis, and many stakeholders, including the Master Builders Association and Greater Canberra have confirmed this.

Let me remind Labor and the Greens of a couple of facts and figures from the ACTCOSS 2023 *ACT Cost of Living Report*. The ACT continues to have some of the most expensive median rental prices of anywhere in Australia. It continues to be one of the least affordable jurisdictions in the country for people on low incomes. More than 60 per cent of private renters in Canberra experienced severe rental stress in 2022, meaning that more than 60 per cent of renters in Canberra are forfeiting more than 30 per cent of their income toward rent alone. Earlier this year we saw almost 4,500 Canberrans register to take part in a land ballot for a mere 217 blocks of land in Jacka. Last year it was even worse. There were 7,400 hopeful buyers for just 51 blocks in Macnamara. Madam Speaker, when does this stop?

The inaction by the Labor-Greens government in exacerbating the cost-of-living crisis we see everywhere around us, from the fuel pump to the grocery store to housing, is something that is hurting Canberrans, and they deserve so much better. Moreover, the Labor-Greens government have failed to prioritise fixing the housing crisis, putting their financial motives ahead of real action for the Canberrans who need the most support.

This is a government that deliberately curtails the release of land here in the territory to ensure that it has a steady drip-feed of inflated revenue from land sales. Forecasts show us that by 2060 more than 784,000 will want to call Canberra home. In order to keep pace with this demand, it is estimated that the ACT will need more than 100,000 homes. How have the government, who like to tell us every day about how forward-thinking they are, responded to keeping up with these projected increases? How have they responded? By releasing more land? By building a sufficient and high quality supply of affordable housing? By announcing policies that will actually make a real difference to those who need it the most? Of course not.

In this year's budget we saw the Labor-Greens government promise to release land for 1,883 residential dwellings, as part of their Indicative Land Release Program. The population of the ACT is predicted to increase by 9,000 people this year alone. The release of these dwellings will barely provide enough housing for half of them, and housing development in the private market will not cover the shortfall. And that is on the basis that they actually meet the targets in the program, which we know they regularly do not.

We constantly hear the Chief Minister harp on about Canberra enjoying a high quality of life and that is true, but in reality what we are seeing is more Canberrans missing out on access to housing, while the government sit on their hands and deflect the

blame elsewhere. We saw that time and again over the last sitting period, as well as this week, in their absolute and utter disdain when it comes to increases in the cost of living, including with this devastating GP payroll tax that Mr Barr is going to be imposing on many, many Canberrans at a time when we are facing a cost-of-living crisis.

The Canberra Liberals will always stand up for the Canberrans that this Labor-Greens government has left behind, that this Labor-Greens government abandoned long ago. We are committed to ensuring that we address the genuine housing crisis that Canberrans are facing.

**MS CLAY** (Ginninderra) (10.11): I recently sat on the estimates committee. We had 11 days of hearings and a lot of those hearings covered the work of EPSDD. That directorate is doing a lot of really essential planning and environmental protection that will shape Canberra's future.

One of the first issues that came up was the government commitment to 70-30. That commitment is that at least 70 per cent of Canberra's development should be infill within our existing footprint. There was a bit of confusion about whether that was up to 70 per cent or at least 70 per cent, because we have seen different words on websites and in different strategies. We did get a clear indication that the commitment is at least 70 per cent.

Then, when we got to the details of how the government has been counting against that target, again we got bogged down in confusion. It turns out that the government has been counting knockdown rebuilds as an additional new home and infill. The reason that matters is that, if you knock down a house and rebuild a house in that place, you have not actually made a new home for anybody in Canberra. You have not made a new home that some new family can move into; you have just replaced the one that was there.

Of course knockdown rebuilds need to happen but they should not count as new, additional homes against our 70-30 target. They are not new, additional homes. It is not the right way to do the data. The reason my office started asking these questions is that, when we were looking at ABS data between 2016 and 2021, we could only see that around 57 per cent of Canberra's development was infill. I think government data is different, but, given that we found some flaws with government data, we have asked a whole lot more questions and we are hoping to get some much better tracking on that.

It is important that we get the correct story, the correct data on the record. That matters, but it is more important that we get the right development happening in the future. The IPCC tell us that, as a city, we need to densify. They tell everybody all around the world that they need to densify. City planners say this. Our own government says this. We know we need to densify because sprawl is destroying our natural environment. It is increasing climate emissions. It is leading to much, much more intensive development, with much more intense scope 3 emissions further and further out of Canberra. It is locking people into long car commutes and it is simply not a sustainable way for a growing city to develop. We also have a housing crisis, which we know, which means we need to densify.

The confusion about 70-30 and how we have been counting—that is, whether it is being done correctly—has prompted the Greens to pivot to a much simpler target that we think everybody can probably understand and that should not lead to any problems in counting the data. We think it is time to set city limits. Most cities have done this. It is now time for Canberra to set city limits. Then we will not have confusion about targets and how we are counting them. We will just all know where the line on the map is.

We also spoke quite a lot during estimates about climate change. I found this a really difficult set of hearings, I have to say. It was winter in Canberra, but it was the hottest July on record. We were seeing some pretty extraordinary events happening all around the world. There was a real cognitive dissonance for me when we were talking about climate change and how important it was, but we were not quite matching up our budget priorities with our stated priorities on climate.

We know we have around 60 per cent of tracked emissions from transport. There is very little in the budget that is going to shift that 60 per cent of transport emissions. We got an extra \$5 million for footpath and cyclepath maintenance. That was really fantastic. It is the first funding boost we have seen for a while in that area, but when I compare it to the \$650-plus million that we are seeing spent on road duplications and construction over the forward years, it is not very much money. When you say active travel is really important, \$5 million to \$650 million is not a great comparison. We know we have a transport hierarchy and we should be supporting active and public transport at the top, but in actual fact most of our money is going into the bottom of that chain. Most of our money is going into private vehicle infrastructure.

We are not seeing business cases, and these are really major transport projects. I am really pleased that we hear calls from the community and from the Canberra Liberals and from all sides of Canberra for transparency on our major transport projects. We should get the same transparency on roads. I spoke to the Auditor-General about this and he agreed that, in an environment of escalating costs on major projects, we should be seeing some public information. We know these figures are public, so it could not possibly be that it is commercially sensitive to keep those figures in-house. The figures themselves are already out there, so the only information that is not public is the reasons and the justifications for the projects.

Light rail is a fantastic success in Canberra. People love it. It appeals to people who do not already use public transport, and that is exactly who we need to get into public transport. But we did not really see anything in this budget that is going to speed that up, and we are seeing one link come out per decade. It is not quick enough to deal with the crisis we are facing.

We have the Sustainable Household Scheme. It is a fantastic scheme. It has just recently added electric motorcycles, and I think that is really promising. Information is still coming out about electric cargo bikes and electric bikes. I am seeing these advertised and I am hearing reports from many people buying these. They cost between \$2,000 and \$8,000. It is quite a lot of money. It is particularly expensive for people who do not have a lot of money to spend on transport.

We spoke about some other areas of emissions. Again, in this budget we are not seeing a lot that is going to address these. Waste is almost 10 per cent of our

emissions and we are going backwards. We have delayed our FOGO facility rollout and the Canberra-wide program that will go with that. I understand that we are prioritising the new materials recovery facility. That makes sense, but because you are building one facility does not necessarily mean you cannot build the other facility. There are options.

We could build two facilities at once. We could look at other ways to deliver a food recovery service. We could do it under contract. We could do it with some of our existing providers. We could do it with new providers. We could look at expanding the existing trials we already have. I am sure there are more ideas that some really clever people will come up with. There are a lot of ways we could proceed to doing food recovery quicker than 2026. It really worries me because, if we are sending food waste to landfill in 2026, that food waste will still be generating climate emissions in 2046. These decisions have a really long tail. In a climate crisis we need to be agile and we need to work quicker when we encounter problems.

I am also quite concerned about climate adaptation. There is some really good adaptation work rolling out at the moment. Greens Minister Rattenbury recently led law changes to make our community clubs refuges for extreme heat and smoke. That is fantastic, but I saw a lack of coordination during those estimates hearings. I questioned two directorates, sports and Education. From sports we heard that facilities and volunteers are trying to navigate this environment themselves. It is pretty complicated. We were directed to one paragraph in the *CBR Next Move* report which talks about climate change. There is no detail there. Schools have a lot more examples of individual adaptive measures they are taking and it is great to hear that, but they were not coordinating it and there was nobody giving them a structure to help.

The Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment has been calling for better coordination on climate adaptation for years. When she looked at sport governance back in 2019, the commissioner said that “governments can and should adopt a leadership role managing the risks and opportunities,” with adaptation. I asked the Minister for Climate Action about adaptation. He agreed that there is work to do to coordinate it, but he said that there are only so many things that can be done at once and there are urgent infrastructure priorities in other areas. I would counter that I think climate change adaptation for our facilities is about the most urgent thing you could be doing. We need to coordinate that now.

I also asked the Minister for Climate Action, in that capacity and in his capacity as Treasurer, how we are doing climate assessments on budget decisions, because I am seeing a lot of decisions made that do not seem to match our priorities in terms of climate. We got some great information about TCCS and Major Projects using sustainability ratings for projects with a value over \$10 million. That is a really good framework. We need to make sure that is routine on all major decisions, not just some of them, and we need to make sure those assessments are available to decision-makers and are published.

Since the budget was handed down, the climate action minister has launched qualitative climate assessments on some bills. It is a positive step, but a qualitative assessment does not have numbers in it. When you are looking at budget decisions, when you are trying to weigh up really major priorities and you are looking at costs



and time frames and quantities of material and where you should spend your resources, what you should do first and what is important is to have some numbers in there. A qualitative assessment will just talk about how we feel about things. It is not going to get the job done. During estimates I spoke to the Greens emissions reduction minister, who is developing a tool to standardise climate assessments. I understand that tool will have numbers in it. It will be a quantitative tool. I am really hoping we can get that quickly and I am hoping that can roll out to as many major budget decisions as possible.

There is great news in the budget for climate. Total loans under the Sustainable Household Scheme are \$280 million and there is a lot of cost-of-living relief in there, as well as climate reduction. We have \$86 million to electrify public sector operations, including getting our schools off gas heating. I was pleased to see that my old primary school was on the list there. We have more investment in the Home Energy Support Program. Anyone holding a healthcare card, a pensioner concession card or a veteran gold card can access that. Those \$2,500 rebates will really help. *(Second speaking period taken.)*

The budget also contains funding for a new small business rebate of up to \$10,000 to transition our workforces away from fossil fuel gas. This, along with the free advice you can get from the Sustainable Business Program, will really assist our businesses to cut emissions and save money at the same time. It is a really smart climate action.

Our pathway to electrification is going well. We are making really good progress there. We have set a clear direction and we are consulting about it. I understand the ACT government recently won an innovation award for Make Your Next Choice Electric. This is all really positive. We are also seeing more EV chargers being installed around Canberra. We had measures in the budget for that. EVs are transitioning well. One in five new vehicle registrations now is an EV and Canberra has just passed the milestone of 5,000 zero emissions vehicles. This is really, really good news, but it is mixed in terms of that overall strategic coordination.

I was pleased during estimates to hear that we are making progress in our sustainable buildings area. There was some really good, solid progress. This is a really complex area of regulation and legislation that has huge commercial impacts and it needs to be done well. Greens Minister Vassarotti told us that the government is on track to introduce legislation for developer licensing by the end of this year. That is excellent to see. I have heard further announcements about that since estimates. She also updated us on progress towards building certification and engineers registration.

These are measures about building quality. They are also going to help us in making more sustainable buildings in Canberra. As we densify, as we focus more and more on doing infill, we need to make sure that it is high quality, that it is a well-regulated industry and that people can move into smaller homes that are built well that they can trust. That is also climate action. Building them well means that they need less energy to run over their 50-year life. Building them well also means that people will have the confidence to live in that type of building.

The budget has quite a lot of money for ACT waterways too. The Greens water minister, Minister Rattenbury, told us about an additional \$8.2 million in Healthy

Waterways funding. I was particularly pleased to see this. I have a bit of a personal stake in this one now. We have a new wetland coming near Emu Creek, on the Belconnen oval, and it has been a great project to watch. It is a really good example of where citizen input and community consultation has led to better design. The designs that are rolling out are quite different from the original designs that were put on the table. It is also a really good example of how building and managing our environment in a more sustainable way gives us much better use for people. It gives us much higher amenity. I think people are really going to love that area. The residents near that project are really excited to see that project coming along.

I am certain that my colleague Johnathan Davis is also really pleased to see the projects to improve stormwater quality down in Tuggeranong. Renaturalising our waterways is great to see. I had somebody explain to me a few years ago that we used to build our stormwater drains like upside down roads and there are all sorts of reasons why that is not the right way to manage our environment. It is fantastic that we are moving closer to a model where we parallel the natural environment and use those natural systems to create a healthier environment than the one we currently have.

We also have some great environmental funding in here. The Greens environment minister, Minister Vassarotti, told us about the \$5.8 million over four years to strengthen our biosecurity and nature conservation. It is really welcome news to hear about that. I know our land carers in particular are really worried about the condition of our parks, and they have put in a lot of volunteer hours. They know the species. They have their own sweat in that land and they are really worried that we need to manage it well. I am really pleased to see the new funding. I am worried that it is not enough. From a budget pipeline of \$7.5 billion, \$5.8 million does not sound like much money.

We know we are going to have more pest species. Climate change will bring more and more incursions of weeds and animals here. We know we are going to have more needs and more labour to manage this land well, and I think we need to see bigger increases in funding than we have seen in the recent past. If we do not do that, our children will not be able to enjoy the environment that we enjoy. It will be gone. We need to make sure that we are spending enough money and spending enough time to care for it now.

There are also some really positive, more recent announcements. I was pleased to see the 20-year *Caring for Dhawura Ngunnawal: A Natural Resource Plan for the ACT*. I am really glad to see that kind of management and that kind long-term commitment to a plan and to funding. This is how we need to manage our natural resources. It is really good to see.

I will finish with a couple of words on the planning review. I will not say much here, as I do not want to confuse anybody about what role I am playing in the next steps on that project. But it does have major implications for government policy, for development and for how we collectively look after this country that we need to look after. The Greens are very much looking forward to seeing the detail in the next steps on this project.

**MR CAIN** (Ginninderra) (10.37): I rise to speak to the Appropriation Bill 2023-2024 as it pertains to planning and land management under the Environment, Planning and

Sustainable Development Directorate. The budget has done little to allay the concerns of many Canberra residents, community and environmental groups and industry stakeholders that the future of planning in the ACT is one they can look forward to.

We must consider what kind of city we want for the future: a city with a large and growing population, and a city that Canberrans can feel proud to live in, with bountiful access to nature and strong considerations of the environment in the age of climate change. Our children must feel the same level of enjoyment from the characteristics of the bush capital and garden city that we currently do.

It is often forgotten that Canberra is the capital of this wonderful country. Where is the vision from this government to enhance the standing of Canberra in the eyes of all Australians? It is my hope that a planning vision delivered by the Canberra Liberals will lead Australians to feel proud to feel that Canberra is their capital city and Canberrans to feel even prouder that they live here.

What Canberra needs is respectful densification; new, innovative approaches to planning that will enable everyone to afford a home without sacrificing choice for purchases; and an informed, measured and evidence-based planning system with a sensible mix of market-rate housing in our suburbs and greenfield land release, both of which will respond to overwhelming demand and thus catalyse a chain of vacancy and housing mobility.

Unfortunately, the new Planning Act endows the chief planner and the planning minister with a raft of unprecedented powers that cause a contradiction between the integrity and transparency of government, and we are yet to understand their full effect. The act employs an outcomes-focused planning system, but these outcomes are entirely at the whim of the planning minister and the chief planner, who will singularly determine the planning direction of Canberra. The regression of community involvement in the DA process will mark a turning point away from consultation and due process—indispensable features of a functioning democracy, let alone a functioning planning system.

Regarding the recently released Territory Plan and district strategies, I do remind members that the planning minister told the Legislative Assembly during the Planning Bill debate on 1 June that finalising the Territory Plan and the district strategies was the next step once the bill passed. He said, “We will do this in the next month.” Customer service 101 says that if you promise to deliver something to someone and you fail to deliver it, whether it is a product or a service, surely you should come out and say, “I am sorry, I will not be able to meet that commitment.” That is an obvious way to treat customers and, in this case, citizens and residents respectfully. Surely, if you say, “We will do this by this time,” and you do not, you should say why it is not going to happen or, “Sorry. For these reasons it will happen later.” We just got silence through the month of June. We got silence through the month of July. We got silence through the month of August.

Earlier this week we finally got to see the new Territory Plan, district strategies and other key documentation. These are voluminous documents. We will need time to analyse and assess these important planning reforms, to see how they will affect how residents live, how businesses operate and how suburbs look. I look forward to the

planning committee's promised inquiry into the new Territory Plan, although I am not quite sure we have heard that confirmed yet. Perhaps it should look into the whole suite of new documents released earlier this week.

The one thing that we are aware of is a very unambitious promise to allow, on 800-plus square metre parcels in RZ1 block zones, a separately titled 120-square metre additional residence. That is just a slightly larger granny flat. How is that going to add to housing options for families, for example, in our suburbs? Families are attracted to our suburbs for obvious reasons: the openness, the green space, the playing areas, the walkways and the cycleways. Is that going to bring affordability within the grasp of young families and growing families? "Here is a granny flat in the suburb for you." It is an unambitious and very, very strange decision. What is so magical about that number? I do not know. Did they just roll some dice or something and come up with a number?

The Canberra Liberals are committed to allowing a separately titled parcel on these large blocks to build a second residence, without saying that it can be only a certain size. There are some parcels in our suburbs that are well over 1,000 square metres. On the radio earlier this week I heard someone saying, "I've got a parcel in Belconnen that is 1,700 square metres." That person will not be able to build anything more than a 120-square metre granny flat, if they choose to add to the housing stock. It really is hard to fathom where this came from. Yesterday the planning minister said, "It was a cabinet decision." Minister, surely you can explain why that decision was made. You are the planning minister. We look forward to your response to my question yesterday.

Furthermore, the planning minister must release more land for residential dwellings, after claiming in budget estimates hearings that land was released in response to population growth. What a load of nonsense. The Indicative Land Release Program for 2023-24 is set to release only 1,800 residential dwellings this financial year. Despite what the minister said in estimates, population growth is far outstripping land release, further exacerbating the housing crisis.

The ACT budget has population growth at 2.25 per cent in 2023-24 and two per cent across the remainder of the forward estimates. That is over 9,000 new people each year. Based on Minister Gentleman's own figure of an average of 2.4 occupants per dwelling, if you release 1,883 parcels of land this year, that means there is housing for about 4,500 people. That is about half of the projected population growth. Again, how do they come up with these numbers? They tell us they are answering the housing affordability and housing choice problems in Canberra; they are actually contradicting themselves through their own policies.

Minister Gentleman said that the private sector will pick up the gap. However, the government, as it knows, is the monopoly land provider in the ACT. So such a claim just does not add up. The Chief Minister has said that the limited release of land that his government is providing does not really contribute to the land price in Canberra. That is ridiculous. If you strangle the supply of a sought-after product, everyone knows what happens to the price of that product: it goes up. Mr Barr's view is that it does not—that the restricted supply of land by this government does not affect the land price in Canberra. I call that "Barr-onomics" because I do not know what else to call it. It is an economic theory that I have never heard before.

**Mr Cocks:** I call it ridiculous.

**MR CAIN:** It does sound rather ridiculous; indeed. The planning minister's vision, and this government's planning vision, is driven by one simple thing: how much money can they get from land? The planning minister may claim that the land release policy is not about financial return, but Canberrans are smarter than that and they will see through this, particularly leading up to the next election. They know when they are being deliberately gouged by a government solely interested in the bottom line, in repairing a structural budget deficit and in trying to reclaim a credit rating that we have held for a long time and now have lost.

A Canberra Liberals government will act decisively and with urgency to help alleviate the ACT's severe housing affordability crisis by releasing more land and ensuring more choice. *(Second speaking period taken.)*

On a more slightly detailed matter, during budget estimates the planning minister and chief planner were asked by me to provide a definition of "developer". Obviously, it is a very important activity in Canberra and affects our planning system. Unfortunately, neither could give me a definition immediately. After lots and lots of umming and ahhing, they said, "We will accept what the Electoral Commissioner says a developer is."

This is in the context of me asking the chief planner: did he keep a record of meetings with developers? He said, yes, his diary does keep that up to date. Then, when I asked, "What is a developer?" he could not answer the question. How do you know that you have not met with a developer if you do not know what a developer is? Further, how do you know that the definition provided by the Electoral Commissioner is one that is appropriate for our planning regime? That needs to be explored. I think there are questions to answer further on that, from both the planning minister and the chief planner.

Under the new Planning Act and the extraordinary powers granted to the planning minister and chief planner, transparency is even more essential to good governance and to ensuring that developments that are approved by the planning minister and chief planner are done so appropriately. One thing to get right is: just who is a developer in the territory? The planning space requires constant scrutiny to ensure strong accountability. It is concerning that the planning minister and chief planner do not have substantive protocols to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest or inappropriate meetings with people who they think may be a developer, but they are not sure.

In conclusion, this year's budget relating to planning and land management has failed Canberrans. A mere 1,800 properties to be released in 2023-24 is utterly disgraceful and not what Canberrans are looking for. It represents a failure to properly manage land release and housing stock supply. A limit on the second dwelling of 120-square metres does not significantly add to the housing options available in our suburbs.

An Elizabeth Lee-led Liberal government will put people back at the heart of planning in Canberra. The Canberra Liberals will stand up for the community councils and the residents associations, the environmental groups and the local businesses. Labor and

the Greens are planning not for the future, nor for the people of Canberra. They are planning for profit from land, and shame on them for that.

**MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (10.50):** We have heard a lot about housing supply and housing issues in our planning system today, but planning is about more than just building more houses and more apartment towers. Planning done well makes sure that people have the services and infrastructure they need as well. Nowhere is this more obvious than in our new areas, places like the Molonglo Valley.

**Mr Cain:** Shame!

**MR COCKS:** That is right; it is shameful the way that this government has let down the people of Molonglo and the surrounding regions in Weston Creek by not providing infrastructure and services, and not planning to provide them, to people in Molonglo. People in Molonglo feel that the government has walked away from them.

The government tell us that they now expect 86,000 to call Molonglo Valley home. That is their number: 86,000 people. Their original planning documents had that number closer to 50,000. The government have not updated how they are going to deal with this huge influx of individuals and families into this region. The roads in Molonglo Valley are already choked. The roads when trying to get out of Weston Creek are already chronically congested. They knew that they were before they turned the first soil in the Molonglo Valley. They knew about these problems and they have not dealt with them through the planning system.

Nowhere is this problem more obvious than where they stand on building a Molonglo town centre. This is a call that has come from the Molonglo community, who have seen the failures in planning, the failure to get even a local shop for so many years—the failed planning policies that led to so-called mixed use just being more and more apartment blocks, without the services and facilities that the community needs.

A town centre would overcome the limitations that this government has applied—things like a 2,000-square metre limit on offices. A town centre can actually have genuine employment. A town centre provides those employment opportunities. It provides opportunities for the higher-order retail that people need, for offices and for consulting rooms. It is the sort of place where you see cultural facilities, community facilities, where you actually have entertainment options, and, of course, it is where you find strong connections to education as well.

What this means is that for someone in Denman Prospect who currently is told that Woden is their local town centre, it is a 45-minute bus ride. According to this government, Woden is the local town centre for the Molonglo Valley. They expect people from Denman Prospect to travel for 45 minutes to what the government considers their local town centre. That is not good enough.

If we can get a town centre in the Molonglo Valley, then people will spend less time in their cars. The congestion will be improved for both Molonglo and Weston Creek. People will have to spend less time away from their family and will have the things they need in their neighbourhood. That is how good planning should work. We have to plan for the future today. We cannot wait until the problem gets so much worse in

the future. It is time to plan and make sure that people in these communities have the things that they need. Thank you.

**MR RATTENBURY** (Kurrajong—Attorney-General, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Gaming and Minister for Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction) (10.55): I would like to speak briefly about the areas in my portfolio responsibility around energy, climate change and water in the budget this year. The ACT government is continuing with its action on climate change. What we see in this budget is investment to maintain our commitment to remain at the forefront of climate action. The investments we make in this budget will ensure that Canberra continues on the pathway to net zero emissions and has affordable energy. They will ensure that this city and its communities are more resilient and better equipped to adapt to climate change over the coming decades.

There are various work streams funded in this budget and each of them plays an important part in achieving that big picture vision that we have. We see in the budget additional funding over two years which will allow the ACT government to continue and enhance governance transparency and accountability measures for climate action. A key element of that is providing clear, independent information to our community. This includes delivering the annual greenhouse gas emissions inventory; delivering the minister's annual report under the Climate Change and Greenhouse Gas Reduction Act; continuing to support the independent ACT Climate Change Council; and conducting the first five-yearly independent assessment of government climate change action.

Research and implementation measures to progress emissions reduction targets are also funded in the budget. This will include tackling those hard to abate emissions sources such as refrigerants, waste, aviation and agriculture. The budget will also see the continuation of essential monitoring and evaluation of the ACT's 30 per cent tree canopy cover and permeability targets. This includes LiDAR imaging capture and analysis, associated heat mapping and the necessary research and analysis to inform ongoing urban adaptation policy development.

The budget will also deliver grant funding to support community organisations to develop climate change adaptation plans and to support exemplary climate-wise design and imitative use of living infrastructure. We will also see the continuation of the ACT longitudinal survey on climate change and community resilience. This will be the third survey. The data will be essential not just for monitoring progress but also for informing ongoing adaptation and resilience policy development, policy delivery and helping us to decide future actions. This is becoming more and more important as our community continues to experience the realities of climate change. We, as a community, need to know who is best able to respond and how we can support those less able. The data being derived from that survey is incredibly important for that purpose.

The budget will also support the promotion and effective utilisation of the NARClIM 2.0 regional climate projections for the territory. These are due to be released very soon. They will provide an important update in the latest science on what we can expect in the ACT. That will help us in climate risk management and adaptation, both across government and in the way we support the community to do those things.

The budget will also continue to support policy activity on energy affordability, ensuring a fair and equitable transition for all Canberrans in the move to a net zero economy. These are all important pieces of policy work that are resourced through the funding we see in this budget.

The budget has also provided \$200,000 to procure ACT-specific energy price forecasting. The current market conditions are creating volatility in energy prices, and this volatility means that much of our analysis and past modelling does require updating. I think it is important that we have the best modelling we can to help us anticipate issues that are coming our way, and also to use modelling like this to underpin the development of important policy initiatives, such as the integrated energy plan, and to inform the direction of numerous other policies and programs.

We are continuing to deliver the Zero Emissions Vehicles Strategy, and there is funding in this budget to do that. A further \$750,000 of funding has been provided to ensure that there is a well-distributed, reliable network of public electric vehicle chargers in the ACT. This funding will ensure that we are reaching our commitment of at least 180 publicly available charging stations by 2025, giving drivers the confidence to purchase an EV without worrying about where the vehicle will be charged. We are making accelerated progress in this, after a slow start, and we are now catching up quickly. There are now more than 100 publicly available EV charging stations across the territory, with more planned. The government is currently tendering for the next batch as well, and I think we are well on track to meet that target.

