



Debates

WEEKLY HANSARD

Legislative Assembly for the ACT

SIXTH ASSEMBLY

23 AUGUST 2006

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Wednesday, 23 August 2006

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

Schools—closures

Debate resumed from 16 August, on motion by **Mrs Dunne**:

That the ACT Government extend the consultation and decision period on school closures until the end of March 2007, and further that no school closures occur before December 2007.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (10.32): At an early morning rally outside the Labor Party conference some weeks ago, a sort of a titter went through the crowd when people suddenly got excited. The word was “Don’t leave—there’s an announcement coming”. The announcement that came was that a motion had apparently just been passed by one of the factions calling on the government to listen to the community and extend the consultation period and that no further school closures should occur before December 2007. For those of us who were there the relief was palpable. People were excited. People suddenly thought the government was going to listen. People suddenly thought that there was an opportunity for real consultation to take place and that there was an opportunity they might be heard. Later in the day, when the vote occurred and it was very close, people were genuinely disappointed that the process was going to exclude them.

A number of people said to me that they are sick of the hypocrisy of politicians who say and do one thing in one venue and then say and do one thing in another venue. They look us in the eye and say they are on our side, go to school breakfasts and meetings and express their dismay at the consultation period, but when push comes to shove they give in and just roll over. This morning may be an opportunity for a number of members of this place who have been going to various forums to honour the commitments or the words they have been saying at primary schools, at preschools, at some high schools and at colleges across the territory.

The community is waiting. The community is listening. The community wants to know where people stand. It is not enough for members to say to the community they are really concerned about the consultation process but when they finally get an opportunity to put that into a vote in the Assembly, to go on the record, to stand up for local schools and their community, they take a different view. The community has very high expectations of members in this place. It is that hypocrisy, different views at different venues, that really angers people. The community will be looking very strongly at those members from the Labor Party, including you, Mr Speaker, and Ms Gallagher, Mr Corbell, Mr Gentleman and Ms MacDonald, who voted for these words just a couple of weeks ago, who said this is the right thing to do.

Since then we have had all this obfuscation and shifting sands. For instance, Mr Corbell urged us last week to have guts and commitment. Mr Corbell should have the guts to stand up to his faction, have the guts to tell them if he does not agree with them and vote

against them on the floor of his convention. He should not tell us to have guts and commitment when he does not have it in this place. He should have commitment and support his cabinet. He should not say on one occasion he is only doing this because his faction made him do it and at another venue say he did not believe it in the first place. Those sorts of actions drag all of us down and drag this place down. People do not understand when they hear him say one thing in one venue and then he votes 180 degrees differently in another venue. That annoys the public.

Mr Corbell said he is a private citizen and can go to functions and do whatever he wants. That is not what the code of conduct says. The code of conduct says every day you are a Minister you are accountable for every decision you make. There are no part-time ministers. I would love to see that duty statement. Maybe it is true. Maybe we do have a nine to five Labor cabinet and for the rest of the time they can do whatever they want. That is how it appears to people outside. So, let us see the guts and commitment today from the people who voted for these words a couple of Saturday's ago. Let us see them vote for it again and say to the community that we do have politicians in this place who mean what they say in one venue and are willing to back it up in another venue. Mr Corbell said he was there as a private citizen, but he was at the front bench with MLAs and MPs and senators, all with their name plates. It was reserved for them. They were up the front, the leading lights of the Labor Party. Mr Corbell was not there as a private member; he was there as the minister. He was there because of his position. He should vote as he voted on the day or he should walk away from cabinet.

I have the tapes of the Saturday and Sunday night news—and there is Mr Gentleman. It is just fantastic. When the vote is called all the other hands go straight up, but not Mick. Mick looks over his shoulder—it is half up, half down, and slowly the arm comes back up. Who is he voting for? Is he voting for his faction? Is he voting for his government or is he voting for his community? The person who has been missing in action most has been Mr Gentleman. I do not think we have seen Mr Gentleman at too many of these school meetings.