Last week I was very pleased to be able to officially unveil the new charging station at the Mint. There are six bays there, so six vehicles can charge at one time. These are the sorts of facilities we need, to give Canberrans real confidence that they will be able to readily access a charging point. Certainly, a site like that is ideal for territory residents and, given its location, is particularly valuable for tourists.

We have also committed \$300,000 to pilot EV-ready developments. This funding will show that intelligent, smart charging retrofitted into apartments and townhouse complexes can be viable, in some cases without the need for costly network upgrades. We are looking to work with apartment buildings here, because this has proved to be an area of concern to the community. It is a space where there has not been a lot of development across Australia, so we want to work with those body corporates that are ready to go forward now and help us, through this pilot program, to work through both the technological questions but also the issues around body corporate regulations, rules and decision-making processes. Given that they are collectives of, in some cases, up to several hundred apartments, there are technical questions. There are also human behaviour questions and governance questions that we need to work our way through. Across the territory, we are seeing a real uptick in the availability of EV charging, which is very important as we see our community really embracing the electric vehicle revolution.

Finally, I will touch briefly on Healthy Waterways. We have continued our investment in the Healthy Waterways project, with more funding over the next four years to improve waterway health and water quality in the territory. As members know, these programs are about reducing nutrient loads and algal blooms in urban



lakes and ponds, and promoting healthy rural catchments by addressing the smothering of rural riverbeds with sand deposits. As Ms Clay has touched on, these projects include the construction of a wetland at Belconnen Oval and the development of a plan for managing water quality in several catchments, including Lake Burley Griffin and the Tuggeranong catchment. We are looking at putting together more explicit and detailed catchment plans, starting with those two.

That funding will facilitate ongoing water modelling, monitoring, research and Indigenous engagement to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and support the development of catchment plans. A significant investment will continue to develop programs to promote practices that reduce the pollution of urban waterways, such as the Leaf Collective program, understanding that there is an educational role and a community participation role in helping us to improve water quality as well.

There is money for the ongoing operation and maintenance of a dozen wetlands built since 2021 as part of the Healthy Waterways project. It is important to recognise that these are not set and forget projects; they do require a degree of ongoing maintenance to ensure that they continue to operate as effectively as we want them to. This budget, with its continued investment, builds on government actions in this area, including the initial Healthy Waterways project from 2014 to 2021, the 2020-21 budget initiatives and the 2021-22 budget review. What you can see there is a sustained and committed investment in improving water quality across this city.

I know some people continue to be frustrated by the fact that, for example, Lake Tuggeranong continues to experience problems. That is the challenge that lies in front of us. We have seen decades of build-up of the nutrients in these lakes. They have done what they were designed for. We now have different expectations. It is a long-term project, but I think what this budget shows, and the other investments we have seen, is that there is a real commitment to delivering a better future for our urban lakes and waterways. I commend these elements of the budget to the Assembly.

**MR PARTON** (Brindabella) (11.04): I am going to talk briefly in the sustainable building space. Buried in the \$207-odd million for the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate is a provision of \$3.3 million for building reform. I am sure there would be provisions elsewhere for building regulation and compliance. In any event, the real-world improvement of building quality is absolutely critical, and I know we would all agree on that. It is critical because many thousands of dwellings of all sorts will be built in the next decade, and it is critical because building quality failures can ruin property buyers and destroy their aspirations for an entire lifetime. I note that budget statements E assures us that the ESPDD will:

Continue improvement to, and reform of, the ACT's building regulatory system focusing on practitioner regulation and building quality and safety.

It is reassuring that EPSDD are plugging away at the problem, and they have been ever since Minister Gentleman proposed his 43 reforms back in June of 2016. As I understand, these are fully implemented, but I do wonder how effective they have been. Then there is work underway to apply a uniform national construction code, which is also a good thing.

There are also other plans, which we have heard about here and in public conversation, for property developer licensing, which I gather will come to fruition later this year. No doubt this will be embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm. I think that is the way that I would say it: it will be embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the industry. Despite all these actual or planned advances, the horror stories are still being brought to my attention, some of which are not in the public arena. Some of the wrenching stories should be spoken about here.

In one instance, an owner in a unit complex has experienced a number of issues, including slab deflection, failing support pylons, water ingress and a number of other problems. Rectification could cost about \$7 million, which is beyond the reach of the 25-odd owners. Not unnaturally, the owners are quite desperate, and the consultants even suggested the sale of the block as an escape route. In this instance, what concerns me as much as the life tragedy is the remarks that no-one from Access Canberra gave them any support or advice on a structural process that they could follow. I find that quite disappointing. I hope that there have been positive improvements by now.

Another constituent with experience in the building industry observes that people get their licences far too easily, and that regulatory officials lack the right qualifications and experience. Another constituent says:

The minister and government do not have the ability/appetite to regulate the building industry certifiers and home warranty insurance schemes.

Constituents also complain of work not executed in line with the approved development application, including trees being removed that were protected by the DA's provisions, while other works were done that were not in the DA. Another constituent in a large development complains of loud cracking and the prohibitive costs of litigation to get things fixed.

I could go on, but I will not. I think I have spoken enough. I would hope that what the budget appropriation is buying us is a robust regulatory and compliance service, and not just a bunch of pretty-looking reports full of platitudes. What we need is a regulatory framework that gives people hope, one that does not shatter lives, and one that makes clear what is expected from the ACT building industry. We need this to give people confidence and to establish the ACT building industry as a national leader in quality standards and reputations. In the next year I look forward to being presented with far fewer horror stories, compared to what I have received since the last budget. That is all I have to say on this line.

**MR GENTLEMAN** (Brindabella—Manager of Government Business, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Industrial Relations and Workplace Safety, Minister for Planning and Land Management and Minister for Police and Emergency Services) (11.08): The ACT government continues to work to plan for our growing population and the creation of a compact, efficient and inclusive city. This budget provides additional funding to support investigations and due diligence to support future land supply in the short to medium term, with a land supply pipeline in the next five-plus years.

Significant work is required to determine whether a piece of land is suitable for future development, including understanding environmental values; assessments of infrastructure capacity and requirements; a range of studies, such as cultural, heritage, contamination and geotechnical; and significant planning processes. This all requires significant time, resources and expenses, which the government is committed to providing. This will support land supply into the future, which is particularly important for housing. Our commitment of \$1.636 million in the 2023-24 budget indicates the importance of getting land ready to bring to market, to house our community. This investment is critical, to allow the government to respond to the movements in demand and provide a sustainable supply of development opportunities to cater for our growing population.

I am also pleased to talk to the Assembly about the investment that the ACT government is making to deliver the Gungahlin community centre. The 2023-24 budget provides total funding of \$28.4 million to enable the delivery of a new community centre in Gungahlin over the next three years. This investment will deliver the design and construction of the new facilities, to be located close to the bus and light rail interchange in Gungahlin town centre. Recognising the existing need for community facilities, the budget also includes \$1.021 million to lease vacant commercial space in Gungahlin town centre to serve as a temporary community facility while the new centre is delivered.

There has been strong community interest in the location and design of the facilities, and in the activities and services that will be provided. The result is a centrally located multipurpose community centre that will include a dedicated youth centre; an outdoor activity area; workshops for visual arts organisations; a gallery space for locally produced art; a commercial-scale kitchen for large indoor and outdoor community events; two multipurpose halls for meetings and community-run activities such as dance, gymnastics and yoga classes; a community pantry and facilities for people needing assistance; and offices and counselling rooms for not-for-profit organisations providing support services to the Gungahlin community.

Providing the facilities that are in line with the community brief is one thing, but once completed it is important to ensure that the facility's management will support affordable community access over the long term. To achieve this, a budget provision of a further \$510,000 in expense funding is included to support the initial operation and maintenance of the facility over the first five years of operation.

Investment in the Gungahlin centre will benefit Canberrans across a range of ages and interests. It will enhance social connectedness and resilience and support the building of an inclusive community. The ACT government is reinforcing the importance of the design review process as well, drawing on the skills and expertise of the ACT Government Architect and a pool of planning and design-related experts to provide a review of relevant development proposals. The increased investment of \$970,000 over 2023-25 in the National Capital Design Review Panel will facilitate additional access to sessions, thereby maintaining a focus on delivering good design outcomes, which is a key element to the new planning system as well.

As the ACT moves to a new planning system, the Planning Act 2023 lays the groundwork for a shift to an outcomes-focused system that prioritises the achievement

of high quality design and good planning and development outcomes for the territory and its people. I note that a key feature of the new planning system is to provide greater opportunities for housing. In addition, the new planning system includes the introduction of design guides, including the *Urban Design Guide*, the *Housing Design Guide*, and the *Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide*. These will be valuable resources for the independent territory planning authority and the design review panel in encouraging innovative and high quality design outcomes.

While planning and land release continues, the ACT government is looking into where Canberra can grow into the future. The ACT Planning Strategy 2018 identified the need to investigate land to the west of Canberra's existing metropolitan area, known as the western edge. The Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate has been undertaking preliminary investigations for environment, planning, heritage and infrastructure. These studies continue to inform the recommendations and next steps. The ACT government, during the financial year, will continue technical investigations on the western edge of the ACT to understand the possible future uses, which could include urban development, nature reserves, environmental offsets and other uses such as rural, broad acre and major infrastructure. This is a large area and it will take considerable time to have a good evidence baseline, which is what these investigations are providing.

The eastern broad acre area was also identified in the ACT Planning Strategy 2018 and in the draft district strategy for east Canberra as offering potential new employment-generating uses, such as industrial uses, due to its proximity to the national freight routes, the airport and the existing industrial areas of Fyshwick, Symonston and Hume. The government has committed \$509,000 for the 2023-24 year to support the finalisation of the eastern broad acre strategic assessment. Following that assessment, the government has provisioned funding of \$17.492 million for the 2024-28 period that may be required for offsets, management and ongoing planning. The ACT government will continue investigations into the eastern side of Canberra to identify areas for future employment uses, including for knowledge-based economic growth through space, cybersecurity, defence, renewables and advanced technologies, and for environmental conservation.

In continuing to deliver improved wellbeing opportunities to the Canberra community and to attract additional tourists to the ACT, the ACT government will be investing \$1.835 million over the next two years to design and construct a new 15-kilometre mountain bike flow trail from Stromlo Forest Park to the Cotter recreation area, to raise Canberra's national profile as a premiere mountain bike destination.

The government will invest \$650,000 over the next two years to continue to provide support to conservation activities for the critically endangered Canberra grassland earless dragon. It will do that through the captive breeding and reintegration program. This initiative provides funding for a team to maintain the captive CGED colony at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and to monitor and evaluate the reintroduction of the species within the Jerrabomberra valley.

The government has increased its commitment to improve the management and maintenance of tracks and trails in the Canberra Nature Park. The investment of a further \$546,000 over four years will achieve greater resilience in these critical assets, and in the face of increasing climate-related events such as fires, floods and severe storms.

The government has also provided \$1 million in support to the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust. This is a well-timed and well-targeted investment so that the trust can continue to work with their partners to deliver the research, management and monitoring of threatened and newly reintroduced species, and enhance the visitor experience within the Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary, Wildbark at Throsby, and the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve.

As one of the fastest growing jurisdictions in Australia, more people will be living in the ACT each year. The ACT government is working to accommodate this growth while enhancing and protecting the aspects that we value most, such as access to services, infrastructure and natural spaces that contribute to connected communities. I commend this part of the bill to the Assembly.

**MS LAWDER** (Brindabella)(11.18): I rise today to speak briefly on the Appropriation Bill 2023-24 as it relates to the areas of my shadow portfolios, including environment, heritage and water.

The natural environment has always been an important part of our lives here in the ACT. Canberra residents value their connection and closeness to nature, where we have more than 60 per cent of our land area in the ACT as parks and reserves. We also all agree on the importance of protecting our native flora and fauna, including many of Australia's iconic animals, as well as lesser-known and endangered species.

That brings me to a very emotive issue for many, many Canberrans about the kangaroo cull. It is undertaken by the government to achieve positive ecological outcomes, but it is a controversial issue for many Canberrans. We have had petitions, demonstrations outside the Assembly and numerous letters from constituents; yet we continue to see the environment minister from the Greens presiding over the kangaroo cull with, I guess, concerns about animal welfare and responsible practice.

We all understand the need to protect other areas of biodiversity but, in good conscience, it is difficult to understand how we club baby kangaroos, kangaroo joeys, to death or decapitate them. These are concerns that are raised to me frequently during the period of the kangaroo cull. You all probably also see the letters to the editor in Canberra as well. From the representations made by me, I feel that Canberrans would like to see an independent review of the kangaroo cull to give them some comfort that this is the best way to approach the issue.

We have the Greens party, which includes spokespeople on animal welfare, yet we have the kangaroo cull and the clubbing to death of baby joeys. I guess that is a tautology: kangaroo joeys and kangaroo babies.

During estimates hearings, we discussed many other animals as well, including rabbit control initiatives and the research being conducted. As you would have seen, there has been a recent petition about the Indian myna bird as having possible official pest status. We have talked quite a bit about the terrible issue of wombat mange, and I would like to acknowledge the great work being done by some community organisations and many, many volunteers who work in that area to help wombats recover from mange. In estimates, we talked about the terminological distinction between wild dogs and dingoes and the potential reintroduction of koalas into the ACT.

Funding for invasive species management and threatened species conservation was discussed and whether it is enough. I know that my colleague Mrs Kikkert argued that it is not enough, given the amount of weeds in her electorate of Ginninderra, for example. In Tuggeranong and out in the rural areas of the ACT, we have seen incursions of weeds that have now just become overwhelming and are no longer able to be managed adequately.

The Select Committee on Estimates 2023-24 recommends that the ACT government ensure funding is sufficient for environmental protection, biodiversity management and invasive species management to match demand and pressures imposed by climate change. Similar to areas in the City Services portfolio, many residents believe that weed funding has failed to keep pace with the demand and that, whilst there have been some increases over the years, clearly they have not been as significant as has been required.

I will now briefly go to heritage. What a chaotic few years it has been for heritage in the ACT. I have raised issues about the work of the Heritage Council for years. Under this current Greens Minister for Heritage, we have had a very tumultuous time, with the ACT Heritage Council's work suspended, a snap review commissioned—and we still have not seen all the findings of the snap review; it is not publicly available in full—and the minister dissolving the existing ACT Heritage Council.

We have seen an interim Heritage Council appointed and another large-scale review into the ACT's heritage arrangements underway. We had a Heritage Council appointed in April of this year for an interim period. It has been a very chaotic time.

The Select Committee on Estimates 2023-24 report recommended that the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate finalise upgrades to the Heritage Council website and database this financial year. But, disappointingly, the government's response talked about statutory procurement requirements, which of course must be followed. However, the time lines for this mean that works to implement the database and website upgrades will begin from July 2024. We must follow our procurement guidelines, but it is disappointing that we have not been able to keep the website up to date on an ongoing basis rather than have to go to a full-scale procurement process.

On water, we know from many discussions in this chamber that water quality in our lakes and waterways, and particularly in Lake Tuggeranong, is of great interest to me and to many other Canberrans. Earlier this year, I launched a discussion booklet, "A new approach to improving water quality in Canberra lakes and waterways", and I have been pleased to receive such an overwhelmingly positive response. So, clearly, people are not satisfied with the lack of tangible outcomes we have been seeing under this Labor-Greens government. There is more that needs to be done.

Just two weeks ago, for example, I was driving along Bugden Avenue in Fadden and there was a man standing in the gutter outside his house with a leaf blower, deliberately blowing a whole lot of leaves down into the drain. Clearly, we need to do more on the public education front, because this is just one example of the need to, if you like, turn off the tap and stop a lot of these nutrients entering into our waterways. It is a large-scale problem as well but, when individual householders contribute to the problem, that is certainly not helpful either.

With blue-green algae; we are just approaching the danger season coming up to spring and summer. Given the tens of millions of taxpayers' dollars being poured into this area, it is understandable that residents would like to see some real improvement.

Mr Rattenbury mentioned that people are a bit frustrated but Lake Tuggeranong is serving its purpose in terms of collecting sediment and nutrients. That is the purpose for which it was originally built for. But, of course, it is now much more than that. The recent announcement of the long-awaited and much-needed foreshore redevelopment program is an example of how it is much more than a collection area for sediment and nutrients. It is a real community asset that we need to ensure residents can enjoy at all times of the year without that bad smell and the terrible look of that blue-green algae.

I am committed to improving water quality and I look forward to doing so in the future under an Elizabeth Lee-led Canberra Liberals government.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Canberra Institute of Technology—Part 1.13.

**MR DAVIS** (Brindabella) (11.27): As the Greens spokesperson for education, I am not supposed to pick favourites, be it early childhood learning, schools, our colleges, our great university sector or, indeed, CIT and vocational education. They are all good. But, as I reflect on the challenges for this government in delivering on its ambitious policy program, I truly think that it is our vocational education and CIT sector that hold the key.

It is an important cornerstone of our society and of our education system. Vocational education helps young people get new skills for future employment opportunities; it supports people of all ages to retrain, refresh or further develop their skills after time out of the workforce; and it helps drive Australia's engagement in the new industries of the future. We have the opportunity to ensure that everyone who wants to upskill or broaden their education can do so.

With workforce shortages commonplace across many industries, I believe providing free, high quality and accessible vocational training opportunities will be essential—indeed, the lynchpin—to bolstering our workforce and helping to deliver on this government's ambitious policy goals.

The Greens want everybody in this city to have great mental health and access to the mental health support services they need, which means that we need to train more mental health support workers at CIT. We want peer workers, youth workers and social workers in our public schools to allow our teachers to teach without expecting them to also moonlight as social support workers for the kids in their classrooms that are struggling.

With adequate wraparound supports by qualified professionals to help students in need, our schools can become better places for students and teachers. That means training more youth workers at CIT.

This government wants to fix the housing crisis, and we know that community workers are an important piece of that puzzle for supporting people accessing public housing and delivering specialist homelessness services. “Specialist” is in the name; it is because these are well-trained professionals, often trained at CIT. We want to build more affordable homes in this city, but we cannot do that without a strong building and construction workforce—tradies who will get their certificates at CIT.

We want to treat drug and alcohol addiction as a health issue, not a criminal issue. We have substantially increased funding for alcohol and other drug support services, particularly to complement the government’s work on decriminalisation. But there is no point funding services without ensuring that there are talented professionals who are able to do these jobs, educated largely at CIT.

Apprenticeship completions declined by 64 per cent between 2013 and 2020. Additionally, the number of students in the ACT doing in-school vocational education and training decreased by 18 per cent between 2017 and 2021. We are in the middle of a skills crisis and we see these numbers going down. That is not good enough and we need direct attention to bring those numbers up, because we want every student interested in vocational education to be supported to realise these goals.

The Greens value equality and equity of opportunity and accessibility for everybody in our education system. I was therefore pleased to see the addition of new courses to the free CIT course list—one of the many recommendations from the Select Committee into Cost of Living Pressures. The new course additions include nursing, community development, the building and construction sector, and community services designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Of course, the Greens are very excited about the development plans for Woden’s new super-CIT. This will be a state-of-the-art educational facility with co-located services, like the light rail public transport interchange, and an abundance of greenspace for residences, students, commuters and businesses.

Woden CIT will enable access to vocational education for people living in the surrounding regions, including in my electorate Brindabella. This access would be even better facilitated by ensuring that stage 2B of light rail goes to Mawson, improving accessibility for people in the southern reaches of Canberra.

I was very pleased with Minister Steel’s response to my question without notice during the last sitting, where he assured me that the CIT in Tuggeranong will not be impacted by the new apartment hotel that is being developed in the same building on Anketell Street, which is due to open mid next year.

My constituents value having access to local CIT spaces to enable and support their studies. I am really glad that even more courses have been delivered out of the CIT Tuggeranong space. For example, the computer lab rooms previously accommodated three classes per week but have now increased to 13 classes per week. I hope to see CIT Tuggeranong continue to provide great value to the local community for many years ahead, beyond the beginning of 2026, which is when the current lease arrangements in that facility expire.



I support recommendations from the Select Committee on Estimates 2023-24 which call on the ACT government to expand access to free Auslan course offerings at CIT, to explore further opportunities to reduce those out-of-pocket costs for students participating in CIT courses and to support more women and gender diverse people to undertake vocational education, including in the building and construction industry.

The ACT Greens are pleased to support the budget appropriation bills that relate to CIT.

**MR MILLIGAN** (Yerrabi) (11.33): I want to talk to this area in my capacity as the shadow minister for skills and to address a number of concerns that have been raised with me over the lack of provisions in this budget for the VET sector. There are, as there is every year, a lot of big promises; but when you investigate them, they are just empty shells—all of which are targeted at CIT and none for the more than 75 per cent of students who are engaged in vocational education and training in the independent sector.

There was \$52 million announced, but a quick look at the numbers shows that most of that will be spent over the next five years with very little of it in this year. What this lack of funding has meant is the closing of some key programs in the ACT that support women in trades and those who need additional support.

Why the government has not sought to further fund the Ginninderry SPARK program and the Women in the Trades program is inexplicable. These much-needed programs were meeting a serious gap in our community. It is disappointing for those who were enrolled in these programs.

I have no doubt that part of the problem is the ever-rising cost of the CEO and the CIT debacle. Questions during estimates revealed that the previous CEO is still being employed on full wages, including a proposed pay rise, whilst the acting CEO travels from Melbourne to Canberra, as well as having her contract extended for an additional two years potentially. It would appear that it would be in the best interests of all concerned if this matter was resolved as quickly as possible.

Then there is the cost associated with the consultancy contracts. I was told by a constituent that their son had their school-based apprenticeship with CIT as his employer, cancelled. This was due to “an economic downturn”. It seems that there is money for extensive and expensive consultancies and extra executive staff and expenses but not for a student who is trying to make his way in the workplace.

The Woden CIT costs also continue to rise. It is now almost \$93 million over budget, having risen steeply from the initial proposed \$240 million in 2020-21 to now \$333 million—an almost 40 per cent increase in the cost of the project. When questioned, the minister was not able to give a satisfactory answer to the rising costs of the project. Mind you, this does not include a much-requested arts space or the youth foyer—the latter of which will cost an additional \$10 million over two years to build. Is it an economic downturn or a budget overspend that is leading to the loss of students being the focus by CIT?

Lastly, I come to the fee-free places. Once again, we find that all the focus here is on CIT, with nothing available for the independent sector, which carries the majority of

the VET sector burden in the ACT, educating and training more than 75 per cent of our students. It is extremely disappointing but something we expect from this Labor-Greens government.

Maybe it is time for this minister to step aside to allow someone with a better vision, someone who could take his place, someone who has a better oversight, to take responsibility for this important portfolio for the ACT.

All in all, this was a disappointing budget for the VET sector. I think more support needs to be given to the independent sector, which clearly carries the majority of the burden of educating our community. With 75 per cent of people completing these courses doing it through the independent sector, I think equal weight needs to be given in terms of support for both CIT and also the independent education sector.

**MR STEEL** (Murrumbidgee—Minister for Skills, Minister for Transport and City Services and Special Minister of State) (11.38): The Canberra Institute of Technology, the CIT, is this year celebrating its 95th anniversary. This anniversary highlights the central place that the CIT holds in our community and the impact of this institution on our economy, supplying the ACT workforce with tens of thousands of graduates with essential skills. The CIT was officially opened by Prime Minister Stanley Bruce in 1928. In that year, there were a total of 80 students enrolled in the technical and commercial classes and just 60 in the evening classes. Today, over 20,000 students train at CIT every year across more than 150 qualifications.

Skills shortages across the country continue to drive demand for high-quality VET sector training—hence, the increased pressure on VET providers to meet government and community expectations. The CIT remains at the forefront of responding to training needs in innovative ways to meet skills demand in both emerging skills and the new economy, but also in traditional areas, to help drive growth and diversification of the ACT economy. As the ACT's largest registered training organisation and the territory's public provider of vocational education and training, it is essential that CIT is equipped to provide high quality, accessible and future-focused training for individuals and employers and for industry in skills needs areas.

The ACT government will continue its commitment to the Canberra Institute of Technology as the cornerstone of our vocational education and training system. It is not surprising to hear the Canberra Liberals not supporting the Canberra Institute of Technology. We have seen in other jurisdictions, when there are Liberal governments or coalition governments in power, that they cut tape, and that is exactly what the Canberra Liberals would do if they ever got into power here.

The CIT budget initiatives have a focus on modernisation, inclusion and renewal and will ensure that the CIT is able to continue to advance as a contemporary, inclusive and future-focused institution, which is essential in developing our workforce of the future. We, as a government, will continue to invest in CIT. We know how important it is for the future of our economy, and that is why, through the budget, we have invested in initiatives, which include \$38 million of investment into the CIT Cloud Campus program.

This program will deliver a complete transformative capability uplift through digital transformation. The initiative would modernise CIT's information and communication

systems, learning and teaching environments, and business and administration systems. The project is future focused. It aligns with the strategic agenda of the government and will support the ambitious priorities that we have set out in *Skilled to succeed*, which sets out our vision for the vocational education and training system, which has been criticised by those opposite, but it is very comprehensive and is based on continued consultation with industry and RTOs across the sector.

Calling on the ACT's Wellbeing Framework and, indeed, our Digital Strategy project will enable the CIT to deliver a better student experience and will support flexible and accessible contemporary learning practices that support the current and future education and economic needs of the ACT. It will ensure that the CIT's systems will be easier to manage and operate, reducing the risks of legacy systems and allowing more flexible responses to the ever-changing needs and expectations of students, the ACT government and our community. Improving the efficiency of the CIT's ICT system will reduce costs, streamline administrative processes and create a better experience for CIT's staff and students.

The Cloud Campus program will help enable CIT's transition to the new state-of-the-art campus in Woden, which is currently well under construction. The crane is up. It is due to accept students from the second half of 2025. The funding for the Cloud Campus builds on funding for the CIT Woden project through previous budgets, which, of course, are continued through this bill as well.

In addition to modernising the CIT's ICT systems, modernising facilities and equipment will allow the CIT to attract a more diverse student cohort and allow the CIT to deliver the quality training packages that meet the latest requirements and needs of students and the industry. The ACT government is continuing to fund infrastructure renewal and modernisation programs to equip the CIT to deliver that high-quality training and industry standards. Of course, there are other measures in the budget as well.

The government is investing in CIT trades training equipment modernisation, which has been funded with \$1.95 million in the budget to update essential trades training equipment. It will deliver a range of upgrades and the new best-in-class equipment required to ensure the operational capability and delivery of electrical, automotive and engineering metal fabrication trades courses at CIT, with a focus on trades identified on the Skills Priority List as being in shortage. This will provide an immediate uplift in apprenticeship equipment for the CIT and has been funded through the continued work that the CIT has done in their investment in CIT baseline property plant and equipment.

The ACT government, through the CIT, is also investing in facilities to support health and safety upgrades. That includes funding for several critical capital works infrastructure projects across multiple CIT campuses, to comply with the latest disability and work health and safety legislation. The CIT needs to be a place of inclusivity—an accessible place that includes accessible infrastructure and facilities. This funding will support the delivery of accessible classrooms and facilities for all CIT students.

The ACT government recognises the critical role that the CIT plays in our VET sector and the transformative impact its training can have on the lives of its students, many

of whom come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. These investments, along with our \$300 million investment in a new CIT campus in Woden and our ongoing commitment to the delivery of fee-free TAFE, are setting up the CIT to be a future-focused and nation-leading provider of training that meets the skills needs of our community.

It is not surprising to again hear the Canberra Liberals are not supporting the CIT Woden campus in their remarks today and are not supporting the CIT more broadly, including the important role that it plays in the vocational education and training system. Of course, there are other registered training organisations. That is not the focus of this particular section of the budget. We have already, of course, discussed that. We will be continuing to negotiate a national skills agreement. Mr Milligan put forward some examples that are factually untrue. I want to particularly call out his mention in relation to the Ginninderry SPARK program closure and the reasons for that, which were discussed in budget estimates and explained. The reasons that he outlined are factually incorrect and he should correct the record about that.

We continue to have training agreements through Skills Canberra for a range of different RTOs, where we will provide, if they have a training agreement in place, funding through the existing funding programs, such as Skilled Capital and the Australian Apprenticeships (User Choice) program, as well as through the other grant programs like the ACE program, for example, and any future programs that may exist for grants for skills to support not just CIT but all RTOs to be able to apply for funding to provide a wide variety of different courses in skills needs areas. We will continue to invest in that.

I am looking forward to wrapping up negotiations on the national skills agreement, which is an important agreement that will support more fee-free TAFE training places in the future. Continuing, of course, the investment that is reflected in this budget for this year, we have seen thousands of students take up those fee-free places, which are not supported by the Canberra Liberals. We want to continue that through a new national skills agreement to make sure that the CIT can continue to deliver fee-free training places to more Canberra students, particularly young people, jobseekers and other priority cohorts, to make sure that they have the skills they need and the opportunities to get ahead in the economy to build a career. It will also help to plug some of the skills needs that we have in various industries, including in the new economy, but also in more traditional areas as well.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

City Renewal Authority—Part 1.14.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Legal Aid Commission (ACT)—Part 1.15.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Cultural Facilities Corporation—Part 1.16.

**MS CHEYNE** (Ginninderra—Assistant Minister for Economic Development, Minister for the Arts, Minister for Business and Better Regulation, Minister for Human Rights and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (11.48): I rise to speak briefly to the funding provided in this year's budget to support the growth of the Cultural Facilities Corporation and arts sector leadership in the ACT and in contributing to enlivening the city centre.

There are two components to this funding in this year's budget. The first is for the continuation of a partnership between the CFC and CIT for the vocational training of stage and theatre technicians through the joint delivery of Certificate III Live Production and Technical Services. The continued delivery of this training is vitally important to the work of the theatres and other venues across the ACT and region. Nationally, there is an ongoing shortage of skilled theatre professionals. The initial two years of government funding for the Certificate III Live Production and Technical Services, delivered jointly by Canberra Theatre Centre and CIT, has produced around 20 qualified graduates per year. Some go on to be employed by the Canberra Theatre Centre and others are engaged by live performance venues and production services businesses throughout the ACT. Twenty may seem like a small number, but the continued investment in building a pipeline of skilled theatre professionals is essential for us to have a vibrant and thriving live performance industry and to build the workforce of tomorrow for our redeveloped Canberra Theatre Centre.

The second element of funding for the CFC is for the growth of the Canberra Museum and Gallery as a catalyst for enlivening City Square and building the profile of the future cultural district alongside the redevelopment of the Canberra Theatre Centre. This funding builds on previous government investment, which has supported CMAG to take over two long-vacant premises across the square from this place and convert the spaces into a flexible, collaborative arts hub and a new gallery space, the Circus Gallery, with a focus on interactive exhibitions.

To date, the Civic Square hub has hosted a range of activities in collaboration with Craft and Design ACT; the Design Canberra Festival; the ANU School of Art and Design; PeopleLab's Festival of Everyday Art; the National Multicultural Festival; the Poetic City Festival; the Uncharted Territory festival; the Canberra Art Biennial; Floriade; and the City Renewal Authority for Enlighten in the city and for Winter in the City.

The hub is currently awaiting further minor internal fit-out, and the funding in this budget will allow for its ongoing evolution into a vibrant arts hub, supporting arts and craft retail; education and community programs; and exhibitions. The Circuit Gallery, which opened in March this year, has already hosted two popular exhibitions. The latest of these, aimed at young families, has broken CMAG records for school holiday visitation. The government's investment in the expansion of CMAG is helping to attract new audiences to CMAG, including young people, families, and interstate and international visitors. This then supports the broader redevelopment of the cultural precinct, the heart of which is the Canberra Theatre Centre redevelopment.

As you know, the Chief Minister and I announced on 11 May 2023 that the ACT government has appointed Architectus, Danish architects Henning Larsen, and international theatre designers Arup as the design partner consortium to deliver the

design for the Canberra Theatre redevelopment. In conjunction with Major Projects Canberra, the design partner consortium is now undertaking the early planning and design process, with insights from community members, theatre users and other technical experts. The Performing Arts Reference Group is already providing key insights, and stakeholders and the community will have the opportunity to input into the project through various targeted engagement and community consultation opportunities, which will continue throughout the life of the project.

The investments in this year's budget build on a strong history of investment across the Cultural Facilities Corporation. I take this opportunity to thank the many staff at the CFC who ensure that these are not just buildings or facilities but also literally help bring to life the histories, interpretations, expressions, entertainment and enlightenment. This is an organisation which has a casual, part-time and permanent workforce, shift workers and those who work on weekends and late into the night. Whether they are curators, gardeners or technical assistants, what every role has in common is that they are custodians. I thank them for their care and passion for this work and bringing it to Canberrans and visitors alike.

I am pretty sure this is the last time that I will speak to the budget appropriation, so I just want to take a moment to thank all those across the public service who have worked so exceptionally hard in preparing business cases; in helping me prepare to present those business cases; to Treasury for their analysis, genuine engagement and support; and to the ERC for their consideration and countless hours of work. It is an incredible amount of work for many months of the year. I believe it is a budget that we can all be proud of. Most of all, I extend my thanks to the team in the Treasurer's office, including the Treasurer but particularly Faheem Khan and Britt Atkins, who epitomise patience, professionalism, progressive values and work ethic.

I commend this part of the Appropriation Bill, and indeed the entire budget, to the Assembly.

**MS CLAY** (Ginninderra) (11.53): I have just a few quick words on the Cultural Facilities Corporation. I note in the budget a lot of their operational priorities are about expanding to new festivals and driving growth in the contribution of the arts to the ACT economy. These are really admirable goals. It is one part of our arts budget that is actually pretty well funded. We do okay with the CFC.

It is good to see this government support. I remain concerned about how we are helping our artists and our arts economy, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. We will be feeling the shockwaves for years. It has really had a huge impact on artists. I know that there was a big talent bleed. I am a little concerned that we have such an emphasis on festivals in this town. We have a really vibrant festival scene in Canberra. That was not the case when I grew up here. We have certainly matured in that. We have a real city festival scene, which is great. Festivals do not provide particularly useful long-term opportunities for our professional artists. They tend to be very much short-term gigs as part of the gig economy.

A lot of out-of-town festival producers tend to bring their own talent with them, so it does not necessarily provide a lot of good, stable work for the local arts economy that supports festivals: stagehands, people doing AV and technical work, and

programmers. A lot of that talent comes from out of town and then leaves when the festival is over. It is a useful part of our scene, but it is a bit concerning if we put too much emphasis on festivals. We really need more ongoing programs and more ongoing cultural attractions.

I am also still a little concerned at how much of our arts budget is spent on buildings. We certainly need to maintain the venues that we have. Our premier venues are expensive. Of course they are. We are a capital city. That is what we have. In our office, we always consider that to be part of Canberra's identity rather than necessarily part of our arts budget. It is probably more of the same. We are still concerned as to whether the funding that we see will actually lead to the long-term viability of arts workers and whether that will lead to a really vibrant local cultural scene.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

ACT Executive—Part 1.17.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Gentleman**) adjourned to a later hour.

## **Legislative Assembly—unparliamentary language**

**MRS KIKKERT** (Ginninderra) (11.56): I wish to withdraw my comments from yesterday based on the Speaker's ruling this morning.

**Sitting suspended from 11.57 am to 2 pm.**

## **Ministerial arrangements**

**MR BARR** (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism) (2.01): Minister Davidson is absent from question time. Minister Rattenbury will assist with Minister Davidson's portfolio.

## **Questions without notice**

### **Taxation—general practice clinics**

**MS LEE**: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, during question time yesterday you were asked about your payroll tax:

Treasurer, if you are not listening to GPs, clinic owners and doctors about what this will do to primary health care, and the impact on the ED, then who are you listening to?

You said:

I am listening to public policy experts who understand that the issue here is reform of the primary healthcare system

Treasurer, who are these public policy experts?

**MR BARR:** They are the collective public services of the states and territories as represented through national cabinet, the health departments, as well as a number of independent think-tanks, including everyone from the Grattan Institute to others who have written and engaged on the substantive issue of primary health care reform. Stephen Duckett amongst others has also written extensively over the last decade on these matters.

**MS LEE:** Treasurer, out of the public policy experts that you have just referred to, that you have personally engaged with, do you know if they have consulted with frontline doctors or GP clinic owners about the impact your decision will have on the emergency department and the viability of GP clinics in Canberra?

**MR BARR:** Every state and territory revenue office, every state and territory treasurer has engaged on this issue and discuss it, including as recently as last week. We have, of course, been discussing primary health care reform at national cabinet so it has had the benefit of input from every government in Australia.

**MS CASTLEY:** Treasurer, did any of these public policy experts consult with local GPs or practice owners about the 65 per cent bulk-billing rate and, if so, who did they consult with?

**MR BARR:** We looked at the data related to both past bulk-billing rates; what is achieved in 30 of the 31 local healthcare networks. There is a level of bulk billing that we have achieved in this jurisdiction before and in recent times. We will of course be debating this later this afternoon.

**Mr Parton:** Point of order on relevance Madam Speaker. The question very specifically asked whether there had been consultation with local GPs, not assessment of data.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I believe Mr Barr's answer is in order.

**MR BARR:** We have met with every peak body; we have met with individual doctors—

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MR BARR:** Yes, with individual GPs and there has been engagement—this issue has been around for years. It is a new thing for those opposite but reform of primary healthcare, bulk billing—that is why the Commonwealth government announced a tripling of the bulk billing incentive in their most budget.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members.

### **Health—community health centres**

**MR DAVIS:** My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, there is an awful lot being built in Tuggeranong at the moment, which is very exciting. The one raised with me most by my constituents is the new health hub that has been committed for in



Conder. Could you please outline the plans for the new Conder health hub and, in particular, when those in Lanyon can expect to start using it?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Mr Davis for his question. I was very pleased to be in Conder the other day, with the Chief Minister and Minister Gentleman, to announce the site for the new south Tuggeranong health centre. In the 2023-24 budget we committed \$16.6 million over four years to design and construct this new community-based facility in south Tuggeranong, as well as to plan sites and early design for community-based health facilities in the inner south and north Gungahlin. We are also committed to doing that in the medium term for west Belconnen.

This builds on the consultation that we undertook last year on designing ACT health services for a growing population, to understand what people want and need from public health services in the ACT. I am very pleased to hear that Mr Davis's constituents are saying that they want and need health care closer to home. That is exactly what we heard.

Once the clinical services and design have been finalised, which will be in consultation with the community, a development application is expected to be lodged in the first half of 2024. We expect that the centre will be fully operational in the first half of 2026, if not sooner. We are certainly aiming for sooner than that.

**MR DAVIS:** Minister, could you please clarify what is meant by multidisciplinary care and what the exact model of care for the Conder health hub will be, including the types of health practitioners you expect to be working in the centre?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** We will work through exactly what those models of care will be and what services will be available at the south Tuggeranong health centre with the local community. What we want is for people to be able to access care closer to home and for our community-based health services to be able to work very closely with general practices in their region so that consumers have a navigable health system and genuinely integrated care.

As we continue to see increasing complexity and comorbidity, having nurses, nurse practitioners and allied health professionals, as well as doctors, in our facilities is incredibly important as we focus on preventative care and advice, early intervention and the management of chronic illness. In south Tuggeranong in particular, we know that we have both an ageing population and families who do not have the best access to health services in their region. We also have adolescents. I was recently at Mura Lanyon health centre, talking to the Directions clinic team out there. We recognise that there are adolescents in the community who are not able to access health services in the city.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, will the models of care for the inner south, north Gungahlin and west Belconnen be the same as Conder's model of care or will they be tailored to the local community's needs?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Ms Clay for the question. It is a good one. The idea is the same across the city. We want to see more Canberrans getting care closer to home and we want to truly integrate across primary care, community-based care and

acute care. For example, someone might be able to come to one of these health centres and sit down with a trusted health professional to get access to a specialist who is providing care by telehealth. That consumer will be supported to understand exactly what the specialist is telling them and to make a plan to continue their care. That will then be shared with their general practitioner and everybody working in a team-based model, with the patient at the centre of that.

That is fundamentally the vision that we have in mind. But, as Ms Clay has indicated, communities in north Gungahlin, the inner south, south Tuggeranong and west Belconnen, as well as in Coombs and the other parts of the city where we have existing health centres, are all somewhat different. In north Gungahlin I can imagine, for example, that we would have more child and family services because we have a community there of young and growing families. It will be both consistent but also tailored to the needs of the individual community.

### **Economy—credit rating**

**MS LEE:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, in an article published today, former Chief Minister Jon Stanhope and Adjunct Professor Khalid Ahmed suggested that you and Treasury had to have known the credit rating downgrade was coming. They say:

The genesis of the ACT's budgetary problems is the unbroken string of deficits and the exponential increase in debt since Mr Barr became Treasurer in 2011.

Treasurer, did Treasury provide any advice to you prior to the downgrade that it was likely to happen? If so, when did they provide that advice?

**MR BARR:** The territory has been on negative watch for several years, so the decision for Standard and Poor's this year was either to move us to a stable outlook at AA+ or to remove the negative watch. Now, given every state and territory with the exception of Western Australia has either experienced a ratings downgrade or has had some pressure on their rating as a result of the pandemic, it is not new, and this issue has been around for some time.

Ultimately, Ms Lee, the choice either was to abandon the forward infrastructure program and not provide any support during COVID, or retain the credit rating. The government determined to continue with an infrastructure program and to provide the support during the pandemic and subsequent cost of living support in this year's budget.

**MS LEE:** Treasurer, when was that decision made, and what did you as Treasurer do to prevent this credit downgrade?

**MR BARR:** The decisions are made each year in the budget process by the ERC and the ultimately by cabinet. We worked closely with Standard and Poor's to understand their assessment criteria and to make decisions over that period, particularly during the pandemic, that would maintain the credit rating, noting that we did during the pandemic period. They observed in their decision of last week that they believed the recovery from the pandemic was not fast enough.

**MR CAIN:** Treasurer, are you able to provide Canberrans with an estimated dollar figure of what the downgrade will cost the territory's budget?

**MR BARR:** I addressed that question yesterday, so zero cost in relation to any existing borrowings, as they are at a fixed rate. The biggest impact, Mr Cain, will be, when we next borrow, what the market conditions are at that time. As I pointed out to you yesterday, the Reserve Bank making even one adjustment to the official cash rate—

**Mr Cain:** Do you have an estimate, Treasurer?

**MR BARR:** I answered this question yesterday, Mr Cain. It will depend on the day we borrow and the quantum with which we borrow, but as I pointed out yesterday, Mr Cain, it is likely to be either zero or one or two basis points difference, which will mean very little in the context overall.

### **Economy—credit rating**

**MS LEE:** My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, yesterday in question time you said that you had your usual meeting with S&P Global following the budget and you discussed the credit rating with them at that time. Did S&P Global indicate to you at that meeting or any other meeting this year that the AAA credit rating was at risk and could be downgraded?

**MR BARR:** In the meeting that I had with them, we did discuss that we had been on negative watch for three years and that they would need to make a determination. So, yes, in that meeting—which is held a few weeks before they make their final determination.

**MS LEE:** Treasurer, in your meeting with S&P Global, did they discuss with you the necessary steps that would need to be taken to save or retain the AAA credit rating? If so, what are they?

**MR BARR:** I have outlined their comparative metrics in their media release in relation to our credit rating and, indeed, the credit ratings of all of the subnational governments that they rate around the world.

**MR CAIN:** Treasurer, are you going to attempt to return the territory's credit rating to AAA? If so, how?

**MR BARR:** The retention of our AA-plus credit rating with a stable outlook is consistent with the current budget position. Returning to AAA would require, as Standard & Poor's have observed, surpluses over the forward estimates and a reduction in the total level of debt.

### **Calvary Hospital—acquisition**

**MS LEE:** My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, FOI documents disclose that on the same day, 31 May 2022, that cabinet agreed to commence

negotiations with Calvary it also agreed on “special legislation to terminate Calvary’s Crown lease over the Calvary Public Hospital Bruce site and Calvary Network Agreement.” How can Canberrans believe you and your government acted in good faith in your negotiations when, at the outset of negotiations, you were committed to terminating Calvary’s lease and its network agreement?

**MR BARR:** The Leader of the Opposition’s imputation in relation to that question is incorrect, as the Minister for Health outlined yesterday.

**MS LEE:** Chief Minister, why, on 4 July 2022, did you agree to your health minister’s request for policy approval to introduce legislation for the compulsory takeover of Calvary in late spring 2022, almost a month before the exclusive negotiation period with Calvary had concluded?

**MR BARR:** Cabinet was being updated in relation to the negotiations with Calvary and the health minister addressed the time line of this matter yesterday.

**MS CASTLEY:** Chief Minister, wasn’t the forced acquisition of Calvary your plan right from the start?

**MR BARR:** Again, this question was asked yesterday and addressed thoroughly by the health minister. The answer to that is no. We sought to engage with Calvary. We offered them a 25-year modern services agreement. We discussed with them our land requirement and the past experience, when, in the previous decade, they had agreed but it had been overturned by the Vatican. So we discussed with them enabling legislation in relation to the land, and the health minister addressed this matter yesterday.

### **Education—teachers**

**DR PATERSON:** My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, can you please update the Assembly on the new teachers’ enterprise agreement?

**MS BERRY:** I thank Dr Paterson for her question. The new teaching-staff enterprise agreement commenced on 21 August 2023. This milestone means that we now realise the agreement’s \$201 million investment in our ACT public schools and leaders—teachers. Teaching, particularly in our modern world, is a complex profession, and I am proud that the ACT has led the nation in the push to recognise their invaluable work through improved pay and conditions. We are now seeing other states and territories moving in the same direction, which is an enormous reform. For ACT teachers from the next year, a first-year public schoolteacher will earn around \$85,000; by 2026 they will begin their career earning over \$91,000.

But do not just take my word for it about how important this important recognition is. I recently met with first-year teacher Oscar Jolly at Melrose High School. Oscar told me that, for him, the pay increases in this new agreement mean that he is able to look beyond the two-week pay cycle and plan for the future. He put it best when he said:

Every teacher in Australia deserves that; and any worker in Australia deserves that kind of security and direction.

The new agreement's pay increases and back pay of salary and allowances will begin reaching the pockets of staff from tomorrow.

**DR PATERSON:** Minister, what does this enterprise agreement do to address teacher workloads?

**MS BERRY:** Thank you, Dr Paterson. We want our teachers to spend their time doing what they do best, which is teaching and leading. That is what is best for our children and our young people, and that is what is best for our workers. It is why I recently pledged to work with the Australian Education Union to implement changes to workloads that mean that teachers have the time to teach and use their educational experiences from university, and their practical experiences on the ground, to give our young people the best possible start in life. This agreement begins that important work.

We know teachers are leaving the profession within the first five years at a worrying rate. This enterprise agreement includes a further one-hour reduction in face-to-face teaching hours each week for new educators in their first three years of the profession to provide more time for mentoring and development. It also funds a new educator support program, and under the new agreement public schoolteachers and leaders will have three additional staff development days so that they can begin every term with a dedicated day for planning and collaboration. And for the first time, our enterprise agreement guarantees teachers release time for curriculum planning, lesson preparation, assessment and reporting.

**MS ORR:** Minister, what else is the ACT government doing to attract and retain teachers?

**MS BERRY:** I thank Ms Orr for the question. For a number of years now the ACT government has been running a teacher scholarship program to provide financial support to ACT teachers and school leaders to undertake further education—training and research that will lead to an improvement in student outcomes. Attracting and retaining teachers during a national teacher shortage requires the attention of all governments across Australia, state and federal. That is why I am also working with my state and federal colleagues on the implementation of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan.

Locally, I established the Teacher Shortage Taskforce back in 2021. It delivered its recommendations last year, and I have agreed to their implementation in full, backed by funding in the 2023-2024 ACT budget. One of those recommendations was to establish a sustainable workload management committee to work with the Australian Education Union and the Education Directorate to identify and implement further workload measures that will make a real day-to-day difference. The committee has begun its work and is working on delivering the other recommendations from the taskforce. These include providing additional permit-to-teach resources to encourage students to gain further practical experience in their final year of their degree; introducing paid practicum leave for permit-to-teach teachers; and implementing incentives for recently retired teachers to return to work.

**Development—Lawson stage 2**

**MS CLAY:** My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. Minister, the first two blocks in Lawson stage 2 sold in 2022 and a third block is for sale now, but this section of Lawson is still not connected to stage 1. This presents challenges for existing stage 1 residents in accessing the Belconnen town centre, and services, particularly if they want to use public or active transport. Minister when is a through road from Aikman Drive to Lawson stage 1 expected to be delivered as part of the Lawson stage 2 estate development?

**MS BERRY:** Thank you Ms Clay for the question. The Suburban Land Agency will continue to provide updates and advise Lawson residents as to how this great suburb continues to evolve and grow. I know the connection roads through the separate parts of Lawson are important to the existing community and of course, importantly connecting them up to the new community that will join them living in Lawson. The connection road between Stockman Avenue and Ginninderra Drive is now Tenterfield Avenue. The design for this road is still subject to Transport Canberra and City Services design approval. Everywhere effort will be made to fast track the delivery of Tenterfield Avenue and it will be prioritised as an early deliverable in the civil tender works package. I do not have a timeframe at the moment for Ms Clay, however, as I said, the Suburban Land Agency will continue to engage with the Lawson community about those time frames.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, what changes were made as part of the updated estate development plan which was approved in August?

**MS BERRY:** There has been significant work around Lawson and its development over the years. The delivery of Lawson stage 2 has been broken down into two different stages to accord with the government's indicative land release program and the land releases across three financial years. The remaining sites in Lawson 2 will be released in the 2023-24 year. There was an expression of interest process through an englobo opportunity, however, there was not interest from builders because of the cost and the issues around planning and so there has been a delay in the development of the second part of Lawson. However, as I said, the Suburban Land Agency has an excellent record for engaging with their communities as they build and grow and I know they are confident in their work with the Lawson community to ensure Lawson residents and future residents can be engaged to build a strong vibrant community in the heart of Belconnen.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Minister, how will walking and riding be protected and prioritised in Lawson Stage 2?

**MS BERRY:** Active travel is a substantial part of the work proposed for Lawson stage 2, which includes connection to Lawson stage 1 via the pathway along Tenterfield Avenue and the pedestrian bridge across College Creek. There will be active travel pathways connecting Lawson stage 2 to the community recreation precinct, adjacent to Lake Ginninderra, as well as a path under Ginninderra Drive providing safe access towards the Belconnen town centre.

**Calvary Hospital—acquisition**

**MS CASTLEY:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, I refer to the letter you wrote to the Chief Minister on 28 June 2022 asking for policy approval to introduce legislation for the compulsory takeover of Calvary in late spring 2022. Given that the exclusive negotiation period with Calvary did not end until over one month later, on 31 July, why were you so keen to jump the gun?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** As the Chief Minister has indicated, I outlined the time frame of this yesterday. Indeed, I talked about this in May this year. As part of commencing the formal negotiation period with Calvary, I wrote to the CEO of Calvary Health Care in April 2022, providing advice that the cabinet had agreed that we could explore, and commence drafting if necessary, legislation to compulsorily acquire the land at block 1, section 1, Bruce, on which Calvary Public Hospital sits, for the purpose of building a new public hospital, to be owned by taxpayers.

This was clear to Calvary as an option throughout the negotiation period. It was part of the negotiations. The way that you get legislation onto the agenda is that the minister writes to the Chief Minister. So I wrote to the Chief Minister, saying could we add it to the legislation agenda. Then, as it looked like we were potentially going to reach agreement with Calvary that we would be able to transition the land without having to legislate, I wrote to the Chief Minister, as reported in the *Canberra Times* and available through FOI, requesting that that legislation be removed from the legislative forward agenda because the negotiations with Calvary actually looked like they were going to reach agreement. It was when we received the response from the CEO of Calvary Health Care in November 2022 and Calvary outright rejected a 25-year services agreement—no ifs, no buts: outright rejected it—that we then looked again at this matter.

**MS CASTLEY:** Minister, why did you also, on 28 June 2022, tell your department that the point of getting policy approval for legislative drafting was “to commence drafting now, not wait and see” and “I am keen to get an early look at what a bill might look like”? Why couldn’t you wait until the outcome of negotiations with Calvary? Will you table the letter, from April, that you sent to the Chief Minister and to Calvary?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** The letter that I sent to Calvary is in the public domain. The fact that Ms Castley does not know that just demonstrates how little attention she has paid to the detail of this matter. Mr Bowles himself included that information—

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I am happy to table it—I have a copy on me—but it is a pointless exercise because it is already in the public domain. I think I will have to go back to the first question that Ms Castley originally asked me, about my letter that was asking the Chief Minister to put this on the legislation agenda. Now she is referring to a brief that was actually about taking it off the legislation agenda. To go to her question, the reason that I was a little frustrated that there had not been any commencement of drafting was that I wanted to understand what that would look like. We were specifically in conversation with Calvary about this being an option. It was no secret between the ACT government and Calvary that this was an option.

I do not want to table this now because I want to hang on to it, but at the end of question time I will table a meeting paper on the north-side hospital project, between the ACT government and Calvary Health Care ACT, which has also been released under freedom of information, that talks about the options for territory lease. The territory-preferred options included compulsory acquisition of the hospital land. At that stage we considered that we might be able to use the Lands Acquisition Act. Whether or not we could use the Lands Acquisition Act was part of the question and the reason that I wanted the work done, to understand exactly what the mechanism would be. Unlike those opposite, I actually do my due diligence.

**MR HANSON:** Minister, were your discussions about the block of land or about Calvary Public Hospital and whether you would actually acquire it?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** They were about the block of land. That has been very clear.

### **Government—community engagement**

**MR BRADDOCK:** Madam Speaker, my question is for the Chief Minister.

Chief Minister, the Molonglo Valley and Weston Creek community councils have raised concerns about the level of ACT government support for the local community councils, and propose that the ACT government appoints a district champion to manage engagement, plus also possible formation of a district advisory committee. How does the government plan to consider these proposals and respond to the community on these ideas?