We should give Ms MacDonald credit where credit is due. At least she has come to the meetings, stood in front of people and told them where she is at, but today is crunch time for Ms MacDonald. She has been to Chisholm and to Kambah and to Gilmore for breakfast and said she is unhappy with the consultation. Prove it. Today is crunch time for Karin MacDonald because I will be taking the transcripts and the votes and saying to people they cannot believe what they are told until they vote for it. Here are the votes.

People genuinely believe there has not been consultation or adequate time frames, but there is also the fact that it ends the week before Christmas—after schools have finished, after teacher allocations have been made, when childcare centres are shutting down and when the before and after school care is not in operation. Christmas will be ruined by Jon Stanhope and Andrew Barr when they announce these things just days before Christmas—when people cannot make alternative arrangements, when they have to start hunting for different schools, and talk to family day carers and before and after school care, when most of them are on holidays. The whole Christmas break and January will be agony as they explain to their children their schools are closed because five members who voted for these words a couple of weekends ago may or may not vote for them today. People will hold those members accountable and people will remember.

It is important because the community is angry. Last week we tabled a petition from Gilmore primary school and the Clerk read it, but I do not think the statistics have been put on the record. It was suggested to Gilmore primary school that it needed to ask its community what the community wanted by door knocking every house in the suburb of Gilmore and in the priority enrolment area. It did. It door knocked 95 per cent of that area. To get a poll of what the public thinks about this, somebody should read the petition from Gilmore primary school. In that area are 1,439 houses. The number of households not at home or not door knocked was 288. In the priority enrolment area 1,151 households were asked. Out of the 1,151, 60 households, less than 5 per cent, did not sign or would not sign. The percentage of households supporting not to close the school was 94.79 per cent and the percentage of total petitioners in the priority area that were asked were 94.3 per cent. So the public does not want their schools to close. They want more time to arrange their affairs should the government go ahead with this folly. That comes down to the vote on this issue sometime today. I urge all members who voted for these words at the ALP conference to vote for them again today.

MRS BURKE (Molonglo) (10.40): Today I speak out on behalf of some 1,327 students with a disability attending mainstream schools in the ACT. While that may not be a big number, as I think I said in this place yesterday, it has a very significant impact on far more people in our community than children who are not affected with a disability attending mainstream schools. As we know, and have heard many times, 39 schools have been placed on a hit list to close. Many people will know too that 10 of those schools have particularly special relevance. Why? Because 10 of those schools house special needs units for children with a disability. Much has been written—and I have pages and pages of data—and lobby groups have come forward to speak. I refer, first of all, to an article by Elizabeth Bellamy in the *Canberra Times*. She says:

Schools closed as part of the ACT Government's rationalisation plan may remain open for up to a term to accommodate students with disabilities, the ACT Department of Education said yesterday.

It is quite clear, as I said in this same article, that the government had not thought through the plan from go to whoa. There is no logical start or finish. Were students with a disability and their families and carers consulted well before these announcements? Let us not kid ourselves. This did not pop up overnight in this term of this government. The decision to close 39 schools would have been thought about, I would suggest, years ago—maybe in the first term of the Stanhope government. Mr Barr is shaking his head.

Mr Barr: I think it goes back to about 1990.

MRS BURKE: Back to 1990? Well, not to this grand scale, Mr Barr, with you the minister in charge. My colleague Mr Smyth said quite eloquently how members stand up at these public meetings saying it is a bad thing. How hypocritical! They run with the hares and hunt with the hounds so that you can look good at meetings. When it comes to the crunch, will they stand up for children with a disability in this city? Are they going to assist, and not just after the event, which is what happened here? At the meetings I was at the parents with students with a disability were aghast. Nobody had told them what was happening prior to many of them reading it in the *Canberra Times*.

Yesterday I read out a letter from one such parent indicative of this government's and the minister's failure to properly bring on board people in the consultation process. Nowhere did these parents say to me that I have it totally wrong and that the government and the minister are right and they were consulted. Absolutely nobody has said they were consulted properly in a timely way, and an expeditiously carried out action by the minister did not occur. These parents have been left in total chaos—absolute chaos.

The article refers to me saying that the government had not thought its plan through to its logical conclusion. The government is now doing policy on the run. Amalgamation of Alfred Deakin high school and Woden school is being suggested. Mr Thorn, who represents Client Guardian Forum, says the government has proposed the amalgamation of Alfred Deakin high school and the Woden school, but it will no doubt impact upon Woden school. According to Newton's third law of relativity, if one does one thing over here, something will happen on the other side of that equation, and it will not all be positive. Some might be. But the minister has not thought this plan through at all. He and his department have been sadly lacking in making sure that students with a disability and their parents have been well catered for.

Does the minister know what it is like to have a child with autism? Has he any idea of the disruption he does to that child when he moves them from one room to another, let alone from one school to another? He may smile. I am serious about this. He cannot sit there and smile, because his plan seeks to move and disrupt. He may be nodding his head as well, but clearly he has not thought about this. Children with disabilities are more likely to be enrolled in non-government schools.

Mr Barr: In government schools, do you mean?

MRS BURKE: Sorry, in government schools. Thank you for your correction. He knows about that, clearly, because he has just corrected me, but the disappointing thing for me is that he seems to have not done the homework first. Parents are saying they are absolutely tired. Parents have already done their homework choosing a school, and they do not want to do that again. Some say, this is a good one but they will have to give up their jobs. Is that good? I do not think so. I could go on and on. The minister knows these facts, but I have to make it clear in this place today that members on the government side, who stood at public meetings and at their local conference to say they thought this was not a good idea, are now backing away at a million miles an hour.

It is an absolute disgrace that they can say it in one forum and then not in another. I ask: who are they doing this job for—the people they represent or their party factions and the people who support them and give them money to stand as members of parliament in this place? It really is so hypocritical. I have said that children are left in limbo, and that is the sad fact of this. I do not believe the education minister has said much more than “Oh well, children can just stay another term in the school. That will fix it”. Where is the plan, minister? You have not talked to me about the plan.

Mr Barr: There is an individual plan for each student.

MRS BURKE: You are probably going to tell me at Christmastime, probably just before Christmas. There is already a plan did I hear you say? Table it. Let us see the plan. You table that plan and I will sit down.

Mr Barr: There are individual plans for individual students, Mrs Burke, and they are private between the department and the students.

MRS BURKE: I see. So selective information is now being handed out to selected people, but you are not going to tell the broader community. That is an outright ridiculous statement by the Minister for Education and Training, that he cannot consult. I will not get on his case if he tells me there is a plan. Show me the plan and I will sit down.

Mr Barr: It is an individual plan for each student.

MRS BURKE: You can have your say. If 1,327 students have been catered for, I do not need to be standing here battling, demanding, lobbying—whatever you want—for these parent and students. What we do not have here is a clear plan. Students are left in limbo, up in the air. They do not know what they are doing, what the future holds for them. As late as yesterday I read a letter from one of the parents who does not know what to do or where to go. The plan the minister is choosing—the path he is choosing to go down is simply illogical, ill thought out, ill conceived. I know that Mr Barr has put his political career on this. I have heard him say this many times at many forums but let us take a closer look. Is he going to stand by that or at the end of the day will he say, “It was not me, I will not close schools”? He may say that, but the planning minister, sitting next to him, may have a different plan and Mr Barr will be overridden in cabinet. What is the education minister going to do and when is he going to table, properly in this place, his accurate plan of what is going to happen? He is going to tell us all now that it is going to be before Christmas. Is that what I go back and tell parents of students with a disability?

Mr Barr: That is the requirement under the Education Act, Mrs Burke, yes.

MRS BURKE: A requirement, that is good—“I am restrained by the program, by the guidelines”.

Mr Barr: You are asking us to extend it, Mrs Burke, so be a little consistent in your argument, if that is at all possible.

MRS BURKE: We have heard it all before. The minister needs to be very clear with these parents about what his plan is for the future.

Mr Barr: Do you want it shorter or longer, Mrs Burke?