**MR BARR:** I thank Mr Braddock for the question. Yes, we are considering the proposals put forward. I do note that also included references to the frequency of meetings and the workload placed on volunteers. Without announcing government policy in question time, I can indicate that we are considering the matter. As it falls within my portfolio responsibilities, Madam Speaker, I will be making a determination on the matter. As I am the Treasurer, I will not be seeking to increase the funding associated beyond that that is part of the Appropriation Bill, though, Madam Speaker.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Chief Minister, is it acceptable for ACT government ministers to refuse invites to attend community council meetings?

**MR BARR:** Absolutely, Madam Speaker. ACT government ministers undertake thousands of engagements each year, and they just simply cannot be at every community council meeting.

**Mr Hanson:** Thousands each year.

**MR BARR:** Thousands, yes.

**MS CLAY:** Does the ACT government value our community councils?

**MR BARR:** Community councils play a role, but they are only part of a network of engagement. I value the YourSay panel, because it has 7,000 contributors, and they



are demographically representative of the city. Community councils have a role to play, but I do not believe that they are the only form of engagement, so they are one of many.

**Mr Hanson:** Point of order, Madam Speaker. The question from Ms Clay was very specific: whether the Chief Minister values them or not. I would ask him to be directly relevant to the answer.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** He is relevant. There is no point of order, Mr Hanson.

**MR BARR:** Community councils have a valuable role to play, Madam Speaker, but they are one of many forms—

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, enough. You have had your giggle, now be quiet.

**MR BARR:** They are one of many forms of engagement, and I do not value them higher than the YourSay Panel. I value the YourSay Panel most highly.

### **Planning—RZ1 changes**

**MR CAIN:** My question is to the Minister for Planning and Land Management. Minister, yesterday, in answer to a question asking why the 120 square metre restriction on second dwellings has been imposed for RZ1 rule changes, you said it was “a cabinet decision”. Minister, was this a decision made by all nine members of the cabinet?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Mr Cain for the question. I will just reiterate: yes, it was a cabinet decision.

**MR CAIN:** There will be some interesting follow-up there!

Minister, was this decision made solely by Labor Party cabinet members without any Green member involvement?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** It was a whole cabinet decision. I thank Mr Cain for the question. It is quite striking that he comes down to this particular discussion about 120 square metres. I think it is a reasonable position to take.

There are quite a number of homes in my electorate that are 120 square metres or smaller. In fact, my home is 120 square metres—or just one square metre over.

**Mr Parton:** How big is the garage?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** It has three bedrooms and an ensuite. It is certainly not the granny flat that we hear the Canberra Liberals describe 120 square metres as.

I spent about five minutes doing a quick search on other homes similar to the size of my home and found the following for sale: 9 Ormerod Place in Kambah, a three-

bedroom home, 98 square metres; 4 Curtis Place in Kambah, a three-bedroom home, 116 square metres; 1 Connor Place, Kambah, a three-bedroom home at 100 square metres; 8 Luckman Street, Banks, a three-bedroom home at 110 square metres; 3 Reeder Court, Banks, a three-bedroom home at 90 square metres; and 99 Pocket Avenue, Banks, a three-bedroom home, at 112 square metres. You might notice that these are in our electorate, Madam Speaker.

So the idea that a 120 square metre two- or three-bedroom house—

**Mr Cain:** Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I did not ask for a survey of houses in Canberra and their size. I asked whether the cabinet decision included Green members or whether it was just Labor members.

**MR GENTLEMAN:** Yes, it did.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** He answered and he has just provided additional information. We have not got to the garage size yet, though!

**MR GENTLEMAN:** Madam Speaker, I was saying that the idea that a 120 square metre two- or three-bedroom home is nothing more than a granny flat is ridiculous. I do not know what sorts of mansions the Liberals are living in, but those mansions are clearly bigger than the standard home—or garage!—in Canberra.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I do apologise for that little quip.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, what is the rationale for imposing the 120 square metre restriction?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** Of course, I will not go to the cabinet discussion. You know the outcome of the cabinet discussion. But I will say that we have seen in recent media discussions on the cost of building in the ACT. It has risen. And, of course, the larger the property is, the more it costs to build.

We want to make more properties available for Canberrans who are looking for an easy entry into housing in the ACT. At 120 square metres, it means that you can build at a certain cost. But, of course, there is always a cost for the land and the applications. So my view is that it is the appropriate size to apply in this case.

Planning changes over many years. Madam Speaker, you have been here for a while as well and you would have seen the changes that have occurred. We want to make sure that we can plan for the future and make sure that there are more houses available for a growing city in a reasonable and sustainable way.

### **Planning—parking**

**MR CAIN:** My question is to the Minister for Planning and Land Management. Minister, I refer to recent media reports that development plans at 220 Northbourne Avenue in Braddon have been refused by the Planning and Land Authority because it had a shortfall of 356 car spaces. Minister, is it your planning agenda to provide a greater or fewer number of car parks in new developments? I am a bit concerned about your position.

**MR GENTLEMAN:** There are particular codes within the Territory Plan that allocate car spaces for new developments and for rebuilds as well. Within the planning system, of course, we do want to encourage people to use active transport as much as possible and public transport.

**Mr Cain:** It's on the light rail route.

**MR GENTLEMAN:** Yes, it is.

**Mr Cain:** You say there are not enough cars—

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Do not respond to the interjections, Mr Gentleman.

**MR GENTLEMAN:** And, when you look at residential opportunities in different locations, those codes with regard to car parking change. If you are in a town centre, for example, there is no regulation with regard to residential parking for the residences in the town centre. Along different corridors, there are different codes for parking, and, if you are replacing a car park, like here in the city at 220 London Circuit, you will see that the original number of car parks have to be replaced within the building, plus car parking for the new tenants in the building. So the codes vary quite a bit.

**MR CAIN:** Minister, would a development with a fewer number of car parks like this one be approved under the new Territory Plan?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** If they apply to the codes that are appropriate to that particular development, yes, they would.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, under what conditions would a development with minimal car parking be approved?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I think I just answered that in the second part of the question, when I referred to minimum amounts of parking in town centre developments, where you have residential and other parking available at the time.

### **Canberra Health Services—cleaners**

**MS ORR:** My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, the 2023-2024 budget includes a number of measures to support workers across the ACT public health system. How will the budget support cleaners at the Canberra Hospital?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Ms Orr for the question. In the 2023-2024 budget, the ACT government is supporting essential health workers by improving the pay and conditions of Canberra Health Services cleaners, among other things. The cleaners contracted to Canberra Health Services through ISS are critical to healthcare delivery, while being some of the lowest paid workers in our health services. They support services across the ACT: at Canberra Hospital and in the community, such as in our excellent walk-in centres. They work behind the scenes and are far too often overlooked. They are diligent and they take great pride in their work of ensuring that a safe environment is provided for patients, visitors and, of course, healthcare professionals.

To support the cleaners, we have bridged the gap in pay that they were offered by ISS, with more than \$9.9 million over four years to deliver a pay increase for cleaning staff. This funding also helps us to plan future options for how we deliver services at Canberra Health Services. This increase ISS cleaners' pay acknowledges the important work they do alongside their other health workforce colleagues. This increase was well supported by the health workforce, including doctors, nurses and other support staff at Canberra Health Services. In July, a 7.5 per cent pay increase was delivered to cleaners and supports them with the current pressures many on lower incomes are experiencing in our community right now. Further increases will be delivered through to 2025 for the ISS cleaners that will make a significant difference to their everyday lives.

Supporting vulnerable workers and ensuring fair pay and conditions: those are just some of the things that are fundamental to an ACT Labor government. I am really proud that we have been able to deliver this significant wage increase for the cleaners in Canberra Health Services.

**MS ORR:** Minister, how will insourcing cleaning services improve conditions for cleaners working across Canberra Health Services?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Ms Orr for the supplementary question. As part of the \$9.9 million funded in the 2023-2024 budget, the ACT government is also investing in a project team to continue considering options for insourcing services at Canberra Health Services.

We have heard from workers that insourcing, or direct employment, provides staff with the assurance of more stable and secure employment, and we have already seen that in the direct employment of school cleaners that was delivered a couple of years ago. We know that secure employment is essential for worker peace of mind and wellbeing, as it can ensure that workers have access to appropriate leave entitlements and improves their overall quality of life. Reducing stress around employment, wherever possible, means people can focus on other things, such as progressing their careers, contributing to a positive workplace culture and their own development, and, of course, it makes their roles more meaningful to them on a daily basis. They really feel more like part of the team.

By developing options for insourcing services, we can look at opportunities to expand workers' skills and, potentially, expand the breadth of areas a person might work in. We can do that in partnership with them and their unions. I have met with teams across Canberra Health Services, and they have told me about the doors that would open to them through direct employment, including professional development and more structured career pathways.

ACT Labor governments know that workers need security. Labor knows that workers who can focus on work, and not on whether they have a job in a day, a week, a month or a year, are happier and healthier at work and at home. Labor also knows that public services in public hands deliver the results the community needs, while respecting workers, and that is essential.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Minister, how do hospital cleaners contribute to the health and wellbeing of the ACT community?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Mr Pettersson for the supplementary question. Our cleaners at Canberra Health Services, both the ISS cleaners and those that are employed by Compass Medirest at North Canberra Hospital, are our frontline defenders against infectious disease. They meticulously clean, sanitise and disinfect every corner and every surface to ensure that healthcare facilities and suites remain safe for patients, visitors and healthcare professionals.

By maintaining the highest standards of cleanliness, cleaners help to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, ultimately reducing the burden on our healthcare system. The importance of their work absolutely cannot be underestimated, because they significantly reduce the risk of healthcare associated infections to keep consumers safe, but they also deliver a more pleasant environment for patients, their families and for the staff who work across our facilities.

Clean, orderly and welcoming healthcare facilities not only aid in patient recovery but alleviate stress for families and friends. Cleaners contribute to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of patients and their loved ones during what can be a very challenging time in their lives. They are an essential part of our teams, often delivering a friendly smile or a conversation with the teams they work with every day on the wards and in our other services.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, cleaners excelled in maintaining cleanliness in our health facilities. They were part of the frontline workforce that went to work every day. Their dedication in such a fluid and unprecedented crisis ensured that infectious cleaning protocols were consistently and effectively executed, safeguarding the health and wellbeing of all within our healthcare environments. Cleaners are also heroes in our healthcare system, and it is essential that we recognise their contributions and support their vital role in our healthcare system.

### **Government—procurement**

**MR CAIN:** My question is to the Special Minister of State. Minister, in a recent response to my question taken on notice, you claim that it would be an “unreasonable diversion of public service resources” to produce the value of government contracts awarded to unions. In your response, you make a conservative estimate that there are roughly 1,300 union-affiliated businesses which your Directorate would need to check to see if they had received ACT government contracts. Minister, your response is unclear: are those 1,300 union-affiliated businesses based in the ACT or throughout Australia?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. I am again happy to come back to him with some more information to clarify, but this was just a conservative estimate to give Mr Cain indication about the resources and work required to be able to answer his question. It would mean going through approximately 328 financial reports which, with a conservative estimate that each union branch has at least four affiliates, would result in, under that assumption, roughly 1,300 businesses to validate against the ABNs in the notifiable contracts register and manual processes. So we deem this to be an unreasonable diversion of ACT government resources.

**Mr Hanson:** Point of order Madam Speaker, on relevance. Mr Cain has been very clear that he is trying to clarify whether that 1,300 figure is ACT or Australia-wide.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I believe the answer is in order but perhaps the Minister can provide additional information. Thank you.

**MR STEEL:** Thank you. I answered that by taking it on notice Madam Speaker. I appreciate those opposite did not want to hear the extra information I was providing.

**MR CAIN:** In your response to my question on notice then, can you be very specific about the number of the ACT union contracts awarded: who they are; what the dollar value is and what the projects are related to?

**MR STEEL:** Yes, I can. I indicated in my answer that there were three direct contracts and I can provide the details of those to the Assembly. They are for the industrial relations advice service for young workers. I have been advised that is for UnionsACT. The current amount for that is \$1,142,952. There is the infection, prevention and control packages for hospitality workers, which is United Workers Union for \$99,200. The third one is women in trades industry coordination officer, CFMEU ACT and I am advised that one is for \$120,000.

**MR HANSON:** Minister, can you provide us the total amount of those contracts directly with ACT based union groups over the last five years since the Secure Local Jobs Code and the MOU has been implemented?

**MR STEEL:** I will take that on notice Madam Speaker.

### **Sport and recreation—swimming pools**

**MR MILLIGAN:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation. Minister, it is seven months since pool operators at Dickson, Stromlo, Civic, Gungahlin and Lakeside Leisure in Tuggeranong advised the ACT government of their intention to withdraw from pool management contracts. The ACT government has promised that the outdoor public swimming pools at Dickson and in the city will open as scheduled by the end of October, despite there being no clarity on whether new managers have been appointed. When will the successful tenderers be formally announced and how long will the transition period be in relation to each specific pool?

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, allow the answer. Thank you.

**MS BERRY:** I do not have a specific time. Negotiations are continuing. However, all of the pools will open in the time frames that they usually open. Dickson is included in that.

**MR MILLIGAN:** Minister, what will be the contract periods for the management of each of these facilities?

**MS BERRY:** Those contracts are continuing to be negotiated. I do not have any detail on that. Once that is finalised, I will be able to inform the Assembly.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Minister, will the pools and other attached facilities remain operational throughout the transition between operators, with minimal disruption to services?

**MS BERRY:** Yes. That is my understanding.

### **Work health and safety—psychosocial hazards**

**MR PETTERSSON:** My question is to the Minister for Industrial Relations and Workplace Safety. Minister, can you provide an update on the new code of practice on managing psychosocial hazards in workplaces?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Mr Pettersson for his interest in the safety of workers. Across the ACT, work health and safety laws in the ACT are designed to protect workers from psychological and physical injuries or illnesses at work. The new code of practice provides an updated focus on ensuring control measures are in place to manage psychosocial hazards and risks in the workplace.

The Workplace Legislation Amendment Bill 2022 introduced sexual assault incidents as a notifiable incident under the ACT's WHS laws and came into effect on 9 June 2023. This followed consultation with the ACT's Work Health and Safety Council, who provided feedback and input which has been used in developing materials and information for businesses and employers.

The ACT government has been working to provide clear guidance for businesses in understanding their duties when managing psychosocial risks and hazards at the workplace. An ACT Code of Practice will be in place in the territory by the end of this year.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Minister, can you provide an overview of the other work being undertaken to ensure the health and safety of workers in the ACT?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** The ACT government has developed a suite of materials to distribute to stakeholders to raise awareness about these reforms through their networks and member channels. This includes infographics summarising key information, flyers, and details on how to ask further questions. A webpage with relevant information will continue to be updated as needed as well.

WorkSafe ACT also provides a number of fantastic resources that businesses, enterprise and PCBUs—those people undertaking or conducting a business—can be accessing for support. This includes materials on supporting mental health, and how to support young workers as well. Small businesses in particular often find themselves in need of independent support in managing health and safety in the workplace, and the vital free service provided through WorkSafe ACT is key to this government's strategy in supporting employers.

WorkSafe ACT will also be kicking off ongoing events through National Safe Work Month. Throughout the month of October, WorkSafe will be running events across the ACT to provide PCBUs, businesses and workers opportunities to access the information they need to build and maintain safe workplaces.

**DR PATERSON:** Minister, can you advise what work is being done to support business and enterprise in the rollout of these vital reforms?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Dr Paterson for the question. The 2023-24 budget provides an additional \$4.397 million of funding over three years to WorkSafe ACT, the work health and safety regulator. This funding allows WorkSafe ACT to secure additional resources to increase regulatory activities for three targeted areas, including psychosocial safety, hazardous chemicals and the territory's large infrastructure projects.

Supported by additional funding in the budget, WorkSafe ACT is also establishing a civil construction team to oversee the health and safety elements of light rail stage 2 during the project's duration. This team will also monitor and regulate other civil construction projects in the territory during this time.

The 2023-24 budget also prioritises increased support for workplaces to manage risks to mental health and wellbeing. Over the next three years, we will see an expansion of the existing work health and safety liaison service provided by Unions ACT to support education and awareness, including around psychosocial hazards. The ACT government will always uphold the right of workers to come home safely at the end of the day. The government will continue to ensure that the highest levels of protection and safety standards are upheld across all Canberra workplaces.

**Mr Barr:** Further questions can be placed on the Notice Paper; thank you.

### **Supplementary answers to questions without notice Government—procurement**

**MR STEEL:** Earlier in question time, I was asked about direct contracts through the unions, and then I was subsequently asked a question by Mr Hanson in relation to the price over a period of time. To assist him with answering that question, I can provide the execution date for the contract and the expiry date that goes along with the amounts that I had mentioned for the UnionsACT contract. The execution date was 20 June 2019. The expiry date is 23 November 2023. For the United Workers Union contract, 31 March 2021 was the execution date and the expiry date was 31 March 2022. The execution date of the CFMU contract was 29 June 2021 and the expiry date was 29 June 2022.

### **ACT Health—nurses and midwives**

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Yesterday in question time, I responded to a question from Ms Lee, asking how many midwives had not transitioned from Calvary or who had left North Canberra Hospital since we announced the acquisition of Calvary Public Hospital Bruce. In my answer, I said:

My recollection is that it was nine midwives who chose not to transition, and I understand that potentially 11 midwives have left over the period since the acquisition of Calvary Public Hospital Bruce was announced ...

My intention was to convey that the 11 midwives included the nine midwives. So nine midwives chose not to transition, and, in total, there were 11. Unfortunately, Ms Castley did not bother to double-check with me. I also stated:



... I will check those numbers and get back to the Assembly if those are not correct.

I would expect that, if I had not come back at the end of question time, I probably would come back today. Unfortunately, Ms Castley did not check either way and put out a number that added the 11 and the nine for a total of 20. I can clarify that, and I recognise that it could have been read either way. I recognise that. Some former shadow ministers would have checked in so they did not provide incorrect information to the public. Some would have; Ms Castley did not. But I can now clarify for the Assembly that, in fact, 10 midwives did not transition to CHS and one midwife has separately left North Canberra Hospital due to personal and career reasons.

Ms Castley put this information out before I would have even had a chance to check the *Hansard* and correct it, because my language was clearly a little bit loose, but she could have checked that before putting incorrect information into the public domain. She did not. In the context—

**Ms Lee:** So it's our fault. It's always someone else's fault.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I have said, Ms Lee, that my language could have been tighter, but I had not even had a chance to check the *Hansard* to correct that language. I had not even had a chance to check the *Hansard*. What I can advise, as I said yesterday, is that CHS is actively recruiting to vacancies as a priority. The number of current vacancies in maternity across both hospitals is: 5.84 FTE permanent vacancies at North Canberra Hospital, where they have 112 permanent registered midwives as a head count; at Centenary Hospital, there are 2.67 FTE permanent vacancies, where they have 325 permanent registered midwives as a head count.

In addition to these permanent vacancies, the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children has recently been experiencing a significant amount of unscheduled leave, as well as high demand. To manage the current demand across both maternity services, the teams are working together to manage activity across both hospitals.

**Mr Cain:** On a point of order: to assist us, could the minister clarify which part of all this we have to check?

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Ms Stephen-Smith, on the matters arising from question time.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am really just trying to provide some additional information that Ms Castley seemed to be interested in yesterday but not interested enough to check. The teams are working together to manage activity across both hospitals, and they are—

**Ms Lawder:** Madam Speaker, on a point of order: under standing order 55, all imputations of improper motives and all personal reflections on members should be considered highly disorderly. Ms Stephen-Smith is making a number of imputations about Ms Castley.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Around correcting information. Members, I do not believe there is a point of order. Again, I will spend some time and reflect, but this part of the day is to clarify matters that arose from question time. Ms Stephen-Smith, please.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I was saying, the hospitals' teams are working together to manage activity across both hospitals. They are also utilising long-term agency midwives, as required, to support staff and ensure ongoing quality of care for women, pregnant people and their families while they actively recruit to those vacancies.

On another matter in relation to the questions I was asked today, I table the letter from me to Mr Martin Bowles. There is not a date on this copy of the letter, but it was sent in April 2022. I am going to table that. I am also going to table the other document that I referred to, but, before I hand it over, just to be clear for the information of the Assembly, because I did hear some cross-talk between Mr Hanson and Ms Castley earlier, there are four options provided for territory owned land.

The first option is subdivision of the current site and partial Crown lease surrender. The second option is acquisition of the Crown lease/new hospital land under the Land Acquisition Act by agreement. The third option is compulsory acquisition of the new hospital land under the Land Acquisition Act. The fourth option is acquisition of the Crown lease/new hospital land under special purpose legislation by agreement. The fifth option is acquisition of the Crown lease/new hospital land under new law without agreement.

It was clear during the negotiations—this document is dated 8 June 2022—that the ACT government was considering an option of acquiring the land without agreement. The corollary to that is that it would have substantially damaged the relationship with Calvary to the point where it probably was going to be untenable for them to continue to operate a hospital on that land. They would have been well aware of that. They would have been under no illusions about that. That would also have severed the Calvary Network Agreement, which was tied to the Crown lease, and would have required them, if they were going to continue to run a hospital, to enter into a new lease. They absolutely rejected the offer of a 25-year modern services agreement and an agreed transition of land. They absolutely rejected that, but they were under no illusions about the options that were on the table that the ACT government was considering.

I table the following documents:

Northside Public Hospital Project—

Copy of letter to the National Chief Executive Officer of Little Company of Mary Health Care Ltd from ACT Minister for Health, undated.

Meeting Paper—ACT Government land tenure and transfer arrangements summary—Meeting date 8 June 2022.

## **Belconnen—bus services**

**MS CLAY** (Ginninderra) (3.04): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes:

- (a) in 2011, the ACT Government commissioned a report titled *Belconnen to City Transitway Stage 1 and City Bus Services and Facilities*

*Improvement Forward Design*, and some but not all of the upgrades recommended in this study have since been delivered;

- (b) Infrastructure Australia identified the Belconnen to City bus corridor as an Infrastructure Australia priority project in February 2016, with a probable timeframe of five to 10 years;
  - (c) between 2011 and 2021, the population of the Belconnen Town Centre has grown from 4,437 to 8,502 and the Belconnen district from 92,444, to 106,061;
  - (d) the population of the Belconnen district is continuing to grow rapidly, with particular areas of growth including Belconnen Town Centre, Bruce and Lawson;
  - (e) buses which utilise the Belconnen to City bus corridor include the two busiest bus routes (R2 and R4) and the fifth busiest bus route (R3) and these routes, while servicing other parts of the city in addition to this corridor, represent 24.3 percent of all public transport boardings in the ACT in Quarter 3 2022 and 30.5 percent of bus boardings in this period;
  - (f) the ACT Government has made a \$1 billion commitment to delivering a new Northside Hospital campus in Bruce which will connect onto the Haydon Drive section of the Belconnen to City bus corridor;
  - (g) the University of Canberra Master Plan which includes expansion of the campus to provide many more residences and buildings and is designed to incorporate a future light rail connection; and
  - (h) Light Rail Stage 3 is planned to connect Belconnen to the City. The route will likely service the University of Canberra and the new Northside Hospital, replacing buses on this corridor and necessitating enabling works for future Belconnen to City light rail connections; and
- (2) calls on the ACT Government to:
- (a) commit to investigate and deliver upgrades to the Belconnen to City bus corridor within three years, in a phased approach which will eventually deliver bus priority for the entire Belconnen to City corridor and enable the future delivery of Light Rail Stage 3;
  - (b) commence early planning work for Light Rail Stage 3 alignment; and
  - (c) report back to the Assembly on progress on these measures by the last sitting day of the 10th Assembly in 2024.

I rise today to speak about the motion circulated in my name on better bus priority for Belconnen. The ACT Greens want the Belco busway, and the time to commit is now. The ACT Greens support public transport. We are strong supporters of public transport, including our amazing light rail and our buses. We need more investment, and we need quicker delivery to improve these systems. That is why I am bringing forward this motion today. I have a really simple ask: we want the ACT government to deliver on previous commitments and improve bus priority measures on the Belconnen to city bus corridor. This is a project that has been iteratively delivered since 2011, and it is time to complete it.

I have spoken to so many locals in my community. There are so many bus users who have told me how uncertain their commute is and how lengthy delays really affect

them. This is what turns people off using our buses, and this is what we have to fix if we want more people catching public transport.

Many days, the buses in morning peak are running five minutes late by the time they get off Haydon Drive. That has a huge flow-on effect. These buses do not stop in the city. They travel on to Woden, Tuggeranong, Fyshwick and the airport. Delays to these Belco buses make people all around Canberra run late, and they make them less likely to use our buses. Twenty or 30 buses delayed by five minutes have enormous ramifications for the city-wide bus network. It affects its reliability and its frequency. It affects the number of services we can offer.

The Public Transport Association of Canberra knows this. In their recent article on this project, they identified an R4 running nine minutes late, an R3 running eight minutes late and an R2 running 16 minutes late! My entire commute by bike from Macquarie to the city is only 25 minutes long; a 16-minute delay is shocking. But these buses could be running smoothly and on time if they had more bus lanes and priority measures like bus lights.

Over 60 per cent of Canberra's tracked emissions come from transport. Most of those come from cars. This project, the Belco busway, is real climate action. It is direct. It is effective. It will get more people out of cars and onto the bus. Every car we take off the road reduces emissions for that traveller. It also reduces emissions for the entire traffic network, because cars idling in traffic generate much higher emissions on their overall trip.

Australian government data from 2000 shows that traffic delays and interruptions to traffic flow in Australia's six major cities accounted for around 13 million tonnes of climate emissions. That data from 2000 is still current. I can tell you that traffic congestion certainly has not decreased since 2000; it has increased. That is a huge amount of climate emissions from idling cars. Fewer cars on the road is also good for people in terms of productivity, congestion and general happiness. None of us want to be stuck in traffic, and the only way to avoid that in a growing city is to create excellent, active and public transport.

I want to briefly go into the history of this project. It is long and complex, because this project has been discussed and worked on over several decades, so I will just mention a few of the key moments. This idea has gone back and forth. It is sometimes spoken about as a reason not to deliver light rail. It is sometimes spoken about as a reason to support buses. The obvious solution now is that it should go ahead as a project that delivers great buses now and enables light rail to Belconnen soon.

The oldest mention I could find of the busway is a 1973 feasibility study commissioned by the National Capital Development Commission for a bus priority scheme between Woden, the city and Belconnen. In 1973 they thought good quality public transport was a priority. I still think it is a priority. This is not a new idea.

Between 2003 and 2007 the ACT government had spent \$3.5 million on the Civic to Belconnen busway. That included money spent on environmental studies and consultants. In May 2007, the Chief Minister at the time, Jon Stanhope, advised that the ACT government would continue to forward plan for the Belconnen to Civic

busway but that its construction would occur well in the future. That was 16 years ago. There are human beings who are now almost old enough to vote, who did not exist when Jon Stanhope uttered those lines. The time to commit is now.