MRS BURKE: I am not talking over the minister. He needs to be very clear and make the statement before 10 December, 2 December, or late December—whenever he is going to do it—to these parents.

Mr Barr: I have already done that, Mrs Burke.

MRS BURKE: If you have already done it, why am I still getting pleas from the heart? I know I get shot down in this place for speaking like it is, but I do not care about that. I really do not care. If people vote for me again in 2008, they will. If they will not, they will not. I can live with that. Can members on that side, Mr Speaker included, live with

themselves, having voted this way at a forum and now in the Assembly, because our factions do not approve, we are going to vote the other way? It is deplorable. Let us take a hard look at it. I appeal to you now: do not go with the bigger decision of closure like we are going to go ahead with it. Let us start all over again. Let us make sure that those people with a disability know exactly what your plan is, minister.

MR SPEAKER: The member's time has expired.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (10.50): I thought that I would have to fight with the backbenchers of the Labor Party for the opportunity to speak, because, as we all know, they have become very important people. An awful lot of people in their electorates are looking to them to do what they elected them for—to represent them. So I expect after I have finished speaking they will be vying to speak. It is quite cowardly to sit there in silence. I know it is safer, but I am waiting to hear them speak.

We are talking about this issue in the Assembly, a place of politics. Yet this issue is going to affect the lives of so many children and families. Mrs Burke spoke from the heart. She said so many things that parents have said to me. Parents of children with a disability, with autism, are particularly affected by this. It is really awful to hear members on the other side laugh. They may not have been laughing at them but they were laughing and Mrs Burke was speaking from her heart. How can people have faith in consultation when members do not even listen to other members in this house? How can people be sure they will listen to them?

My fear is that backbenchers may have already been silenced by being told—by the strongest voices, perhaps—that key schools they are worried about in their electorates are not going to be closed. Politics works like this. That is my fear and if that is the case, it makes this consultation a sham and we need to go back for more. Of course, people are talking to me, but I am only one person. I cannot save their schools. I am doing my very best. I wish I had the balance of power so we could have some proper negotiation on this issue. Constituents, of course, talk to each other when things matter to them, so they know what politicians are saying. I was sent an email that Karin MacDonald's office sent. It says:

Karin is under the opinion that it would have been easier for schools proposed with closure and the surrounding communities if the consultation period had have run from later this year to early next year.

Is that not what my bill and this motion say? Then it says:

That said, Karin will not be supporting Dr Foskey's Bill to delay school closures. She will however continue to work closely with the communities affected by proposed school closures and fight for schools and preschools in her electorate that should remain open.

Which are the schools that should remain open? On what criteria can Mrs MacDonald decide which schools should remain open? We know that we do not have the full information before us but possibly backbenchers have a way of getting information that others do not. Let us go back to the education 2010 proposal. It was more realistic to have a plan for 2010. Again, the minister is not listening, and this is a minister who consults and hears.

There had already been consultations about the 2010 proposal when a letter was written in April in which the department was seeking to engage the community in educational debate on issues under the banner of education 2010. The questions and suggestions were about the role of emerging technologies and contemporary teaching and learning, and were looking for a strategic goal to shape and lead education and training. That discussion is exactly what we need. We do not need this one, where schools have been put under the hammer. They have already been told what is going to happen and now we have a so-called consultation.

What is next? The Government Schools Education Council is the government's own body. If it does not consult and listen its own advisory body, what hope do school communities have? These experts, which I am sure the government had a lot to do with choosing, were so concerned about this budget that they wrote a letter to the minister in which they said:

Not only has the advice of Council seemingly been disregarded on almost all issues but some of the budget proposals will also clearly exacerbate inequity in the ACT, restrict access to higher performance, and affect the quality of educational provision.

Not only did the council experts express alarm at the extent and impact of the school closures proposed, but also at the extent of head office cuts and their effect at a time when schools will need so much more support, and the extent of the reductions proposed to the teaching force. They say explicitly that this will work negatively against the aims of the Canberra social plan. I already addressed that extensively yesterday. At the moment this beautiful thing, this social plan, which was more or less a compact between the community sector, communities and the government, looks hollow.

Given enrolment numbers is one of the key categories by which schools are being judged, whatever the rationale for making such a big, across-the-board change by announcing in June that schools might close at the end of the year, the whole notion of genuine consultation is becoming irrelevant. It is only consultation to the extent that it involves talking. Minister Barr's answer to his first question in the Assembly is shown to be either disingenuous or deluded, because the decision to close those schools has already been made and put into effect.

The Chief Minister loves to name individuals and suggests that his actions are justified by statements they have made. In rewriting the history of consultation provisions of the Education Act, Mr Stanhope has misrepresented everyone involved. It is not a new approach, but it is unethical. A brief example came up again yesterday—the Chief Minister is nothing but predictable—when the Greens raised the issue of greenhouse targets in the Assembly in 2004. Mr Stanhope repeatedly named one of his officers, who had previously worked for Kerrie Tucker, and used back-of-the-envelope figures that person had arrived at that in discussion with his manager as supposed evidence they were on the wrong track. He has never apologised for that unfair and indefensible manipulation of a public servant in his own department. As I said, he mentioned it again yesterday.

In this case the Chief Minister has taken great pleasure in loudly proclaiming that the sham consultation being pursued with Canberra schools is what Mr Morgan, from the

P&C council, wanted. In the lead-up to its election in 2001 the Stanhope Labor Party explicitly supported the P&C's proposal for an 18-month consultation period. Eighteen months was chosen because it allows time for real consultation with the school community without undermining the present enrolments. The initial Education Bill, when presented by Minister Gallagher in 2003, had no specific consultation timeline, and only required that school communities be adequately consulted. At the same time the guidelines for closing or amalgamating the schools that were in place under the previous government, were withdrawn.

Finally, following intense negotiation between the government, crossbench, P&C and other interest groups, a six-month time frame was put into the legislation. That decision was accompanied by comments from government representatives at those meetings that there was no need to specify a time, because it would probably take much longer to do it properly—which is, of course, what the government would do. The six months' statutory consultation period we now have was simply the outcome of some fairly complex negotiations that were considered acceptable by the parties if more comprehensive guidelines around closure or amalgamation were subsequently developed.

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

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (11.01): I speak in support of my colleague's motion. I am amazed to have been afforded that opportunity on this occasion by various Labor members—Mr Gentleman and Ms MacDonald, in particular—who have been strident on this issue when in the clutches of factional politics but profoundly silent on this motion. Indeed, I hoped, Mr Speaker, that you may have given us the benefit of your views on this matter. I know you hold passionately the importance of education in your electorate, and would understand the critical role we play here in protecting the interests of those who elect us, rather than be bound by policies possibly dictated from the top. Whilst this debate is moving towards a finish, and the opportunities are reducing, I still would love to hear what government members have to say in relation to this motion which should be familiar to so many of them.

In addressing the need to extend the consultation and decision period on school closures until the end of March 2007, the government's *Towards 2020* proposal, and the underlying basis for it, must be reconsidered. As a member for the Molonglo electorate, the need to extend the consultation process, and particularly delay the closure of schools until at least December 2007, is particularly evident to me. All of the schools in the Molonglo electorate, indeed the electorate I share with Mr Barr, that have been earmarked for closure—Curtin South preschool, Melrose and Chifley preschools, Rivett primary and preschool, Weston Creek primary and Weston preschool—are scheduled to be closed at the end of this year. Obviously the imminent closure of these schools is the most pressing issue.

Mr Barr: Two of those are not in your electorate, but never mind.

MR MULCAHY: Well, if we want to split hairs about Chifley, okay, it is across the boundary of the electorate. But you will find that a large number of children from Molonglo are in that school, by virtue of the fact that the road is so close to the boundary of the electorate. So we can argue about semantics if you like. I am sure it will mean a lot to the parents to tell them that technically they are on one side or the other of Hindmarsh.