The 2008-09 budget committed additional funding of \$3.5 million to progressively construct bus lanes and priority measures at the key intersections along this corridor. The 2010-11 ACT budget committed \$7.3 million to stage 1 of the Belconnen to city transitway. That included the Barry Drive and College Street sections, as well as \$200,000 towards feasibility works for the Belconnen to city bus transitway alignment. Much of that work has been done.

In 2011, the ACT government commissioned a report titled *Belconnen to City Transitway Stage 1 and City Bus Services and Facilities Improvement Forward Design*. Some of the upgrades recommended in that study have since been delivered. The first two stages of the Belconnen transitway were delivered over a three-year period between 2012 and 2015.

It has been a great success for the parts which have been delivered. Buses fly down Belconnen Way and Barry Drive on these sections with full priority, and they zip past cars idling in traffic. One of my chief delights in my morning ride is whizzing past cars stuck in traffic, but those buses leave me in their wake. Bus priority on Belconnen Way works, but we need to finish connecting it up.

In February 2016, Infrastructure Australia identified the Belconnen to city bus corridor as an Infrastructure Australia priority project. They gave a probable time frame of five to 10 years. That was seven years ago. This is not a new commitment. This is a long-running government commitment, and we need to finish it. The time to commit is now.

The Belconnen busway has been under discussion for 50 years, and it has been in active design and construction since 2011. What has changed since 2011? Between 2011 and 2021, our population in the Belconnen town centre grew from 4,437 to 8,502. Our population throughout Belconnen grew from 92,444 to 106,061. We have a lot of people. We are the biggest district in Canberra, and we are growing really quickly. That is thousands of additional journeys every day and no busway to help out. Our population growth is particularly fast in the Belconnen town centre, Bruce, and Lawson. This south-east corner is prime for transit-oriented development, but public transport does not have full priority there. That makes it much less desirable. That means our roads are clogging up with cars, and unless we take a different course, we will not get a different result.

The ACT government has also made a \$1 billion commitment to deliver a new northside hospital campus in Bruce. That will connect onto the Haydon Drive section of the Belconnen to city bus corridor. Emergency vehicles use bus lanes. If we build these lanes with good connections to the hospital, this project will support works for the new northside hospital. Good bus lanes on Haydon Drive will make life easier for our hardworking paramedics. It could even save lives. Our hospital workers and the many hospital visitors will also benefit from smoother-running, faster buses, and that might mean that some of them will not need to drive.

The University of Canberra master plan includes expansion of the campus to provide many more residences and buildings. It is designed to incorporate a future light rail connection. This will increase traffic if we do not create high-quality, prioritised public transport. These students and the workers need great buses now, and they need light rail down the track.

Changes to the northside hospital and UC campus will bring more people to this area, but even before these changes, the bus corridor is already busy. My office looked into the data, and it is staggering how popular the buses that use this corridor are. Buses which use the Belconnen to city bus corridor include the two busiest bus routes, the R2 and R4, and the fifth-busiest bus route, the R3. These routes service Belconnen and travel all around the city. In the third quarter of 2022, they represented 24 per cent of all public transport boardings and over 30 per cent of all bus boardings. This is a key corridor.

Light rail stage 3 is planned to connect Belconnen to the city. The route will likely service the University of Canberra and the new northside hospital. Light rail will likely replace buses on this corridor, and we need to be undertaking enabling works early for future Belconnen to city light rail connections on the corridor. These enabling works can be done as part of the Belconnen busway. The road corridor needs landscaping to make it more suitable for future light rail. We can do all of these things in one project. Delivering bus priority improvements now can actually hasten light rail stage 3.

I am calling on all parties in here to get the government to commit to investigate and deliver the upgrades to the Belco busway—the Belconnen to city bus corridor—within three years. I am calling for delivery in a phased approach so we can deliver bus priority for the entire Belconnen city corridor. I am calling for delivery in a way that futureproofs it for light rail stage 3.

This project has been under discussion for over 50 years, and it has been in active delivery for 15. We cannot wait another 15 years to finish it. Our population all around Canberra is growing, and it is growing particularly fast in Belconnen. We need to cut climate emissions, and we need to cut congestion and traffic. We need to make our bus service run on time, and with high frequency, all around Canberra. The time to commit is now.

We have been looking at this project ever since I got elected in 2020. It came up in one of my first meetings with stakeholders. I have written to the transport minister several times over the past year, and I have asked him questions about it in the Legislative Assembly. I was really delighted to see our Labor colleague Minister Cheyne sponsor a petition supporting the project recently. She provided some really useful commentary on her Facebook ad that ran alongside the petition, and I just want to echo her words:

As a regular bus user, I reckon the time to invest in these improvements is now.

It is really welcome news. I also welcome the Canberra Liberals' public support for this. I know we disagree on light rail, but Mr Parton and the Canberra Liberals do support better buses. In particular, I really like his quote in Riotact:

This motion could have come from me ... I think it's a beautiful thing.

Let us see if we can get tripartisan support to finish the Belco busway. This project is about getting on with the job. We need to commit and deliver these improvements now to make life easier for the many tens of thousands of Belconnen residents who use public transport every day.

We need to do it for Canberrans today, and we need to do it to cut transport emissions now and into the future. This is what real climate action looks like, and this is how we build a sustainable city. I want your bus journey to be fast and smooth, without traffic, and delays. I want it to be frequent and reliable every single time. I want Belconnen residents to have a high-quality light rail service from Kippax to Civic as soon as possible. The Belco busway will make all of these things work better. The time to commit is now.

I note we have got a number of amendments that have been circulated. I am not entirely certain of the procedures in here, but I am very much hoping that we will allow each member to discuss their amendments. This project has clearly got a huge amount of interest. We have heard words of support for the project from all three parties. We have heard a great deal of commentary, and a great deal of enthusiasm to get on and build the Belco busway, so I am really looking forward to the debate, to hearing the merits of all these different amendments and to making sure that we get a really good discussion on this issue, because it is clear that we do need to work through these issues. It is clearly a project of high public interest to so many Canberrans. I commend my motion to the Assembly.

**MR PARTON** (Brindabella) (3.17): In speaking on Ms Clay's motion, I would say, first up: welcome to the dark side, Ms Clay! Welcome. We have been waiting; we have been waiting for you for some time! This motion is a signal that Ms Clay is as passionate about public transport as I am—and as Mr Hemsley. I note the presence of Mr Ryan Hemsley from the PTCBR group in the gallery.

Ms Clay is extremely passionate about public transport, and this motion is a signal that she has conceded that the cavalry is not coming—there will not be a tram to save public transport users any time soon in Belconnen—so we have got to get out of this ourselves. This motion is a concession from Ms Clay that the tram is not getting to Belconnen any time before 2040, and probably closer to 2050, and the people of Ginninderra cannot wait for this disastrous white elephant. Madam Speaker, as you well know, the Canberra Liberals arrived at that conclusion some time ago, and I welcome the Greens to our position. I welcome them, because there is plenty of room on this particular metaphorical tram! I would point out that this motion is not an indication that Ms Clay is, indeed, anti-tram. Of course she is a supporter of the tram—of course she is. She has just conceded that it is a long way down the track, but this motion does not dilute her support for that project.

I also welcome PTCBR to, in part, our position—I feel silly talking about Ryan in the third person. Haven't PTCBR changed their tune in recent months! They are as exasperated as the rest of Canberra by this long-running debacle known as the tram, and by the fact that in regard to stage 2 nothing that has ever been promised has actually been delivered.

Mr Hemsley was on radio 2CC in July speaking with Leon Delaney and he said, “This whole saga around the route for stage 2B is incredibly disappointing.” This is a bit surreal for Mr Hemsley! That is exactly what he said, “This whole saga around the route for stage 2B is incredibly disappointing.” Mr Delaney pointed out to Mr Hemsley that if the Canberra Liberals were elected, then the saga would be over, and Mr Hemsley responded by saying, “Look, it would certainly be a nice, decisive end to a six-year debate.” Mr Hemsley went on to say, “This has just become exhausting. I am not sure whatever policy the Canberra Liberals will be taking as a public transport alternative but, realistically, how much worse can it get in terms of the amount of time it’s taken to not decide on things and not deliver a project that was promised in September of 2016?” That is from Mr Ryan Hemsley!

Madam Speaker, I would say to Ms Clay that once you have come over to the dark side you start to figure out how you can actually get more Canberrans around this city as efficiently as possible! And so much of this proposal, as presented by Ms Clay, as articulated by PTCBR, is pure common sense. It is just pure common sense. As such, this motion could well have been stolen from the Canberra Liberals’ yet-to-be-announced transport policy. When I picked it up, I thought, “What is going on here? Have they been looking over? Has someone infiltrated?” But that was not the case. But, hallelujah, we are finally on the same page—as Ms Cheyne appears to be in regard to this one. Because the time to do this is, apparently, absolutely right now. So, we are absolutely with Ms Clay, and we are pleased to see some common sense in transport policy, finally.

Here is the thing, and I think this is a really important point to make: if not for the tram project, this transitway would have been completed years ago. It would have been completed years ago! This has been on the agenda for way too long. It came initially from the 2011 government-commissioned report titled, *Belconnen to City Transitway Stage 1*. It was identified by Infrastructure Australia. We all know this. Ms Clay has pointed it out.

We understand that Ms Clay has to be true to her base. I am a bit the same! She has to be true to her base, and she has to at least pretend that the tram is coming within her lifetime to Belconnen. We do not believe it. We ceased believing it a long time ago.

As such, I move the amendment circulated in my name:

Omit all text after paragraph (1)(h), substitute:

“(2) calls on the ACT Government to:

- (a) commit to delivering upgrades to the Belconnen to City Bus Corridor within three years, in a phased approach which will eventually deliver bus priority for the entire Belconnen to City corridor; and
- (b) report back to the Assembly on progress on these measures by the last sitting day of the 10th Assembly in 2024.”.

The Canberra Liberals have made the call to leave Ms Clay’s “notes” section of the motion intact, because we like Ms Clay; we do not want to upset her too much! But also, because we are much more interested in the “calls-on” section. So all we are doing with these amendments is removing references to the tram in the “calls-on”.



That is it. That is all. So the calls-on at 2(a) now ends at the words “Belconnen to City corridor” and removes reference to the enabling of the future delivery of light rail—whatever stage it is. Is it stage “never”? The amendment also completely removes the original 2(b), which refers to the early planning work for the tram—stage never!

As I move these amendments, I would again like to reflect on the fact that when this project was first seriously mooted in 2012—which, I gather, was before the climate emergency had beset us—at that time, from the perspective of the Greens, one of the biggest reasons we were doing this was to reduce emissions. This was one of the biggest reasons that we were doing it. In the years that have followed, the reduction of emissions has been one of the biggest apparent reasons for this multibillion dollar spend. In regard to the aforementioned climate emergency, there is a great urgency that is always transmitted by the Greens, passionately, as to the mandatory cut-off dates—that unless we reduce emissions by this much, by this date, we are history. It is always communicated that unless we achieve our targets by 2030, we are history. But the further we get down this tram rabbit hole, the clearer it becomes that any emissions reductions that may or may not come from the delivery of this project to Woden will not be delivered by any of the self-imposed deadlines. They just will not.

If you are genuinely concerned about transport emissions and climate emergency deadlines, I would suggest that you should unhitch your carriage from the Labor train and hook it up to ours, because the cold hard reality is that the Liberals’ transport policy will deliver significant emissions reductions well before the trams. I know it is hard to give up on the dream, but this motion is certainly a moment whereby even the most animated Greens public transport cheerleader has sort of considered hopping over to this side.

I just want to say in very straight, unpretentious language—in regard to the debate that is about to follow regarding the series of amendments—and I would, through you, Mr Assistant Speaker, direct these comments to Ms Clay. Ms Clay, you have to make a decision: “Leave tonight or live and die!” No, that is not the decision! The decision is whether you want your motion to succeed or whether you do not.

Because this is the reality: I am with the Canberra Liberals and there is no possible way I can sign up to a motion that declares we are spending money and doing things pertaining to stage 3 of the tram. I cannot do it. If, indeed, we get through the amendment section—I do not care about the notes section—and if in the calls-on you have references to us constructing things for the tram, you have lost us; we are not on board.

Obviously, I have had a look at Mr Steel’s amendments, and I have engaged with his office, and I am not entirely happy with the Steel amendments, because I think there was a commitment to get this done some time ago that has not been fulfilled, and I think it is really important stuff. I will not be signing up to the Steel amendments, so if the Steel amendments get up, there is no possible way that we can support the motion.

So what I am saying, through you, Mr Assistant Speaker, to Ms Clay is that if you want this motion to succeed, all you have to do is vote for the Liberal amendments. If you vote for the Liberal amendments, your motion is going to be successful today, and that is the way it is. If you do not, I think there is a large possibility that it will not.

For Ms Clay, it just gets down to whether she wants to get a motion up on this matter, in this chamber, or whether she wants to go down on the sinking ship waving that Greens' flag of active travel and public transport. I do not know.

But you know that I am genuine when I say that if you want to get this motion up, you should say yes to this amendment. And if you do say yes to this amendment, nobody would believe for a single moment that that means all of a sudden you are anti-tram. We know that that is not the case. We know that you are not selling your soul to do that. All you would be doing is trying to get this motion up over the line.

That is all I have got, thank you.

**MS CLAY** (Ginninderra) (3.28): Mr Parton, thank you so much for that really, really detailed and genuinely authentic speech.

*Government members interjecting—*

**MS CLAY**: No, really. This is going to come out all wrong in the *Hansard*. I really, really appreciate the commitment to buses. I really appreciate this amendment that has come through. It is absolutely true that the one change that the Canberra Liberals have made to this motion is to move light rail from the “calls on”.

We have had a really good think about this one because this is quite a difficult decision for the Greens. The problem is as an ACT Green and also as a member for Ginninderra it is impossible for me to say we cannot do light rail to Belconnen.

There are delays to light rail. We know that this project has been rolling out more slowly than we would like. We know that we need this project as part of our public transport network. We can see how marvellously successful it is for Gungahlin and for the city and in Belconnen we really, really want light rail as soon as we can have it.

I am really worried about an official calls-on to build a Belco busway that does not future-proof that busway for light rail stage 3. I am worried, given how many delays we are seeing to this public transport project, that, if we sign up to a calls-on that does not future-proof this for light rail, maybe we will be still stuck here in decades without a clear direction—that we will not be telling people clearly what we are going to do.

We in the Greens know what we need to do. We are still optimists. There are a lot of things going wrong with the climate and there are a lot of delays in our capital works projects, but we know what we need to do. So we are still holding the line to make sure that we deliver on those things that we need to do.

We need to make better buses—the Belco busway is part of that—and hourly weekend services. There are a whole lot of things that we know we need to do to improve our bus service, and we know we need to build light rail all around Canberra and build it more quickly than we have seen so far. We see how successful it is. We see how well it works and how it is delivering in the areas where it is complete.

So, as much as we genuinely appreciate the thought that has gone into this amendment—it is a really, really good amendment that commits to buses—it simply

will not future-proof Belconnen for light rail. It is going to worry a lot of people in Belconnen, I think, if we take out light rail, even in a motion that will not necessarily lead to shovels out on the road.

If we take out light rail at this stage, what we are telling people is, “You are not going to get it.” That is not a message I am prepared to deliver to my constituents back in Belconnen. I am still really hopeful that we can give them better buses that are more reliable and more frequent and more convenient and light rail as quickly as we can possibly deliver it. So, unfortunately, the ACT Greens cannot support this amendment.

**MRS KIKKERT** (Ginninderra) (3.31): I thank Ms Clay for bringing this matter to the attention of the Assembly. I support the intention to improve the bus corridor between Belconnen and the city. With such a large number of Canberrans commuting along this route daily, improving bus travel here should be a high priority.

I have reservations, however, with how the government may interpret the call to ensure that within three years the upgrades will deliver bus priority for the entire Belconnen to city corridor. This could be pursued in several different ways. The government could install specialised signals for buses, it could build a new dedicated bus lane or it could take one of the existing lanes currently used by cars and turn that into a dedicated bus lane, making travel slower and more difficult for private vehicles.

As many friends catch public transport to and from work each day, quality public transport is much talked about in my office, and particularly the Belconnen to Civic corridor. My staff are intimately familiar with this corridor and use it every day during the weekdays. They know all about this route. For example, they know that, if they arrive to work early, they can get the discounted rate for off-peak travel and, if they catch the No. 4 four bus in the morning at the Cohen Street Interchange, they will board an empty bus and have their choice of seats.

They also know that specialised road infrastructure for public transport is just one part of the equation to improving public transport. Another part, and more importantly, is having an adequately serviced route.

Since January 2022, this Labor-Greens government has been slowly eroding the number of buses that service this corridor, whilst telling people that service is getting better. Let me provide some numbers.

In January 2022, there were 534 daily rapid bus journeys along the Belconnen to Civic corridor. As of the latest update, on 17 July this year, there were only 508—a reduction of 26 buses per day. And these are not just off-peak services that this government has cut; it has also cut the number of rapid services during peak times, creating chaos during these busy periods when people are left stranded at bus stops because buses are at capacity. This is unacceptable. Shame on this Labor and Greens government for cutting bus services along the city’s busiest corridor.

While I hope that, following this motion, the government takes serious steps to improve travel for buses along the Belconnen to city corridor, it has repeatedly demonstrated that improved bus service is not a priority.

For many bus users, the announcement of a network change is often met with dread and thoughts of, “How are they going to make my commute worse this time?” That is a sentiment shared by many in my electorate. Many of the 1,180 Canberra residents who signed a petition I sponsored to prevent the removal of the expresso buses are still dissatisfied that those buses were cut anyway, as are many of the 7,120 people who signed the petition to revert the network to the pre-tram timetable. So too are the 2,365 people who signed two separate petitions, sponsored by both me and Ms Clay, to restore a convenient bus service to thousands of students on the ANU campus.

Many Belconnen residents would benefit from streamlined bus travel along the Belconnen to Civic corridor. But, like many of my constituents, I am extremely sceptical of this government’s willingness or ability to deliver a good bus service. What we really need are more dedicated buses—which the Labor and the Greens have cut.

In closing, I would like to thank the bus drivers that take much of the chaotic hassle of the morning and evening commutes off the plates of thousands of Canberrans a day. One of my staff has requested that I give special thanks to the bus drivers who have the heaters running to warm the buses before they even pick up their first passenger. The efforts of our bus drivers really make a difference in keeping our city running. I hope we can at least make the Belconnen to Civic leg of the journey easier for them as well as Canberra residents.

**MR CAIN** (Ginninderra) (3.37): I rise to support my colleague Mr Parton’s amendment to Ms Clay’s motion regarding the Belconnen transit way.

As I think we have all agreed in this place, Belconnen is a rapidly growing district and will continue to be for decades to come. Current developments are continuing to occur in Bruce, the Belconnen town centre, Lawson and, of course, the Ginninderry development in West Belconnen.

As a member for Ginninderra, I will always support transit upgrades throughout Belconnen. William Hovell Drive and Parkes Way, going into the city, are a nightmare, especially during morning and evening peak hour traffic periods. Better transit routes from the city to Belconnen would help ease congestion on these other main roads. Haydon Drive, a busy road that provides access to the University of Canberra, the Canberra Stadium, the AIS, Radford College, Belconnen Mall, North Canberra Hospital, CIT and the suburb of Bruce, surely deserves a comprehensive bus transit network. The Haydon Drive and Belconnen Way intersection is often congested, with cars and buses competing for use of the road. That is what Mr Parton’s amendment goes to the heart of—to stop the competition for a roadway, to give the buses a right of way. I think his amendment is worthy of support, and I would urge Ms Clay to rethink her current position.

Navigating Haydon Drive during school pick-up or drop-off can be very difficult, let alone when Canberra Raiders or ACT Brumbies football matches are being held. Just go for the experience.

The three rapid bus routes that run between the city and Belconnen account for almost 30 per cent of Canberra’s daily bus boardings. The R2 and R4 are the two busiest bus

routes and the R3 is the fifth busiest bus route in Canberra. The Belconnen transit way would allow buses operating between Belconnen and the city to bypass some areas of significant traffic congestion. This is happening now, Mr Assistant Speaker.

Delivering on this transit way, as Mr Parton has called for, in a realistic time frame will remove significant problems for travellers early morning and afternoon, particularly parents dropping children off at school.

As Belconnen continues to grow, making bus journeys faster and more reliable will see people use public transport to get to the city, and this will ease road congestion, especially in the AM and PM peak periods. Upgraded transit lanes will get Canberra's busiest buses out of traffic and mobilising Belconnen residents and workers more efficiently and more effectively if done right, according to Mr Parton's amendment.

Leaving out light rail is very appropriate. We are hopefully looking at a motion that calls for a realistic delivery of an important service in real time, in close time. I again urge Ms Clay to rethink her position. She can certainly bring a light rail stage 3 motion to this Assembly. I am sure her members will not think she is betraying that agenda by accepting Mr Parton's amendment.

I do hope that, particularly, the Green MLAs on the floor here can see this motion serves a very important person to call on the government to give a commitment to real-time delivery of an essentially needed service to remove a current problem. Surely that is something good government would look at doing.

I want to commend Mr Parton for doing this—and in the spirit in which it is being done as well, I do not mind saying. We have obviously been handed Mr Steel's proposed amendments to take out any promise of an actual event to improve our public transport in Belconnen. In Mr Steel's amendment, the "calls on" would be replaced with "consideration of", "consider further" and "consider opportunities". Where is the promise to deliver? There is not one. This is from the Minister for City Services. Shame on you, Minister. You have an opportunity to support a commitment to deliver an urgently needed upgrade. This is the moment to do it.

I also want to acknowledge Mr Ryan Hemsley, from the Public Transport Association of Canberra, and thank him for his commitment to enhance public transport in our wonderful city. I will take a little aside. If he happens to have a certain letter on behalf of the Molonglo Valley community forum about leaving the current arrangement with the government, I would be happy to take that and lodge it with every Labor and Green MLA in this place. That is a total aside and very cheeky of me to do so!

I go back to the main theme. Ms Clay, I really do urge you to carefully consider the heart of what Mr Parton is doing here. Of course, we are not going to agree on light rail, but we can have that full and frank discussion again if you want to, through another motion about light rail stage 3. I am not sure we have had a light rail stage 3 motion, Mr Parton, on its own. Have we? I do not know.

**Mr Parton:** I think the motion is scheduled for 2040!

**MR CAIN:** But I do urge you, Ms Clay, and your colleagues to commit this Assembly to delivery of a service that is actually needed right now in our electorate.

Surely Member Clay and Minister Berry should support this as well, for the sake of Belconnen—a reasonable time frame to deliver a vitally needed upgrade. It is needed now.

If we can get it in three years that would be pretty good because, obviously, we will not be getting light rail for quite a while. Let us focus on the here and now. Let us focus on something we as an Assembly can call on this government to deliver—to deliver something that is vitally needed right at this moment.

Question put:

That the amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 8

Noes 15

Mr Cain  
Ms Castley  
Mr Cocks  
Mr Hanson  
Mrs Kikkert  
Ms Lawder  
Mr Milligan  
Mr Parton

Mr Barr  
Ms Berry  
Mr Braddock  
Ms Burch  
Ms Cheyne  
Ms Clay  
Mr Davis  
Mr Gentleman

Ms Orr  
Dr Paterson  
Mr Pettersson  
Mr Rattenbury  
Mr Steel  
Ms Stephen-Smith  
Ms Vassarotti

Amendment negatived.

**MR STEEL** (Murrumbidgee—Minister for Skills, Minister for Transport and City Services and Special Minister of State) (3.48): The Labor Party supports the objective of Ms Clay’s motion but we do not support her method for achieving it. That is why I am moving an amendment to the motion. I move:

Omit all text after paragraph (1)(h), substitute:

“(2) calls on the ACT Government to support the expansion of the Belconnen Transitway including:

- (a) consideration of further bus priority upgrades for the entire Belconnen to City corridor and planning for Light Rail Stage 3;
- (b) consider further bus priority interventions based on new traffic modelling and consider future development of housing, health and tertiary education precincts in the region;
- (c) consider opportunities to:
  - (i) improve active travel infrastructure such as delivery of separated cycleways along Haydon Drive, Belconnen Way and Barry Drive, which are identified as future priorities in the ACT Government’s draft proposed cycling network;
  - (ii) improve connections between bus stops and key infrastructure and services, such as early education centres, North Canberra Hospital and the Belconnen Community Centre;

- (iii) enhance other transport modes between Belconnen and the City; and
- (iv) preserve the corridor and support the future construction of Light Rail Stage 3;
- (d) note any decision to expand the Belconnen Transitway (following this investigation) will be subject to budget consideration;
- (e) put forward updated feasibility and design for the Belconnen Transitway to the Australian Government for consideration under the \$500 million Housing Support Program, which supports state and local councils to build infrastructure to support liveable communities and enable more housing; and
- (f) report back to the Assembly on progress on these measures by the last sitting day of the 10th Assembly in 2024.”.

This amendment supports a multi-modal approach to the Belconnen to city corridor, including buses, light rail and active travel, which was missed from Ms Clay’s motion. It is, of course, part of a community petition which has been sponsored by my colleague Ms Cheyne.

The ACT government recognises the importance of expanding the Belconnen transitway. The Belconnen to city transitway is one of the busiest public transport corridors in Canberra. It services three very popular rapid bus routes—the R2, R3 and R4—as well as a number of local bus routes.

The ACT government commissioned and released the *Belconnen to City Transitway Stage 1* options report in 2011, as reference by Ms Clay’s motion. This report analysed bus priority options for the Belconnen to city transitway. Following the release of the report, the ACT government implemented a notable portion of the recommended bus priority measures, including dedicated bus lanes and bus jumps at intersections.

The upgrades were progressed based on priority and were delivered over two stages in 2013 and 2014. The bus priority measures were located in the city and in Belconnen around the University of Canberra and Radford College, specifically on College Street and Haydon Drive.

Some of the bus priority measures in the report were not progressed as they were discredited or were not deemed necessary at the time. These measures were predominantly located in the central section of the transport corridor between Haydon Drive and Belconnen Way. For example, one of the investigations in the report identified that there was not a strong case for extending bus lanes on Haydon Drive from Purdue Street through to Belconnen Way based on the outcomes of microsimulation modelling of future traffic conditions on Haydon Drive. Another solution which was considered in the report had the potential to increase bus travel time, specifically the signalisation of Purdue Street. Both of these recommendations were made over 10 years ago and, while not expected to reflect today’s bus priority requirements, need further consideration.

We are of the view that this is the right time to reassess potential bus priority measures along the Belconnen transitway, particularly along Haydon Drive and

Belconnen Way. The Belconnen to city transitway is one of the busiest public transport corridors in Canberra and bus patronage is only expected to increase with more people accessing future developments along this corridor, including the new North Canberra Hospital and also the master plan development of the University of Canberra.

With ongoing growth in Belconnen—which goes beyond the direct centre of Belconnen but also into Ginninderry as well—it is vital the ACT government proactively protects the key public transport corridors from increasing traffic congestion to ensure that it can continue to provide rapid transit services with optimal operational efficiency.

The importance of this project is further evidenced by the commonwealth government's identification of the Belconnen transitway by Infrastructure Australia. The project has been listed on Infrastructure Australia's priority list. It was added in 2016 and identified this as a project for consideration in the medium term with a five- to 10-year time frame, and that is the time frame that we are in in 2023.

Although the 2011 report included recommended solutions for bus priority, these are now very out of date and do not reflect the growth that has been experienced in the region or, indeed, the growth that is planned in the future. Additionally, the bus priority recommendations in 2011 may no longer be sufficient and more significant interventions may now be required—for example, where an intersection bus jump may have been previously recommended, a dedicated bus lane may now be required.

That is why I moved an amendment that calls on the ACT government to consider further bus priority interventions which take into consideration new traffic modelling and future development of housing, health and tertiary education precincts in the region. This analysis will need to consider the future impacts from the new North Canberra Public Hospital, the pressing plan for the AIS and future expansion of Radford College and the University of Canberra—and none of us know exactly what those measures might be yet but work needs to happen.

The ACT government is committed to delivering the best outcomes for the Canberra community. To achieve that, we need to undertake those detailed investigations to ensure that the bus priority measures that could be delivered achieve their intended outcome. We are not going to commit to deliver an undefined and unfunded project that has not been properly considered and scrutinised through appropriate government processes, including budget processes—which brings me to the amendment.

As confirmed in my response and in the amendment, the ACT government does support the expansion of the Belconnen transitway, but we do not support Ms Clay's approach in this motion. Contrary to Ms Clay's expectation, the government does not make significant decisions on capital expenditure funding through private member's business, and we will not commit to delivering an unfunded project with an unknown scope without appropriate consideration and investigation. That needs to happen.

Ms Clay's motion is effectively calling on the government to deliver a project that has not been properly investigated and considered. There is no defined scope and no cost estimation; it does not have supporting business cases and it has no approved funding.



The ACT government supports the objective of the motion, but we will not be making a decision to expand the Belconnen transit way today without following the appropriate government business and budget processes. This is the standard process for all infrastructure projects with capital expenditure, which Ms Clay is aware of.

I would be interested to see the response in this place if the situation were flipped and the Liberals were calling on the ACT government to deliver a road duplication project which we supported in principle. I suspect that there would be an outcry from Ms Clay if we committed to delivering a road duplication project without having first considered a supporting business case and the costs and benefits of the project—and known scope would be helpful as well.

If I could just snap my fingers and provide more bus priority between the city and Belconnen, I would. But there is a process for delivering large-scale infrastructure projects with significant capital expenditure. It is more complicated than that. We need to undertake the investigation and updated feasibility first.

As we do that, we will take a multi-modal approach. I have said this on many occasions in the Assembly. Our government considers all modes of transport holistically rather than in isolation, and this project should be no different. We should be applying a multi-modal approach to what is a strategic transport corridor and looking at all forms of travel, from active travel and public transport through to private vehicles and freight as well. We need to undertake that proper investigation without tunnel vision. We need to make sure that we consider possible improvements for a range of different transport modes.

In my amendment, I call on the ACT government to consider opportunities to improve active travel infrastructure, such as the delivery of separated cycleways on Haydon Drive, Belconnen Way and Barry Drive, which are already identified as future priorities in the ACT government's draft pro-cycling network.

I have also called on the ACT government to consider opportunities to improve connections between bus stops and key infrastructure and services, enhance other transport modes between Belconnen and the city, and preserve the corridor and support the future planned light rail stage 3.

Ms Clay may argue that her motion is no different to Minister Cheyne supporting a petition which calls on the ACT government to design and construct improved bus priority measures between Belconnen and the city. But there are major differences with the specific community requests that have not been reflected in Ms Clay's motion.

One of the other key differences between Ms Clay's motion and the petition is that the petition calls for government and parliamentary consideration. The petition aligns with government processes, particularly budgetary processes. It allows the government to appropriately consider the proposal and provide a response. It does not force the government to commit to delivering an undefined project.

I would also like to thank Minister Cheyne for championing this initiative for her constituents in Belconnen and for public transport users, while still following

government processes. I wholeheartedly welcome her advocacy on this topic and I look forward to considering and responding to the community petition, including the principal petitioner Ms Heidi Prowse in due course under a proper process.

I would also like to thank the Public Transport Association of Canberra for their ongoing advocacy for this project. During my meetings with them, they have undertaken some detailed research and analysis of the history of the project, which they have published on their website. They will be pleased to know that I have been discussing these bus priority measures along the corridor with Transport Canberra and City Services over recent months. I have already been briefed on a recommended next step for progressing the project.

Under the proposed amendment, we are calling on the government to put forward the updated feasibility and design for the Belconnen transitway to the Australian government for consideration under the \$500 million Housing Support Program, which supports states, territories and local councils to build infrastructure, including transport infrastructure, to support liveable communities that enables more housing. This has been included in the amendment to make sure that this important next step is part of the motion.

Finally, I wish to be clear that the ACT government is still committed to delivering a city-wide light rail network—and that includes light rail stage 3, an east-west route that would connect Belconnen to the city and beyond—as part of our vision for improving public transport infrastructure in this city.

These bus priority measures will provide an interim solution to improve public transport outcomes for Belconnen in the short term. Designed right and based on that updated feasibility and traffic modelling, it will help to preserve the corridor for mass transit and to mitigate anticipated traffic disruptions during any future construction for light rail stage 3.

To conclude, the ACT government supports the Belconnen transitway. We support the intention of the original motion; however, the wording of the motion does not reflect sound government processes; does not understand what is asking to be delivered, because further feasibility and traffic modelling is required to determine scope; and it does not support a multi-modal approach to the corridor, including making sure that there is safe active travel infrastructure along the corridor as well.

The ACT government does not make significant financial decisions during private member's business, particularly for a motion provided with less than a week's notice.

To summarise, and to the point that Mr Parton made earlier, I think it would be disappointing if, in the case that this amendment is not supported, the motion could fail. That would be an example of making the perfect the enemy of the good. I hope that members support this amendment, because it will see a significant outcome today for the city to Belconnen transitway. I commend the amendment to the Assembly.

**MS CHEYNE** (Ginninderra—Assistant Minister for Economic Development, Minister for the Arts, Minister for Business and Better Regulation, Minister for Human Rights and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (4.00): I rise to speak in support

of Minister Steel's amendment. I am a regular bus user. I took the bus this morning. I took the bus last night. I took the bus yesterday morning. You get the picture. I am also a town centre resident. I have lived there close to 14 years, save for a brief period in Bruce. I have not only watched it grow; I have been a part of it growing. As a town centre resident, I am on the Belconnen rapid route: the R2, the R3 and the R4. With my workplace here in the city, these are the busses I know intimately—the R2 and the R4 especially—but I also love the convenience of the R3, especially to the airport. They are the routes we are focused on today.

The Belconnen to city transitway is one of the busiest public transport corridors in Canberra, with these three popular rapid routes. And they are popular for many reasons. The R3 and the R2 extend from the town centre and take in many Belconnen suburbs. All three rapids provide numerous local bus connections from either the Belconnen Interchange or the Westfield Interchange, including all the regular bus services in the numbers in the 30s and 40s, and, of course, they connect to light rail.

The rapids support connections to major health, education and community services along the route: the ANU, the North Canberra Hospital, the CIT, early education centres, the University of Canberra and the Belconnen Community Centre. That is in addition to their connections to the major residential hubs of Belconnen and Bruce. And the rapids support connections to some major cycleways, including where we have recently made significant investments, such as Belco Bikeway stages 1 and 2. Thank you, Minister Steel.

In the evenings, the bus travel time between the city and my town centre home is comparable to driving or getting a taxi or a rideshare home. I have checked the MyWay data for my late-night trips, and they are under 20 minutes, and some are under 15. During the day, the rapids between the town centre and the city are more reliable in terms of their consistency and travel times, especially in peak hours, than driving.

It is my preference to take the bus, and I do so confidently, on sitting days, because I know it will be between 20 and 25 minutes, whereas an accident on Belconnen Way, Gungahlin Drive, William Hovell Drive or Parkes Way risks blowing travel time to double that. There is a reason that I have that confidence and it is thanks to the investment of bus-only lanes and bus jump lanes along most of the route, allowing buses to bypass traffic and to have priority at traffic signals. That is true for most of the route, except for Haydon Drive.

As much as I enjoy the confidence I have in the bus travel times—and the 20 to 25 minutes in peak hour is not bad by any means—it could be better. As the population grows, as the needs of our community to access education, health and community services along this route grow, and as thus the popularity of the route grows, it is time to explore this investment on Haydon Drive. It makes sense, especially as we look to futureproof this corridor for Light Rail Stage 3.

That said, as important as these enhancements on Haydon Drive are, and I acknowledge the support and engagement across the community for this investment, including from the Public Transport Association of Canberra—and I thank Mr Hemsley for being here and for all his advocacy over an extended period of time—there are other opportunities that could be explored through this too.

I draw members' attention, through you, Mr Assistant Speaker, to the petition from Mrs Heidi Prowse OAM, which I am proud to sponsor. While there are similar outcomes sought in the original motion to Mrs Prowse's petition, Mrs Prowse's petition goes further. It is because, as bus users in Belconnen know, Haydon Drive is important, but there are more considerations about improving the Belconnen transitway than just investing in that.

As the petition indicates, and as Mr Steel's amendment makes clear, as part of the planning work to improve public transport connections for Belconnen, we also need to investigate opportunities to improve connections between bus stops and the key infrastructure and services in the area, and to invest in other transport modes like cycleways. I see Ms Clay's amendment to her own motion at this late stage acknowledges that, but it does beg the question as to why it was not included in the first place.

The issue was brought into sharp relief for town centre residents just this year, with the JWLand development application proposal on the Swanson Court car park alarmingly not providing clear connections from the Belconnen Interchange to the town centre, including the nearby central service provider, the Belconnen Community Centre. While that development application was rejected, the experience highlights the value of these connections.

As we consider the needs of the growing employment and residential populations, we need to consider the current stops and where future stops may be, and we need to futureproof these too. And we need to consider further investment in separated cycleways because a convenient bus service is supported by its accessibility and ease of wayfinding, including for major community services and from other travel modes.

Finally, there is a host of other opportunities which I consider timely for the government to consider investing in exploring now with appropriate up-to-date modelling, as Minister Steel has indicated. I would implore these to be considered as part of a holistic review of the transitway and bus services in Belconnen. These are experiences that I have had and that have been shared with me, and certainly that I have recognised.

The first is whether improvements could be made to the R2 and the R3 as they move into the suburbs. While they are rapid routes in regularity, these routes have many stops. It is worth exploring the suitability of the stops and enabling the most efficient movement of the rapids and whether any other priority transit corridors or signals are warranted, or, indeed, another rapid is warranted.

The second is whether similar improvements could be explored between the town centre and the city. From the Belconnen Interchange to the Legislative Assembly, there are 10 or 11 stops, from memory. Some of these are more popular than others at different times of the day, and, from what I have observed, some occasions when buses may be slower could be due to the number of people boarding or alighting at different points. Anyone who has been on a bus which is at standing room only in particular knows the dance as people move through to make way for others as they board or alight and the bus driver makes sure it is safe to depart. This necessarily does take time. This warrants a closer look, and I would expect that a holistic review, with the benefit of a new ticketing system, would provide for further improvements.

The third is the need to take a closer look at the interaction of transport modes at major hubs. There are naturally areas where many transport modes cross paths, and this in and of itself can create slower movements for all these modes. A key example that warrants further investigation is Barry Drive on approach to Northbourne Avenue and the intersections with Marcus Clarke and Moore Streets. This is where cycle paths, signalised crossings and bus priority lanes and signals all come together. It is also where, if you are travelling from Belconnen and want to turn right onto Northbourne Avenue, you almost certainly need to change lanes. All of this has the potential to create conflict—and does—as well as queuing and potentially unsafe behaviours, let alone reducing efficiency for all those travelling.

Mrs Prowse's comprehensive petition goes further than Ms Clay's motion today in both recognising and understanding these broader considerations required by government when it comes to improving public and active transport to Belconnen for all members of the community and holistically. Minister Steel's amendment has further recognised these opportunities as we plan for the future and acknowledges that further bus priority interventions may be required, in addition to connections and enhancing other transport modes.

This exploration and investigation should start now. Minister Steel confirms in his amendment that he would report back on that next year, but a locked-in time frame for only a portion of that work that needs to be done, and in anticipation of any future budget processes, as Ms Clay's original motion proposes, only goes so far. It does not deliver the holistic improvements that Belconnen residents deserve. It is for this reason that I support the more comprehensive amendment that Minister Steel has brought forward today.

Whatever happens with this motion today, given the numerous amendments that have been moved and are being moved, I look forward to Mrs Prowse's petition continuing to gain support, as it has already, and the opportunity to discuss it in more detail when it is tabled. I commend Minister Steel's amendment to the chamber.

**MR PARTON** (Brindabella) (4.08): I will be very brief. We will not be supporting Mr Steel's amendment. The debate that we are seeing here is frustratingly disappointing. The debate that we are seeing was so predictable. It was as predictable as the failure of Ms Berry's growing and renewing program. You could see, right from the start, where it is going to head. You can see where it is going to end up.

We will not be supporting this amendment, because we do not want the minister and this government to weasel out of something that they should have already done. I find it extremely disappointing that the three parties are driving down the same road, but we cannot all end up in the same lane, somehow! We are all heading in the same direction; we just cannot get in the same lane.

In closing, I would say to Ms Clay, through you, Mr Assistant Speaker: I thought you were here to shake things up and get things done. We could have shaken things up and got things done here. He was never going to be with us. I have made myself abundantly clear as to where we are throughout this process, and where we are likely to end up disappoints me.

**MS CLAY** (Ginninderra) (4.10): Unfortunately, the ACT Greens cannot support Minister Steel's amendment.

I am really pleased to hear such strong support from the transport minister and from ACT Labor for the Belco Busway. We have heard strong support for the objective but not the method in this motion. I am struggling to understand the logic. This is a project that has been under discussion for 50 years. It has been in development and is being delivered in progressive stages for 15 years. This is not a new project. This is not a new decision. We are simply trying to get firm commitment and a time frame.

There is a lot of great material in Minister Steel's amendment. I have tried to capture some of that in the amendment to my motion. I assumed that, when we were talking about public transport, we all knew that we also include bus stops and active travel as part of that, but I think it is great to spell it out, just to make that really clear. Of course we include active travel whenever we do our public transport. That is how you integrate with the public transport. We have all said that quite a lot in here, so we know that we need to do that, but it is really good to spell that out and make that clear. It is great to see that in Heidi Prowse's petition, and, similarly, to have better bus stop infrastructure. Of course we should capture that.

But the more significant changes in Minister Steel's amendment are about removing any commitment to delivering it and removing any time frame to delivering it. I just cannot sign up to that for the people of Belconnen. We have been having this project under delivery since 2011. The reason we picked the time frame that we have picked is that, in 2016, there was the Infrastructure Australia report that recommended this be delivered within five to 10 years. We looked at that and we said, "Okay, that is 2026. Let's deliver it within five to 10 years. That would be great."

We understand that there will need to be some updated studies. Perhaps if we had delivered it in 2011, we would have been able to use the studies that government had at the time. Of course, situations have changed. That is why we have said very clearly in the motion that we should commit to investigating and delivering upgrades. Of course, there is going to be a bit of work to do to get the details of the project right, and we were very careful not to tell the government what the details of that project should be. There is so much great material out there. There is a government report already and there is an Infrastructure Australia report. Mr Hemsley, from the Public Transport Association of Canberra, has great content and maps on his website. We did not need to step into that space and tell people exactly how the project should be done. Of course, that work will need to be done, but this is why we need a commitment to do it, to deliver it and to complete it within three years.

I am really worried that, if we do not have that kind of commitment, there might be a bunch of people—us or somebody else; I do not know—circling back in another 15 years and still talking about the Belco Busway that will still not actually exist in Belconnen and will still not be giving people better buses and quicker commutes.

It is really important that we integrate active travel. I think that is essential. It is important that we integrate bus stops in good planning. It is important that we do futureproofing. A key part of this motion is about enabling Light Rail Stage 3 and making sure that we plan this project and roll it out. That is absolutely essential to

doing this project well. But we cannot possibly pass this motion and drop all commitments and drop all time frames. What would be the point?

I am still hopeful that, with some of the new elements in the minister's amendment that I am hoping to move to mine, we might get agreement. We will have to wait and see. But, even if we do not, I will leave here really happy today that we have had all three parties saying how important this project is to deliver and how important it is to the people of Canberra. That obviously means the minister will deliver it regardless of what happens, but the ACT Greens cannot support a motion that removes all the commitments.

Question put:

That the amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 10		Noes 13	
Mr Barr	Mr Pettersson	Mr Braddock	Mrs Kikkert
Ms Berry	Mr Steel	Mr Cain	Ms Lawder
Ms Burch	Ms Stephen-Smith	Ms Castley	Mr Milligan
Ms Cheyne		Ms Clay	Mr Parton
Mr Gentleman		Mr Cocks	Mr Rattenbury
Ms Orr		Mr Davis	Ms Vassarotti
Dr Paterson		Mr Hanson	

Amendment negatived.

**MS CLAY** (Ginninderra) (4.18): by leave, I move the following amendment circulated in my name:

Insert new paragraph (2)(aa):

“(2) (aa) consider opportunities to:

- (i) improve active travel infrastructure such as delivery of separated cycleways along Haydon Drive, Belconnen Way and Barry Drive, which are identified as future priorities in the ACT Government's draft proposed cycling network; and
- (ii) improve connections between bus stops and key infrastructure and services, such as early education centres, North Canberra Hospital and the Belconnen Community Centre.”.

I will be brief. I have circulated an amendment that introduces the active travel elements and to improve the connections between bus stops and key infrastructure and services in Minister Steel's amendment. These are great elements. In the Clay office, we assume—and maybe we should not make assumptions—that, when we do something on public transport, we also integrate active transport and we integrate bus stops, but I think it is valuable to spell it out really clearly. We certainly would not want any delays to this project because people were confused that those elements should not be included, so I have tried to capture those and insert them. I have

captured them directly in the minister’s words—that those opportunities should be considered and integrated in the project.

That is the amendment that I have introduced to my original motion, which is a very simple motion to commit to the Belco Busway and deliver it within three years after doing proper investigations to make sure that we get the details right.

I commend my amended motion to the Assembly.

Amendment agreed to.

Question put:

That the motion, as amended, be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 5

Mr Braddock  
Ms Clay  
Mr Davis  
Mr Rattenbury  
Ms Vassarotti

Noes 18

Mr Barr  
Ms Berry  
Ms Burch  
Mr Cain  
Ms Castley  
Ms Cheyne  
Mr Cocks  
Mr Gentleman  
Mr Hanson  
Mrs Kikkert  
Ms Lawder  
Mr Milligan  
Ms Orr  
Mr Parton  
Dr Paterson  
Mr Pettersson  
Mr Steel  
Ms Stephen-Smith

Question resolved in the negative.

## **Taxation—general practice clinics**

**MS LEE** (Kurrajong—Leader of the Opposition) (4.22): I move:

That this Assembly:

- (1) notes the following recent comments made by local general practitioners (GPs), practice owners and practice staff in relation to the decision by the ACT Labor-Greens Government to impose the general practitioner (GP) payroll tax:
  - (a) “So, I don’t think that there will be any choice for me but to impose a new payroll tax levy on the patients in my practice. The only question is exactly how large a levy we impose and when we put it in place.”;
  - (b) “...the ACT Government’s new tax is a tax on patients. GPs will have no choice but to raise their fees...”;
  - (c) “The ACT Government’s decision to impose additional payroll tax on GPs has left many worrying how they will keep their doors open...”;
  - (d) “GPs are forced to choose between their conscience and their income in a way no high-minded politician or public servant has to do.”;



- (e) “There are 10 practices currently paying it but a majority of practices will be paying it if GP payments are included in the figures that make us liable for payroll tax.”;
  - (f) “I urge Mr Barr to meet with practice managers and owners, like me, in order for him to understand that his figure of 65% bulk-billing is not achievable for my practice. If mandated to do this, our practice would most likely close down.”;
  - (g) “I have it on good assurance that many GPs are so distressed by developments that they are looking at leaving the profession, or altering their workloads.”;
  - (h) “...It will be absolutely devastating for the community if one of their local practices are forced to close, and GPs leave town...”;
  - (i) “While GPs are strongly committed to ensuring equitable access to healthcare, the introduction of a new tax for General Practices will inevitably limit their ability to provide healthcare services at a reduced cost through bulk billing. This means that some people are unable to see their GP because they cannot be bulk billed.”;
  - (j) “Thousands of ACT patients will be affected by the new tax. In meeting after meeting, GPs have been telling the ACT Government exactly this.”; and
  - (k) “The idea from Mr Barr that GPs ‘lack motivation’ to do anything, let alone bulk bill is absolutely outrageous. The amount of extra labour we do at no cost to the patient or the state and federal government should be commended. Mr Barr’s rhetoric is ill-intentioned, ill-judged and continues to damage morale.”;
- (2) further notes the following comments by The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Australian Medical Association ACT on 27 August 2023:
- (a) “It would not be possible for us to bulk bill 65% of patients and stay financially viable, even with the triple bulk incentives, which are only applied to pensioners, children and healthcare card holders. The ACT Government’s policy is out of step with other jurisdictions and will not encourage GPs to work in the ACT, it will have quite the opposite effect.”; and
  - (b) “I’m calling on the government to come back to the table to consult with GPs and find a real solution before it’s too late.”;
- (3) further notes the following comments by Dr Walter Abhayaratna in The Canberra Times on 11 September 2023:
- (a) “The Barr Government’s decision to impose a new payroll tax on GPs is the latest assault on a primary care sector already on its knees.”;
  - (b) “Unfortunately, all the evidence points to GP access problems getting worse in Canberra, right at the time when chronic disease rates are rising with our ageing population.”;
  - (c) “Into this setting, the ACT Government has lobbed its payroll tax grenade...”;
  - (d) “The ACT Government should be frantically trying to stimulate general practice in the territory, knowing GP-led care is vastly more efficient

than caring for patients in hospital, where the cost of care is exponentially greater per occasion of service.”; and

- (e) “Instead, it is bent on a policy that will make the ACT one of the least favourable places in Australia to practice as a GP.”; and
- (4) calls on the ACT Labor-Greens Government to listen to these local GPs, practice owners, practice staff and GP groups and exempt general practice from the new interpretation of payroll tax that applies to contractor GPs.

Over the last few weeks, I have been contacted by countless GPs, practice owners and practice staff concerned about the ramifications of Mr Barr’s GP payroll tax. I am sure many in this place have also had similar emails, calls and meetings. In each of those meetings, emails and phone calls, I have heard about the real ramifications the decision by Mr Barr will have on primary healthcare businesses, but, most importantly, the impact that it will have on the community.

My motion outlines just a small selection of the comments that I have received and have seen. There are comments from desperate GPs, such as:

I do not think that there will be any choice for me but to impose a new payroll tax levy on the patients in my practice. The only question is exactly how large a levy we impose and when we put it in place.

There are comments such as:

The ACT government’s decision to impose additional payroll tax on GPs has left many worrying how they will keep their doors open ...

There are comments such as:

GPs are forced to choose between their conscience and their income in a way no high-minded politician or public servant has to do.

There are comments such as:

I have it on good assurance that many GPs are so distressed by developments that they are looking at leaving the profession, or altering their workloads.

Recently, we have seen comments by Dr Walter Abhayaratna, a doctor who has been working in Canberra’s public hospital system for 30 years. He said:

The Barr government’s decision to impose a new payroll tax on GPs is the latest assault on a primary care sector already on its knees.

Ultimately it will worsen the GP shortage in Canberra, make GP care less affordable and push more chronically ill patients onto an already stretched public hospital system.

Dr Abhayaratna went on to say:

Unfortunately, all the evidence points to GP access problems getting worse in Canberra, right at the time when chronic disease rates are rising with our ageing population.

He then went on to say:

GPs in the ACT have their hands tied trying to do their best for their patients in a system that has been fragmented by knee-jerk government policies.

“A primary care sector already on its knees”—those are not my words; those are the words of a respected doctor who has worked in Mr Barr’s health system for 30 years, a doctor on the front line of health care who has seen it all.

Just last week we saw the disturbing survey results of 92 Canberra GPs which found that one-quarter would consider closing their practice, nearly half of those surveyed would consider selling up and, most disturbingly, 80 per cent will likely have to increase their fees if they do not receive an exemption from this decision by Mr Barr. The ACT already has the highest average out-of-pocket costs compared to other jurisdictions, and this will make things even worse at a time when many Canberrans are facing a cost-of-living crisis and when organisations such as ACTCOSS are reporting seeing people accessing help when they have never had to access help before. Mr Barr is going to make them pay more to access essential health care.

GPs are the bedrock of our health system. They play a vital role in the health care of every person in the ACT. During the pandemic they were on the front line. They stepped up to support Canberrans when it counted the most, many of them at great cost. They were the first point of contact for many COVID patients and were the ones providing the ongoing care. They had to innovate and adapt to a new way of seeing patients and were called upon by the government to help roll out the vaccine program. What a difference a year or so makes. This is what Mr Barr says about those same GPs—the same people we all relied on when we needed them during the pandemic. When questioned about the concerns raised by local GPs over his decision to impose a tax on them, he accused their lobby groups of seeking to minimise tax and making “wild accusations”. He said that they lacked ambition in relation to bulk-billing and accused them of being in pursuit of profit.

Just yesterday Mr Barr said he was comfortable with the fact that general practice is massively subsidised by taxpayers and scoffed at a potential \$5 increase to fees for patients. I know he does not get it, but for many Canberrans that \$5 increase to see their GP can be the last straw for an already stressed household budget. If you take a family of five, all of a sudden that potential \$5 increase is \$25 for the family just to see their GP. Today we have seen a notice from one GP clinic to their patients advising that, regrettably, they have to increase their consultation fees by \$5 because of the payroll tax imposed by the ACT government. Sadly, I suspect that this is just one of many. We know that, when it comes to essential health care, even if someone could absorb that \$5 increase, what about a family of five? Whilst it is all good for Mr Barr to scoff at his “only” \$5 increase, it is nothing to sneeze at for a Canberra family already struggling with the cost of living.

This is what Mr Barr, our Chief Minister, really thinks of our local GPs, the front line of primary care, the people who went above and beyond during the pandemic, often at great personal risk, and the people he relied on to roll out the critical vaccination program. This is what he really thinks of them, and this is what Mr Barr, our Chief Minister, really thinks of Canberrans who are going through a cost-of-living crisis—that

they should not have the hide to be concerned about his claimed only \$5 increase to see their doctor. They are the Canberrans who will struggle the most with any increase in the cost of living, let alone essential health care. This is what the Chief Minister thinks.

If that were not bad enough, Mr Barr has issued a threat to all GPs that they would be given only a two-year amnesty on one condition: that they bulk-bill 65 per cent of patients. In issuing this threat, he has blatantly ignored the warnings from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Australian Medical Association—national and ACT—the GP Alliance, the Primary Care Business Council, the Australian Patients Association, and countless GPs that this target is unrealistic and unachievable.

He has ignored pleas from practice owners who have explained that the 65 per cent bulk-billing target is impossible and that already the margins for practice owners are so small that any additional expense will cause clinics to increase their fees or consider closing their doors. As one local practice manager said:

Imagine if you were a practice owner and woke up one Saturday to find out your business was not viable, and the government had essentially tried to blackmail you into becoming a bulk-billing centre to get votes. They should know full well that bulk-billing is not viable in Canberra. They invested millions into the National Health Co-op and they still went bankrupt.

What Mr Barr is demanding of Canberra's GPs is utterly and completely out of touch with the brutal reality of running a general practice here in the nation's capital. The RACGP has told us so; the AMA, national and ACT, have told us so; the GP Alliance has told us so; the Primary Care Business Council has told us so; the Australian Patients Association has told us so; countless GPs and GP practice managers have told us so; and concerned Canberrans have told us so. So why is it that Mr Barr continues to ignore and refuse to listen to these dire warnings?

This decision by Mr Barr will not only have a significant impact on the ability of Canberrans to access essential health care through their GPs; it will also have serious flow-on impacts for our already stretched public health system. Dr Abhayaratna, in relation to Mr Barr's decision to impose this GP payroll tax, said:

Ultimately it will worsen the GP shortage in Canberra, make GP care less affordable and push more chronically ill patients onto an already stretched public hospital system.

We have heard time and again in this place that Canberra has the worst emergency wait times in the country. We have people waiting years on elective surgery wait lists. We have doctors and nurses leaving, and the ACT has one of the lowest number of GPs per capita in the country. This decision by Mr Barr and his Labor-Greens colleagues will make it even harder for existing GP clinics to keep their doors open.

In his comments to the *Canberra Times*, Dr Abhayaratna raised a significant concern about the impact of this decision by Mr Barr and what it will do to GP numbers in Canberra. He said:

Unfortunately, all the evidence points to GP access problems getting worse in Canberra, right at the time when chronic disease rates are rising with our ageing

population. Older GPs retire and are not replaced, and GP training places remain empty.

In question time yesterday and today Mr Barr admitted he is not listening to the concerns raised by Dr Abhayaratna or local GPs, not listening to practice owners or practice managers and staff, and certainly not listening to the people of Canberra, who are very concerned about this tax and who will suffer the most from this decision. Instead, Mr Barr has taken his advice from public policy experts who he says understand the primary healthcare system—not the local doctor who has been working in Canberra’s health system for 30 years and not the local GPs who provide critical health care to every person in the ACT and steered us through the worst of the pandemic. No, he is not listening to those doctors.

I guess this goes some way to explaining why Mr Barr is refusing to back down, is not listening to the local GPs, is not listening to the AMA, is not listening to the RACGP, is not listening to the GP Alliance, is not listening to the Primary Care Business Council, and is not listening to Canberrans. GPs will be forced to either put up their fees—and we know it is already happening—or face closures. If that were to happen, that would have a devastating effect on the Canberra population. I urge Mr Barr to exempt the GPs and bring it back to the status quo. I commend my motion to the Assembly.

**MR BARR** (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism) (4.36): I move the following amendment circulated in my name:

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

“(1) notes:

- (a) recent comments by the Australian Medical Association ACT, RAGCP, local GPs and practice owners regarding a NSW Supreme Court ruling (Thomas and Naaz 2022) confirming that medical centres with a payroll over the threshold set in each State and Territory are liable for payroll tax on relevant contracts;
  - (b) that the NSW Supreme Court upheld a September 2021 NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal decision on the same matter, which was in turn based on a precedent established in Victoria in 2018; and
  - (c) that these decisions have been reflected in identical Revenue Office rulings across a number of jurisdictions;
- (2) reiterates key facts noted by this Assembly in June regarding the ACT and nationally harmonised payroll tax regimes, including that:
- (a) payroll tax is payable by employers on all taxable wages paid to their employees;
  - (b) payments to contractors who provide services to a business under a relevant contract are considered taxable wages under the *Payroll Tax Act 2011*;
  - (c) the ACT has the highest payroll tax threshold of all States and Territories, meaning all businesses operating in the ACT pay no payroll tax when their payroll is under \$2 million, and only pay payroll tax on the quantum over \$2 million;

- (d) there has been no change to ACT legislation regarding the application of the contractor provisions, and for many medical practices (those with a payroll under \$2 million) there will be no financial impact; and
  - (e) some GP clinics are registered and have already been paying payroll tax in the ACT for a long period of time;
- (3) notes that bulk billing rates in the ACT:
- (a) are the lowest in the nation, and currently sit at 56 percent of services, compared with every other jurisdiction and every other primary health network region, which are above 70 percent;
  - (b) have declined over the past few years as the Federal Coalition Government maintained a freeze on Medicare rebates, making bulk-billing practices less viable, after having increased close to 70 percent between 2018 to 2021; and
  - (c) are influenced by a number of factors including, but not limited to, the ACT having the lowest number of GPs per capita compared to any other capital city in Australia, and the relative wealth and income of ACT households on average when compared to other jurisdictions;
- (4) further notes that the ACT Government is supporting medical practices by:
- (a) guaranteeing no retrospective assessment and collection of payroll tax debts that would otherwise be payable under the existing policy settings that have been confirmed through successive Tribunal and Court decisions;
  - (b) providing a two-year moratorium on payment of payroll tax on relevant GP contracts for medical centres where at least 65 percent of eligible services are bulk billed; and
  - (c) ensuring the ACT Revenue Commissioner and Office are available for individual GP and representative association meetings to discuss specific corporate structures and arrangements, so that any tax liability can be accurately understood;
- (5) additionally notes that the Federal Labor Government's 2023-2024 Budget:
- (a) triples the bulk billing incentive for most common consultations with children under 16, pensioners and other Commonwealth concession card holders, better supporting GPs to bulk bill around 157,000 eligible people at the 105 practices already providing bulk billing in the ACT, commencing on 1 November 2023; and
  - (b) significantly reduces costs for general patients by up to \$180 a year if their medicine is able to be prescribed for 60 days; and
- (6) calls on the ACT Government to:
- (a) continue to engage with GPs, practice owners and representative associations on the application of payroll tax liability to medical centres operating in the ACT that engage GPs through relevant contracts and exceed the \$2 million threshold; and
  - (b) before 30 May 2024, update the Assembly, using the most up-to-date quarterly data available, on the rate of bulk billing in the ACT.”.

The amendment that I move states the issues that have already been extensively canvassed, reflects the government response to the previous Assembly motion of May

and highlights the facts of the matter. I particularly draw the Assembly's attention to the first section of my amendment, to the history of this matter. In the second section of my amendment are the key facts noted by the Assembly in June regarding the ACT and nationally harmonised payroll tax regimes, including particularly that there has been no change in ACT legislation regarding the application of contractor provisions. For many medical practices, those with a payroll under \$2 million, there is no financial impact at all. The important point is that some GP clinics are registered and have already been paying payroll tax in the ACT for a long time.

I note there is a particular discussion in relation to bulk-billing rates. In the ACT, they are the lowest in the nation and they currently sit at 56 per cent of services. The ambition to get from 56 per cent to 65 per cent is not that big a leap. There is some suggestion that we were at five per cent or at zero. We were at 56 per cent. Every other jurisdiction, every other local health network, is above 70 per cent, so we are not even asking to get to where the rest of Australia is but to just lift it from 56 per cent to 65 per cent. We have done it before. This is the point that is most frustrating. We were at nearly 70 per cent between 2018 and 2021. So it can be done.

It is an aspiration worth pursuing, and it goes directly to the point that Ms Lee made around cost. If you are bulk-billed, it costs zero, so that is an aspiration worth fighting for. That is why we support the tripling of the bulk-billing rebate. That is why we encourage primary healthcare reform. To look at the particulars of what the ACT government has done that other jurisdictions have not, we have guaranteed no retrospective assessment and collection of payroll tax debts that would otherwise have been payable, and we are offering a further two-year moratorium on the payment of payroll tax by relevant GP contracts and medical centres where at least 65 per cent of eligible services are bulk-billed.

We are currently achieving 65 per cent for under 16s and seniors without tripling the rebate, so it is possible. It is entirely possible and is part of a suite of further reforms. That is where point (5) of my amendment goes to: the tripling of the incentive for most common consultations for children under the age of 16—the family of five that you talk about, Ms Lee—pensioners and other commonwealth concession card holders to support GPs to bulk-bill the around 157,000 eligible people at 105 practices already providing bulk-billing in the ACT. That kicks in on 1 November this year. I also note that some of the further reforms will save patients up to \$180 a year if their medicine is able to be prescribed for 60 days.

There are, through the reforms, through the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce and through the national cabinet reforms, opportunities to significantly improve primary health care. That is the public policy debate that is being had. That is what is occurring in discussions between every state and territory government and the commonwealth right now. These are the reforms that are being announced and delivered and are going through the federal parliament right now. These are important. I touched on them in the government response that we tabled a couple of weeks ago. Through national cabinet, there has been an agreed approach to strengthen Medicare and to deliver the highest priority investments in primary care. The measures are in line with the recommendations of the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce and build the foundations to fundamental reform of primary health care in Australia.

What this means is a change in the way primary health care is delivered, to support health practitioners to work to their full scope of practice. The commonwealth and territory government are undertaking a scope of practice review that examines barriers and incentives for all professionals to work to their full scope of practice. I am sure the health minister will touch further on this. The commonwealth has provided additional funding for after-hours service and to improve collaboration across primary care providers. There is also the establishment of MyMedicare to support patients registered with their general practice and care team through new blended payment models. This is fundamental, Ms Lee, to the change that is occurring, away from fee for service. The entire funding model changes, and this is fundamental to the reforms that will be implemented.

The commonwealth government will increase funding for multidisciplinary team-based care through increases in workforce incentive programs, through practice streams and through primary health networks to commission multidisciplinary care teams. Higher quality care and better health outcomes—a change in the funding model. There is tripling of the bulk-billing incentive. What we are looking to achieve, in partnership with the commonwealth, is increased access to free health care. There is nothing new in this issue. It has been rattling around the federation for five or six years.

It suits the political purpose of the Leader of the Opposition to say it is my tax. It is not. Payroll tax is levied in every state and territory. It is an important source of revenue for every government. The decisions that are being taken are consistent across the federation. It is not the responsibility of state and territory governments to remove taxation in order to solve a funding issue that was caused by the previous federal Liberal government. If we were to do this, we would have to accede to the demands of every other group that says, “I do not want to pay payroll tax anymore because it means the cost of my good or service is harder.” We have already had the pharmacists come out, and there will be others. One of the difficult jobs of being the Treasurer is that you have to say, “No, I cannot accede to you not paying any tax. That is not reasonable.” All of us contribute through our taxes to a better society, and we cannot accede to campaigns like this.

This has been a campaign that has had a lot of misinformation. I particularly note, having been told that it would be a \$15 to \$20 increase, that the increases have been \$2 and \$5. There was never a basis for that claim. The \$20 figure and the \$15 figure were put out on a fundamental misunderstanding of how the payroll tax system works. It was never possible, for the amount of tax that is required to be paid and with a \$2 million tax-free threshold, to ever get to that level. If it were done, the ACCC, under Australian Consumer Law, would have to step in, because there is no justification for an increase of that quantum.

There is every reason to support the basis that we could move from 56 per cent to 65 per cent with the tripling of the incentive. We have achieved it before. We can achieve it again. Through the other systemic reforms to primary health care, we can deliver more and better care at a lower price. That is what we are working towards through national cabinet. I commend my amendment to the Assembly.

**MR DAVIS** (Brindabella) (4.46): I rise to speak to Ms Lee’s motion on the notice paper, and the amendments from the Chief Minister, which the ACT Greens will support. The Greens take the provision of health care extremely seriously. We want



everybody in this city to be able to see a doctor or qualified healthcare professional suitable to their ailment where they need to, when they need to.

We are in a cost-of-living crisis that is manifesting as an inequality crisis, and those living on the margins are doing it toughest. This means that our most vulnerable people—those who may need to access and seek out health care more frequently—are suffering disproportionately. We recognise that general practitioners are fundamental to the health and vitality of their communities and that all GPs in this city work hard to put their patients first.

The issue of payroll tax application to general practitioners and their clinics did not arise from the ACT government or the ACT's independent revenue commissioner. The claims that this tax belongs to one person, one political party or one government are deceitful and unreasonable. Tribunal determinations—specifically the 2022 New South Wales Supreme Court ruling which confirmed that relevant contracts in medical centres are liable for payroll tax—brought this issue to the fore across the country. Precedent was also established in Victoria, with a similar case for optometrists. Payroll tax laws have not been changed. Revenue commissioners across the country use these cases to ensure that payroll tax is being applied appropriately.

I empathise with all general practitioners, all clinic owners and specifically all patients who have experienced the distress and anxiety caused not just by this situation but by the hyperbole, rhetoric and scaremongering being perpetrated for political gain by many—those who seek to win votes, and those who seek to reduce their tax. Our office, however, has consulted with stakeholders extensively on this issue—general practitioners and patients, in particular. I have spoken with the Australian Medical Association and the Australian College of General Practitioners at length. I have met with them multiple times, and I have discussed this issue in detail.

More than a decade ago, the Council of Australian Governments made a clear commitment to harmonise the implementation of payroll tax across Australian jurisdictions. Other states have made similar commitments for the application to payroll tax. While the amnesties provided in other states for GP payroll tax liability, mean that there are short-term inconsistencies in tax law implementation—and I believe that that is regrettable—these amnesties are temporary. The amnesties in the ACT will only apply to clinics that bulk-bill a majority of their patients—65 per cent. After those grace periods, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia will all apply payroll tax to general practitioner payments.

We are opposed to the retrospective application of payroll tax on GPs, and we are pleased that, unlike Victoria, in the ACT the Treasurer will not be pursuing this. Additionally, the ACT has the highest payroll tax-free threshold in the country, at \$2 million. Therefore, it is important to underline in bold print that payroll tax is only paid on wages above that threshold. Just consider how big a business needs to be for its payroll tax liability to be causing such distress to their patients when it is only for the income that they have made over \$2 million. I also understand that some clinics have already been paying their payroll tax liabilities, as have many other allied health and medical professionals, many of whom have contacted my office concerned about what this may mean for their businesses. They feel that they have been paying their tax liability fairly and on time.

I want everyone to be able to see a doctor when they need to. I acknowledge the variety of reasons that bulk-billing rates are, unfortunately, lower in the ACT than in other jurisdictions. We must address that. I understand the Treasurer's ambition for this policy to address that. As we have discussed at length this week, we are a very wealthy city, but a huge proportion of our community—I would argue that it is a growing proportion of our community—is struggling to meet the cost of living, and, in particular, to see a doctor. I will ensure that we do not forget about those people in this debate.

The ACT government, working in partnership with the federal government and other subnational governments across the country, of both political persuasions, have been working hard to undo the damage caused by the former federal government's freeze on the Medicare rebate, but there is clearly still more work to do. The ACT Greens would be pleased to see the recently increased bulk-billing incentive applied to all eligible patients, not just to children, healthcare card holders and pensioners. I implore both our government and the federal government to continue working to increase the number of GPs practising in our jurisdiction and to support them to increase the rates of bulk-billing. In particular, I welcome the amended motion's calls for the ACT government to continue engaging with GPs, practice owners and the key stakeholders on payroll tax liability for GPs in the ACT.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH** (Kurrajong—Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Families and Community Services and Minister for Health) (4.51): I support the Treasurer's amendments to Ms Lee's motion. I want to start by acknowledging the vital work of general practitioners in the ACT. I speak with GPs who provide high quality care for patients who have increasingly complex care needs and co-morbid conditions, including mental health challenges.

Many GPs tell me they do bulk-bill their patients who need it most—people who are on low incomes, people who have chronic and complex health conditions, pensioners and children, or long-term patients who do not meet the criteria for the bulk-billing incentive but who they want to keep treating to ensure that they get continuity of care. The ACT government has made ongoing investments to boost bulk-billing and improve access to primary care for the most vulnerable Canberrans. These efforts saw the GP non-referred attendance bulk-billing rate in the ACT increase from 61.9 per cent in 2016-17 to 69.1 per cent in 2020-21.

But other GPs tell me why they cannot bulk-bill more patients: because the value of the Medicare rebate has fallen so much in real terms over the decade of neglect; because the kinds of complex care they provide are not appropriately recognised in the MBS fee schedule—or indeed, they are not really appropriately supported by a fee-for-service model at all, as the Chief Minister has touched on; and because they spend a lot of time navigating an increasingly complex health system.

There are things we can do to help here, particularly on the last issue. We can work together with GPs to improve the engagement between them and Canberra Health Services. I look forward to discussing this with GPs at our regular GP forum tomorrow evening. I have already received some ideas from the GPs I have been talking to recently—like expanding the availability of the GP liaison units at our hospitals and looking at what we can do to improve access to community nursing and ease of referral. I want their ideas and I will be there to listen.

Over the past decade we have invested more than \$12 million in incentives to support the GP workforce, including implementing programs to increase the GP-to-population ratio, encourage bulk-billing, expand the GP workforce, develop primary care infrastructure, and, indeed, support social workers in general practice. We have demonstrated our willingness to listen and to act.

More recently, the ACT government has been working with the commonwealth to co-design a primary care pilot to test innovative models of care that reduce pressure on hospital emergency departments. The primary care pilot will invest \$7.74 million over two years for the ACT to support the delivery of the pilot, with options including supporting patient navigation of urgent and primary care services, and enabling accessible primary care options to support patients in avoiding potentially preventable hospitalisations. This will include real, concrete steps to support GPs to provide care, particularly for those complex patients they tell me they really want to be able to support with comprehensive, coordinated patient-centred care.

I recognise that for many GPs the commentary about payroll tax has been distressing, and I am genuinely sorry that this has been the case. But, as the Chief Minister noted, there has been no change to ACT policy regarding payroll tax. It is important that these conversations are based on facts, not assertions about new taxes and \$20 fee increases.

On 7 September the ACT Revenue Office released a detailed circular that is harmonised across jurisdictions. It also provided information on its website about the amnesty for medical practices with contracted general practitioners. Their harmonised ruling states:

This revenue circular has been issued to provide guidance to medical centre businesses and reflects the position of the ACT Revenue Office. The circular should not be interpreted as a change in position or interpretation.

This point is not only made by state and territory revenue offices; an update from Hall and Wilcox lawyers, dated 22 August 2023, commenting on the harmonised rulings issued in Victoria and New South Wales, said:

The Ruling isn't groundbreaking. As the Ruling itself says, it reflects the 'longstanding' views of the Revenue Authorities as to how the relevant contractual provisions apply. It restates the positions first discussed in both *Thomas and Naaz* and *Optical Superstore*. Before the Ruling, there was some uncertainty as to how the Revenue Authorities would seek to apply these decisions. However, we had already started to see payroll tax investigations being launched into medical practice clients. In fact, we suspect that if it had not been for COVID-19, we would have seen much more activity from the Revenue Authorities as a result of these decisions.

The AMA Victoria, in an article dated 16 August 2023, stated:

The potential liability is not new. Victorian Payroll Tax legislation has not changed in this respect since 2009. What has changed is that since 2018 the SRO has turned its attention to independent contractor arrangements with health service providers, and in late 2019 succeeded in a case involving a large optometrical services provider in the Victorian Court of Appeal ...

As has been widely reported in the medical media, the New South Wales Civil and Administrative Tribunal applied the Optical Superstores precedent in *Thomas and Naaz Pty Ltd v Chief Commissioner of State Revenue* where it was held that the practice owners owed almost \$800,000 in retrospective payroll tax.

The New South Wales commissioner had originally issued the assessment notices to Thomas and Naaz in April 2018, and the tribunal decision upholding these assessments was issued on 3 September 2021. As far back as 25 November 2021, the AMA New South Wales posted a feature stating:

Since last year AMA (NSW) has been actively encouraging members to seek professional advice regarding their arrangements and potential payroll tax liability following the Optical Superstore decisions in Victoria. The recent NSW Civil & Administrative Tribunal decision in *Thomas and Naaz Pty Ltd v Chief Commissioner of State Revenue* has again highlighted the potential issue for medical practices engaging medical practitioners under independent contractor arrangements.

We do not know what the ACT AMA has been advising its members during this period, as much of the information on its website is only available to members who can log in. However, one of the practice owners I have spoken to in the last couple of weeks confirmed that their accountant had been all over this for some years, and that the practice had been planning, preparing and budgeting in case the ACT Revenue Office came knocking to look at their arrangements. In this context, I note that when I met with the RACGP recently, they were very clear that their biggest concern was a retrospective application of payroll tax to practices that had not been planning for it. They are not advocating for a complete exemption from payroll tax, but, rather, as stated on the RACGP website:

The RACGP is seeking a commitment from all state and territory governments to not impose retrospective payroll tax on contractor GPs and to implement a grace period so that practices can prepare for any changes as required.

Unlike the Victorian and New South Wales governments, as noted in the Chief Minister's amendment, the ACT government has provided a guarantee that there will be no respective assessment and collection of payroll tax debts that would otherwise be payable under the existing policy settings that have been confirmed through successive tribunal and court decisions. This is because we understand that practices have been at different points in understanding the implications of the Victorian and New South Wales tribunal and court decisions that have been made since late 2019. We appreciate the importance of certainty for general practices about historical liabilities. While some other jurisdictions have called to provide a temporary amnesty, the ACT government has provided confirmation that we will completely waive tax liabilities on relevant GP contracts that would otherwise be approved to 30 June 2023.

We also know that, after more than a decade of neglect of Medicare by the federal Liberal government, practices have been doing it tough—particularly those that have been trying to maintain bulk-billing for children and the more vulnerable and lower income patients. The ACT's rate of bulk-billing has dropped to its lowest in years—lower than every other jurisdiction and every other primary health network. That is why the ACT government will implement an exemption on payroll tax liabilities for healthcare businesses that bulk-bill at least 65 per cent of non-referred GP attendances,

which will be assessed from 1 January 2024. This measure is focused on supporting the clinics that are majority bulk-billing to allow them to continue to do so, and takes into account the fact that the bulk-billing incentive triples from 1 November this year and that the financial year has already started.

In my recent meetings with GPs, they have asked me why bulk-billing is so important to me and the Labor government. It is because we know that, more than the national average, Canberrans are delaying or avoiding seeking care because they cannot afford it, and because we know that primary care plays an incredibly important role in our health system. We also know that others in this place care about it, as well. Indeed, Mrs Kikkert had an interesting conversation with the director of the Academic Unit of General Practice in the ACT Health Directorate, Professor Kirsty Douglas, in a recent hearing, which Mrs Kikkert commenced by saying:

With the cost of living rising, a lot of families that I know of are not going to their GPs because bulk-billing is non-existent for many families in their local area.

After a short exchange, Mrs Kikkert said:

It is available. It is just very difficult for a lot of families to access it. In Charnwood there is only one doctor that does bulk-billing, and her waitlist means that an appointment is months away.

To which Professor Douglas responded:

I acknowledge that that is the very commonly held belief. But the MBS data shows us that over 65 per cent of all consultations in the ACT are bulk-billed. GPs do not advertise that they bulk-bill because it makes their situation very financially challenging. But consistently we have seen that the bulk-billing rate is about 65 per cent. If you look at children under the age of 15, it goes up to about 75 per cent. If you look at a further subgroup of people who need chronic disease management plans, people who have chronic disease, then it is close to 90 per cent.

*(Extension of time granted.)* Professor Douglas's data was a bit out of date, and we have seen the ACT bulk-billing rate plummet over the last couple of years, but as I noted earlier, in 2020-21, largely pre-COVID, the overall rate in the ACT was 69 per cent.

As members know, funding for general practice is not the primary responsibility of state and territory governments. It is the policy and funding responsibility of the commonwealth. In real terms, the Medicare rebate freeze has significantly reduced the support GPs receive from the commonwealth over time, let alone the previous government's deliberate decision to reduce the bulk-billing incentive available in the ACT—something I raised repeatedly with Minister Hunt.

The fact that the ACT has fewer GPs per capita than in other jurisdictions is also a factor when it comes to primary care access. I have been advocating with the commonwealth on all of these issues, and I will continue to do so, in addition to working collaboratively with them on initiatives like the primary care pilot and the response to the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce.

As the Chief Minister has noted, the commonwealth budget announced an investment of \$3.5 billion over five years to make it easier and cheaper to see a doctor. The

bulk-billing incentive will be triple for consultations with children under the age of 16, pensioners and other commonwealth concession card holders. This includes face-to-face, telehealth and videoconference consultations. This increase to the bulk-billing incentive will support GPs who bulk-bill anyone in the around 157,000 eligible people at the 105 practices that are already providing bulk-billing in the ACT.

In a time when chronic disease and multiple complex diseases in one person are on the rise, I know that GPs provide critical services that cannot be replaced. I am committed to working with general practice to examine sustainable and equitable ways that we can support GPs, going forward. The Canberra Liberals' proposal to completely and permanently exempt GP contracts from payroll tax will do nothing to address the fundamental challenges faced by primary care. It goes well beyond what any other jurisdiction is doing and even what the RACGP has asked for. It is a knee-jerk response to an issue that is not actually new to the RACGP and the AMA, which have indeed run a campaign of misinformation on this matter. The ACT government will continue working with general practice to address their actual challenges and to build a more integrated, patient-centred health system for Canberrans. I commend the Treasurer's amendment.

**MS CASTLEY** (Yerrabi) (5.04): Such is the arrogance of this Labor-Greens government that it thinks it knows more than Canberra's general practices do about the impact of the imposition of payroll tax on their own businesses. Ms Lee has spoken about the recent survey by the AMA of 92 Canberra general practices, in response to the government's imposition of payroll tax. She talked about the quarter of practices that would consider closing, the half that would consider selling and the 80 per cent that are likely to increase their fees. The survey also showed that only six per cent will be able to increase their bulk-billing rate to 65 per cent.

The survey showed that 80 per cent of practices believe that the new tax will adversely affect the training of GP registrars, and 65 per cent believe that the training of medical students would also be adversely affected. The AMA concluded that patients will see an increase—in the range of \$10 to \$15—for private billings as this new tax is passed through. Given these results, why will this government not listen to the overwhelming majority of Canberra's GP clinics and now dump its payroll tax before it wreaks havoc on primary care in Canberra?

You would think that a prudent government—a government concerned about access to GP services, one of its wellbeing indicators—would heed this advice from an overwhelming majority of Canberra's general practices. Perhaps the Chief Minister is relying on his shamefully out-of-date wellbeing indicator and believes the November 2019 data, indicating that around 5.5 per cent of people in the ACT found it hard to access a GP service. An updated survey released in 2022 showed that in December 2020, 10.7 per cent of Canberrans were finding it hard to access a GP.

The government's wellbeing dashboard still has not been updated, despite the Chief Minister telling me months ago that the wellbeing team in CMTEDD were working on it. I can assure him that the situation has gone downhill since 2019. Nowadays, if you can afford to see a GP, you are struggling to find one that can take on new patients. Recently, one patient contacted half a dozen practices before finding one that would see him. Along the way he encountered several recorded messages saying that

those practices were not seeing new patients; one even said that he should contact local parliamentarians about the problem.

Cleanbill's report into the health of the nation has laid out the significant challenges the ACT faces in primary care. The report showed that in the ACT only 5.5 per cent of GPs bulk-bill—the lowest percentage in the nation. Two out of three of the ACT's federal electorates rank in the top five of the most expensive electorates in which to see a GP in the country. The average out-of-pocket cost to see a GP who does not bulk-bill is \$49.11 for a standard 15-minute consultation: the highest out-of-pocket cost in the nation. The national average is \$39.75.

I suppose if you are on \$400,000 a year, you do not have to worry about the cost of seeing a doctor, but this is not the situation most Canberrans find themselves in. The ACT had the lowest number of GPs per capita of any jurisdiction between 2015 and 2019, and the latest figures have the ACT as the second-lowest jurisdiction, with around 21 GPs below the national average per 100,000 people. In these circumstances, this government thinks it is responsible to impose payroll tax on the income of general practitioners. Back in April the ACT health minister told ABC Radio Canberra, "This is not particularly an area that we see as an area of significant concern." How out of touch!

Lately, we have heard the Chief Minister taking swipe after swipe at doctors and their representative organisations. He sees this as an opportunity for some social engineering. Our Chief Minister is offering a two-year amnesty for clinics which bulk-bill 65 per cent of patients. This illustrates his profound lack of understanding of general practice. Medical practices in the ACT already operate on very slim margins, typically making only five to 10 per cent profit on their business revenue. The Chief Minister repeatedly said that there were fewer than 10 GP practices within the ACT that were above the \$2 million tax-free threshold for payroll tax. In reality, there are 10 practices in the ACT that pay payroll tax currently. These businesses already pay payroll tax on their wage bills for administrative staff, nurses and other allied health professionals, so if the 6.85 per cent payroll tax is also levied on those clinics' payments to GPs the payroll tax bill of these 10 practices will rise significantly. These practices see over 60 per cent of Canberrans. Then there are practices which currently do not pay payroll tax, which, when the payments to GPs are caught in the net, will be pushed above the \$2 million threshold. This could impact at least half the remaining medical practices.

I have said before that the Chief Minister's crude attempt at social engineering, at coercing medical practices to lift their bulk-billing rate to 65 per cent or else pay the payroll tax, is both nonsensical and counterproductive. Firstly, a practice cannot control whether a GP bulk-bills particular patients; secondly, were a large practice to take up the government's proposal, the reduction in its practice facility fees as a result of lifting its rate of bulk-billing to 65 per cent would be at least double its saving on the payroll tax. Indeed, the proposal of a two-year exemption from payroll tax in return for lifting bulk-billing rates to 65 per cent, like something you would see in a command economy, will have a perverse economic effect. It will perversely force practices to reduce bulk-billing rates and hike consultation fees.

This extension of payroll tax, this sick tax, will actually be a patient tax, which will reduce the rate of bulk-billing in the ACT. The Chief Minister should heed our doctors. RACGP President Dr Nicole Higgins has said:

What's also clear is that the ACT government doesn't understand how bulk billing works. Their exemption from the new patient tax for practices that bulk bill 65 per cent of patients is flawed. It's almost certain to fail at its first test with very few practices able to take it up and remain viable. If this happens, it will be devastating for the patients and communities that lose their GPs.

Clearly, the proposed limited payroll tax exemption is a recipe for disaster, but listen to these recent comments from local GPs, practice owners and practice staff. One said:

The ACT government's new tax is a tax on patients. GPs will have no choice but to raise their fees.

Another says:

The ACT government's decision to impose additional payroll tax on GPs has left many worrying how they will keep their doors open. There are 10 practices currently paying it, but the majority of practices will be paying it if GP payments are included in the figures that make us liable for payroll tax.

Another says:

I urge Mr Barr to meet with practice managers and owners like me in order for him to understand that his figure of 65 per cent bulk-billing is not achievable for my practice. If mandated to do this, our practice will most likely close down.

Another says:

Many GPs are so distressed by developments that they are looking at leaving the profession or altering their workloads.

Another says:

It will be absolutely devastating for the community if one of their local practices are forced to close and GPs leave town.

Another:

While GPs are strongly committed to ensuring equitable access to healthcare, the introduction of a new tax for general practices will inevitably limit their ability to provide healthcare services at a reduced cost through bulk-billing. This means that some people are unable to see their GP because they cannot be bulk billed.

Another:

Thousands of ACT patients will be affected by the new tax. In meeting after meeting, GPs have been telling the ACT government exactly this.

Finally:

The idea from Mr Barr that GPs lack motivation to do anything, let alone bulk-bill, is absolutely outrageous. The amount of extra labour we do at no cost to the patient or the—



**Mr Barr:** I have a point of order. I have just been grievously misrepresented by Ms Castley. I never said the words that she has just suggested I have, and I ask that she withdraw them.

**MS CASTLEY:** I am quoting from some of the GPs that have reported in the public arena.

**Mr Barr:** You were characterising that I had said that people lacked motivation. I never said that.

**Mr Hanson:** On the point of order, this is a debating point. Ms Castley is simply quoting from what others have said. It is a debating point; it is not a misrepresentation.

**Mr Barr:** Was that a direct quote from someone? That was from you.

**MS CASTLEY:** No, Chief Minister, this is—

**Mr Barr:** No, it was not a quote. You were not quoting at that point.

**Mr Hanson:** Madam Speaker, you cannot have a situation on a point of order where Mr Barr gets up and makes rulings and interjects across the chamber. Ms Castley is on the floor debating—

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I do not need your assistance.

**Mr Hanson:** If it is a point of order it needs to be dealt with, not with an ongoing debate across the floor.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I do not need your assistance. Mr Barr, if you were misrepresented, I am going to give you the opportunity to seek a withdrawal. I was unclear whether she was quoting a GP. If you bear with me, Chief Minister, I will review the *Hansard* and, if I need to, I will come back tomorrow and seek her withdrawal. Please continue.

**MS CASTLEY:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. (*Extension of time granted.*) I have been going through various quotes from people who have commented in the public arena. This is the final one:

The idea from Mr Barr that GPs lack motivation to do anything, let alone bulk-bill, is absolutely outrageous. The amount of extra labour we do at no cost to the patient or the state and federal government should be condemned. Mr Barr's rhetoric is ill-intentioned, ill-judged and continues to damage morale.

Has the Chief Minister any political antennae on this issue? Today we learned, as we have all spoken about, that two GP clinics have had no choice but to raise their prices and are calling this a patient tax. And this is just the start.

**Mr Hanson:** That was a quote.

**Mr Barr:** Quoting someone else misinterpreting something I said.

**MS CASTLEY:** Madam Speaker, I listened in silence. Can I ask that you direct—

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Your colleague is chatting across the table, as well. Members at the central table—Mr Barr, Mr Hanson—your colleague is seeking silence.

**MS CASTLEY:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. According to the health minister, there is nothing more to see here. She told ABC Radio this morning—and, to be clear, this is a quote:

I'm pretty confident that some of those bigger practices actually knew this was coming. They've probably planned for it; they've probably budgeted for it. I've certainly spoken to one practice owner who said, "Yeah, we've been planning for this for the last couple of years. We're ready for it."

She is "pretty confident"! She has spoken to one practice owner. Well, good luck with that, because the AMA have surveyed 92 general practices. Yesterday the Chief Minister said:

None of the states and territories are indicating that they are going to exempt a certain section of taxpayers from payroll tax.

Again, he is wrong. The Western Australian government is not altering the way it applies payroll tax to general practice. In a letter to Western Australia RACGP chair Dr Ramya Raman, Western Australian Deputy Premier and Treasurer Rita Saffioti confirmed the Western Australian government's approach, saying that most GPs working with independent agreements are considered contractors running an independent business.

The New South Wales, South Australian and Queensland state governments have granted temporary amnesties on the application of the new approach. The New South Wales government has announced it will pause the tax for the next 12 months. The South Australian government has provided an amnesty until 30 June 2024, and the Queensland government will provide an amnesty until 30 June 2025. This will give both states the opportunity to assess the disastrous impact of this patient tax in the ACT before they lock it in.

The point is that, again, the Chief Minister is not listening. He is not watching what is happening elsewhere and he is not caring for Canberrans. I implore the Chief Minister and the health minister to listen to local GPs, practice owners, practice staff and GP groups and to exempt general practice from your patient tax. I commend Ms Lee's motion.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, by way of information—but I will come back to it tomorrow—if I look to the *Companion to the Standing Orders*, at 11.85 it says that it is not in order to use quotations as a vehicle to employ unparliamentary language. I will go back to the context. Be very mindful of all of that. It is at 11.85, Mr Hanson; you are very familiar with the *Companion*.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH** (Kurrajong—Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Families and Community Services and Minister for Health) (5.18): I table the following paper:

NSW Government moves to pause payroll tax audits for GPs for 12 months—  
Media release—NSW Minister for Finance, dated 24 August 2023.

This is the media release from the New South Wales government which clarifies that it is moving to pause payroll tax audits for GPs for 12 months. It specifically states that there will be a 12-month pause on tax penalties and interest accrued on outstanding payroll tax debts incurred before and at the commencement of the 12-month period.

**MRS KIKKERT** (Ginninderra) (5.19): I thank Ms Lee for bringing this important matter before the Assembly today. I rise to join Ms Lee and my Canberra Liberals colleagues in calling on the ACT government to listen to local GPs and general practice owners regarding this government's decision to impose a new payroll tax on them. This request should not be necessary.

ACT Labor and the Greens repeatedly tell people that they want to listen and that genuine consultation is important to them. Then along comes an opportunity to impose a new tax and seize some additional revenue from a group of essential workers whom they cannot control, and the mask drops. This clearly happened yesterday in question time, when Chief Minister Barr was asked whom he was listening to when he admitted that he is not listening to general practitioners. He said that he is listening to policy experts. What policy are Mr Barr's hand-picked experts pushing? Again, the Chief Minister was clear. The goal is "reform of the primary healthcare system" and specifically "a move away from fee-based remuneration for doctors".

So now we have our explanation. ACT Labor and the Greens have no interest in listening to trusted local GPs because, as revealed yesterday, their goal is to break the back of this territory's existing primary healthcare system. Canberrans who value their current GPs have been warned. Their trusted family doctors are in this government's crosshairs. If Mr Barr and his accomplices make it harder and more expensive for sick people to access primary health care, well, that is just the eggs they are happy to crack to cook this toxic omelette.

Since ACT Labor and the Greens have zero intention of ever listening to GPs, I have. I recently met with one who lives in my electorate. I asked her to walk me through the situation at the general practice where she works. She happily did so. In reference to Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith on my questioning the health department during one of our inquiries: yes, she is right that there are fewer bulk-billing doctors out there and there are fewer of them in my local neighbourhood. I highlighted that as a fact to her that that they were not familiar with.

However, after speaking to GPs it is quite clear to me why there are fewer bulk-billing doctors out there. It is just not really sustainable for them to function, and eventually they leave. Now I understand why, having spoken with this local GP who understands clearly what is happening. In summary, she and her fellow doctors each pay \$35 from each consult to keep their practice running. These payments are just enough to cover reception, nurses, admin staff, billing, IT equipment and support, insurance for the practice, maintenance costs, heating, cooling, medical supplies and this territory's high rates.

The Medicare rebate, if a GP bulk-bills, is currently \$41.20 for a standard 15-minute consult. Completing four consults per hour while still paying out \$35 per consult would leave a doctor earning just \$24.80 per hour. Of course, that is before one calculates a GP's personal expenses. As private contractors, they are required to make their own payments into superannuation. They also have no paid annual or personal leave. In addition, they are required to pay for their own indemnity insurance. The GP to whom I listened explained that the cost of her insurance had recently tripled, to \$1,000 per month. Adding together all of these personal costs, and others that I have not listed, leaves a bulk-billing GP in this territory earning less than the minimum wage. I do not think the government understand that. They really do not know how the bulk-billing works.

Any reasonable Canberran understands that this is not possible, if the goal is to make primary health care sustainable. I share this information for their benefit. I understand that those opposite are not interested in facts and figures. Again, their goal is not to make the existing primary health system sustainable. With zero hope that ACT Labor and the Greens are willing to listen to me any more than they are willing to listen to primary healthcare workers, I commend this motion to the Assembly.

**MR COCKS** (Murrumbidgee) (5.25): General practice is pretty important to our healthcare system. That is probably a bit of an understatement; 87 per cent of Australians visit a general practitioner at least once a year. What is more, the average number of times Australians visit a general practitioner in a year is six. General practitioners are, essentially, the heart of the Medicare system as we know it. If you listen to the Chief Minister at the moment, he is not really interested in general practice. They are just another interest group that he can tax. That is the type of rhetoric that we have been hearing.

We need to understand just how big the impact of this change is—and it is a change. It may not be a change in law, but it is a change in the application of the law. To understand the impact of that change, we only have to look at what we could see in my electorate and, in particular, in Weston Creek. I have been meeting with general practices, as have my colleagues on this side of the chamber, and what I have heard is that just one practice in my electorate can serve around 10,000 people. That practice is not convinced that it can survive this. If that practice goes, that is 10,000 people in Weston Creek alone who lose their GP!

That could be the thin end of the wedge, because we know that general practice has been under stress for quite some time and that smaller practices that would not be subject to this tax have been struggling to survive. What has happened in the past is that a larger practice has taken them over. If this stands, it is entirely possible—and this has been put to me by practice owners—that those larger practices will no longer be in a position to rescue the small practice down the road. It is a real thing. It is a genuine risk in our community. This is going to impact patients. It is going to impact general practice.

We have problems with bulk-billing; that is clear. That is absolutely clear. The Chief Minister and the health minister like to hark back to that golden age when we achieved 65 per cent bulk-billing. It is a straw man. They look at that period as being some golden era when we achieved this amazing rate of 65 per cent, far below

anywhere else in the country. Yes, it was before COVID predominantly. However, it was also during a period when we had a thing called the National Health Co-op operating in Canberra. That was a significant organisation which provided massive amounts of bulk-billing. That was an organisation which went out of business in 2021 because it could not afford to keep operating in Canberra. The costs in Canberra of operating that model of general practice, which was dedicated to bulk-billing, were too high. The deficits it was accruing in trying to sustain that business model here in Canberra were too high. But that is the period that this government refers to.

The Chief Minister loves to talk big on primary healthcare reform. I spent 20 years in the federal Department of Health. I spent a lot of time around primary care reform. It goes back a whole lot longer than the five or six years that the Chief Minister is talking about. The types of reform he is talking about date back to the 1997 trials which were undertaken. This idea to reduce fee for service has been attempted multiple times and there have been problems every time. That is not a reason to stop trying, but you have got to get that right before you start undermining the current business model of general practice.

There are many different approaches to primary care reform. The Chief Minister, when he was asked today which specific experts he is listening to, pointed to the Grattan Institute. I have read many of the Grattan Institute's reports. I had looked at this one, *A new Medicare*—which is their most recent report—before. I read it right through, but I thought I would go back and have a look at it today. Nowhere does it advocate for anything which would increase the costs for general practice. In fact, it does point out that there is a problem, in that the payments under Medicare are often too low to cover reasonable costs or the funding rules require excessive GP involvement. Yet what this government will do is increase the cost to deliver the same services.

The Chief Minister is right. It is not his responsibility to give special treatment to any group, but it is his choice. He has the power. He can decide that the ACT should compete above every other jurisdiction. We should come first. We should cut the costs for general practice. We should be bringing them here. We need to cut the cost of general practice and make it an attractive place to deliver GP services. Right now, the message that this Chief Minister, this health minister and this government are sending to GPs is that they do not want them. I am afraid the community does. I want to see general practice stay here. I want them to be viable. I am very happy to support Ms Lee's motion, which helps make that happen.

**MS LEE** (Kurrajong—Leader of the Opposition) (5.32): I thank all members for their contributions to this debate. There is no doubt that it is of importance to the community, and it has caught the attention of many, many doctors who are very concerned about this issue.

It interesting that Ms Stephen-Smith says all the right words: “I want to work with the GPs,” and “I want to work together.” Why should we be surprised? After all, the health minister is very well known for saying all the right words, but when it actually comes to action, we know that she fails. There were no surprises from a minister who oversees disaster after disaster and constantly blames everyone else for the failings. The deflection is business as usual for every single minister in this government.

Mr Barr was classic, as well, in his contribution to this debate: “Hey, hey! It’s not me. It is not us. It is not the ACT. We have not changed the law. We have not done anything.” They are always good at the deflection and the lack of responsibility, but here is the rub: Mr Barr very well knows that by not changing the law, by not explicitly exempting the GPs on a contract, GPs will be—and are—paying this payroll tax. It is all good to say the words, “No, no; it is not me. It is not my fault, and it is not my problem.” As Mr Cocks said, he does have a choice. He has made that very, very clear the whole time that we have been discussing this, and again today in this debate.

It is interesting that Mr Barr likes to say that there has been a lot of misinformation in this debate and likes to throw around accusations about what the RACGP, the AMA, the GP Alliance, the Patients Association, the Primary Care Business Council and so many countless GPs have said. There are also the facts that he has not talked about or considered—and it is the same with Mr Davis. They like to spruik that the ACT has the highest threshold for payroll tax, in the \$2 million mark, totally ignoring the fact that the ACT also has the highest average wage of all the jurisdictions and that, once you do hit that threshold, we have the highest rate of tax when it comes to the payroll. A few factors are missing when they spruik that it is a \$2 million threshold and that there are going to be not many people who are affected. The fact is that there will be tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Canberrans who will be impacted by this.

Mr Barr also conveniently ignores the fact that it costs more in the nation’s capital to run a business. This is something that GPs have been telling us. It is convenient, isn’t it? Mr Barr continues to throw the blame at the previous Liberal-Nationals government in relation to Medicare funding, but how does that explain that the ACT has the highest out-of-pocket costs and the lowest rate of bulk-billing? Did the federal Liberal-Nationals government freeze the Medicare rebate for the ACT alone? You cannot have it both ways. You cannot, on the one hand, say that it is the fault of the former federal Liberal-Nationals government and then say that the ACT needs to pick up its game because we are coming last. You cannot have it both ways.

Talk about throwing “wild accusations” around. On the one hand, Mr Barr is accusing the doctors of making wild accusations. In the same week, we see Mr Barr talk about what is next: “Are the GPs going to try to exempt themselves from income tax? Are they going to try to exempt themselves from rates?” Who is throwing wild accusations around now? Let us not forget that in the last sitting period we heard Mr Barr say that the existence of the doctors’ representative groups is to minimise tax for their members. Let us not forget that he accused them on being in pursuit of profit.

These are doctors. These are Canberrans and Australians who have worked extremely hard to get a qualification, who have undertaken years and years of training. Through COVID they stood on the front line a lot of the time, at great personal risk to themselves and their families. They stood up and provided the essential health care that all Australians needed. These are the doctors who have done that. These are the doctors that apparently, according to Mr Barr, are trying to minimise tax in the pursuit of profit, and who are throwing around wild accusations about the way their practices run. These are those very same doctors. It is disrespectful and deeply offensive to our doctors.

I look at Mr Barr’s amendment. The Canberra Liberals will not be supporting this amendment. This amendment is a personal insult to all our hardworking GPs. It does nothing to address the significant concerns that have been raised by our doctors. Instead, it continues to chastise and criticise our GPs for their—and I will make sure I quote it correctly—“lack of ambition” when it comes to bulk-billing. Make no mistake, as one practice manager has said, this is blackmail of GPs. When you have a look at the “calls on”—paragraph 6 of Mr Barr’s amendment—this reeks of a threat to GPs and a way to continue to criticise them and keep tabs on what they do, despite the fact that they have told Mr Barr time and again, very clearly, that what he has demanded of them is not achievable and is not realistic.

This is not something that will address the significant concerns that have been raised by GPs. The Canberra Liberals will not support this amendment. It is a personal insult to every GP in the ACT. The tax will lead to higher fees. We saw that today from the Garema Place Surgery. It has already told its patients that it is being forced to increase fees because of this tax. The Canberra Liberals will abolish this tax. If Mr Barr and his Labor-Greens colleagues genuinely care about the viability and long-term sustainability of general practice in the nation’s capital then they must support my motion.

Question put:

That the amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 15

Noes 8

Mr Barr	Ms Orr
Ms Berry	Dr Paterson
Mr Braddock	Mr Pettersson
Ms Burch	Mr Rattenbury
Ms Cheyne	Mr Steel
Ms Clay	Ms Stephen-Smith
Mr Davis	Ms Vassarotti
Mr Gentleman	

Mr Cain
Ms Castley
Mr Cocks
Mrs Kikkert
Ms Lawder
Ms Lee
Mr Milligan
Mr Parton

Amendment agreed to.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

## **Appropriation Bill 2023-2024**

### **Detail stage**

Schedule 1—Appropriations—Proposed expenditure.

ACT Executive—Part 1.17.

Debate resumed.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Office of the Work Health and Safety Commissioner—Part 1.18.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Icon Water Limited—Part 1.19.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

ACT Gambling and Racing Commission—Part 1.20.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Public Trustee and Guardian—Part 1.21.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Independent Competition and Regulatory Commission—Part 1.22.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Total Appropriated to Territory Entities.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Treasurer's Advance—Part 1.23.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Capital Works Reserve—Part 1.24.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Total appropriations.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Clauses 1 to 10, by leave, taken together and agreed to.

Title.

**MR BARR** (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism) (5.48): I thank members for their contributions to the budget debate. This budget is delivering more essential services for Canberra's growing population. It is working to address cost-of-living pressures, builds some more houses, improves community wellbeing and supports economic growth to create more jobs.

As we have all agreed, our city is growing rapidly and we need to invest in the health, housing and transport infrastructure necessary to keep Canberra a great place to live



as it continues to grow. This budget contains important measures that support the economy and local business. But we recognise that community wellbeing goes beyond just economic indicators. Our focus on wellbeing shapes our policy development, investments for proposals and evaluation of impacts. By adopting a comprehensive wellbeing perspective in the budget, we are optimising spending to deliver better outcomes and to ensure long-term sustainability.

This budget reflects the priorities and aspirations of our growing community. It builds hospitals, health facilities and schools that our community needs. It hires more hardworking health professionals to keep Canberrans well and treat them in an emergency. It hires more teachers and funds wage increases to make them among the best-paid in the country.

This is the final opportunity to speak on the bill before it is put to a vote, so I thank members for their contributions to the budget debate. I particularly thank my ministerial colleagues for their contributions through the debate, but, in fact, principally for their engagement in the hundreds of meetings throughout the budget process. This process involves hundreds, if not thousands, of very difficult decisions, often with competing priorities.

I note the importance of this responsibility resting with the executive government. We are accountable, under the Australian Capital Territory (Self-Government) Act, and are the only ones able to bring appropriation matters before the Assembly. We do so through proper budgeting processes that ensure that all decisions weigh up all the factors and priorities, and we make decisions with the benefit of expert public service advice. There is a significant amount of work involved in the Expenditure Review Committee and the cabinet to help make these decisions, and so I am certain that I speak on behalf of all my ministerial colleagues in thanking the Treasury officials in particular. We may not always agree with what the Treasury recommends—and there would be a few colleagues who will have a wry smile at this point!—but we thank them for the frank and fearless advice they provide. We also thank officials from across the entire ACT public service for the work undertaken to support ministers.

From the Treasury, I specifically acknowledge and thank the Under Treasurer, Stuart Hocking; the Deputy Under Treasurer, Russ Campbell; and the Executive Group Manager Finance and Budget Group, Scott Austin. And I thank DLO Kylie Beer for her hard work. I also want to thank my office, the entire team that works very hard throughout the process, but particular acknowledgment goes to the small but very able Treasury team of Faheem Khan and Britt Atkins. They put in many long hours to coordinate the process and to advise me as Treasurer through the development of the budget.

I commend the title and the budget to the Assembly.

Title agreed to.

Question put:

That this bill be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 15

Noes 8

Mr Barr	Ms Orr
Ms Berry	Dr Paterson
Mr Braddock	Mr Pettersson
Ms Burch	Mr Rattenbury
Ms Cheyne	Mr Steel
Ms Clay	Ms Stephen-Smith
Mr Davis	Ms Vassarotti
Mr Gentleman	

Mr Cain
Ms Castley
Mr Cocks
Mr Hanson
Mrs Kikkert
Ms Lawder
Mr Milligan
Mr Parton

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Bill agreed to.

## **Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2023-2024**

Debate resumed from 27 June 2023, on motion by **Mr Barr**:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

**MR BARR** (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism) (5.56), in reply: I commend the bill to the Assembly.

Bill agreed to in principle.

Leave granted to dispense with the detail stage.

Bill agreed to.

## **Leave of absence**

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

That leave of absence be granted to Ms Davidson (Minister for Disability) for this sitting due to personal reasons.

## **Adjournment**

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

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

## **Health—chronic pain**

**MRS KIKKERT** (Ginninderra) (5.57): I invite you to close your eyes and imagine when you were in pain from an injury. Now imagine what life would be like if this

pain is constantly reoccurring. Imagine living with this pain that is always with you, day and night, during your good times and your bad times. This is what I was asked to imagine early this morning when I visited the front lawns of Parliament House with my colleague Leanne Castley and joined dozens of people in bringing awareness of women who live with chronic pain in Australia. The event was hosted by Painaustralia. I would like to especially acknowledge my friend and former colleague Giulia Jones, who is now CEO of Painaustralia, for all the effort she and her team put in to make this morning's event possible.

Painaustralia is the national peak body for pain and is working to improve the quality of life of people living with pain, as well as supporting their families and carers, and is more broadly working to minimise the social and economic burden of pain in Australia. Did you know that the most common person in Australia living with chronic pain is a woman in the peak of her working years, and that a staggering 1.8 million women live with chronic pain, yet only one out of every 100 people living with chronic pain receive multidisciplinary care?

This morning, we heard from a couple of brave women who stood up and shared their pain story with us, not so that we could feel sorry for them but so that we could be part of working to see that no woman—or any other person for that matter—would have to go through what they did, and still do.

Painaustralia asks of the federal government just three things: 10 allied health visits subsidised per year and 10 psychology appointments per year via doubling of funding for GP management plans; for GP Practices to have access to pain care nurses as a flexible online option to get treatment plans actioned; and new training for GPs and pharmacy staff in chronic pain multidisciplinary management. A cost-benefit analysis has been undertaken for these three policies, coming to a total of a \$70 million investment but saving \$3.7 million in the health system in net intervention costs, \$65 million in reduced absenteeism and \$203 million in improved wellbeing. The benefit-to-cost ratio has been calculated as 2.9 to one for this investment.

What a difference to our healthcare system this would make, particularly for women in Australia. The women who spoke this morning shared their valuable insights on what their lives would be like if they had access to the supports that they are now advocating for so passionately. It would have made all the difference. I would like to invite everyone to go online and visit [walkmypain.com.au](http://walkmypain.com.au) where you can join the campaign, donate to the cause and, if you have one, share your pain story.

It is time that women and the chronic pain they often silently live with becomes visible and acknowledged; it is time it is no longer ignored by the health system that is supposed to support them.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

**The Assembly adjourned at 6.01 pm.**