Obviously, the imminent closure of these schools is the most pressing issue. The community is concerned and does not understand because the government has not properly told them why the schools are closing. That comes out of each of the meetings I have attended. People are screaming for more information. They are not happy being told to go to the web site. They do not feel adequate data is there and they have questioned the accuracy of the data.

With that level of concern being expressed by the electorate, I would have thought we would hold the horses a bit and revisit the timetable. Clearly we have an awful problem in communication. Given the way we have handled this, we need to retreat from our first position. There is confusion and concern about the future of special programs within these schools. For example, I have received representations from a constituent about the future of the program that is operated for autistic children at Rivett Primary School. When people affected in this regard take the view that they need to take it up with their elected representatives, you know they are deeply concerned.

In addition to the problems associated with the imminent closure of schools and the uncertainty that this creates, other elements of the government's plan must be scrutinised, and require longer consultation. Not the least of these is the proposed merger of Lyons primary school and Curtin primary school, and the future of programs run in those schools like the bilingual Italian immersion program at Lyons and the learning support program, or the gifted and talented program, at Curtin primary school. I am not sure whether the minister had the opportunity to go to the Lyons open day recently, but a number of members did. Mrs Burke, Mrs Dunne and Mr Seselja were there, and one would understand the tremendous support that parents are giving towards that school and its programs. I understand the minister made commitments to protect the bilingual programs, but there is a high level of apprehension about the full impact of these reforms on those schools. That level of angst needs to be addressed in a conclusive and satisfactory fashion.

There is a feeling in the community that the consultation process has been rushed. The government had failed to properly justify to the community why schools in general, and especially the 39 schools targeted for closure, need to be closed. It would have overcome much of its problems if the infamous Costello report were made public. We would then see the rationale, the validity or otherwise, of the data to see what lead to this dramatic policy direction. I know the government is under pressure. It criticised me for talking to the credit rating agency, Standard & Poors. I also met with Moody's, who had the spotlight on the territory government. Panic was setting in that if the credit rating of the territory was downgraded we would be in awful strife. I understand Mr Costello would have advised the Chief Minister to make radical, unpopular decisions or be permanently damaged in being the only Australian jurisdiction to have a downgraded credit rating. One then asks why did we get into this predicament so far into the term of this government? The answer is obvious. It is because of the government's decisions.

Many sweeping changes are proposed in this territory in a horrible budget but the people of Canberra, who are a well-educated community, are entitled to hear the rationale for many of the decisions. Clearly the education one in the short term is the most serious concern on the minds of many of our electors, and in the longer term the issue of rates and taxes, as it is starting to bite now and starting to hurt the average household, will come under even closer scrutiny.

The consultation decision-making process undertaken by the government has been inadequate. This is the key point to this motion and why my colleague has introduced it into the Assembly—indeed, I assume that is why it was introduced at the recent ALP annual conference. It is being pushed ahead too quickly. We have raised the issue of these decisions being made effectively on Christmas Eve—I think Mr Stefaniak raised it the other day—and it takes no regard of all the factors including children's lives. I am settling arrangements now for my children's education next year. I received a letter yesterday from the school to which my child has been admitted. That is reasonable. We started this process some time back and we know where our youngest child will be educated, hopefully, for the next six years. So to be presenting parents with these options—let us figure your school falls over so you had better make a decision now—is completely insensitive to the problems that were cited, particularly at the meeting in Campbell, where some of the younger people flagged concerns.

The Chief Minister has implied many times that only his government is capable of the courage and conviction required to make the difficult decision to close schools. Indeed, during question time recently he said, "We are prepared to accept the political implications of taking hard, tough decisions". The point is that by seeking to rush a consultation decision-making process, the Chief Minister and the government are trying to make a hard decision easier by minimising consultation and the chance for residents to respond to the shortest time they can. The closure of schools is not easy. We all accept and understand there will often be well-justified opposition within communities to school closures, and I do not say that there can never be a case for a school closure. That is a fact of life.

Mr Corbell: Just not these ones?

MR MULCAHY: It is the way the government has gone about it. I do say not these ones at this time in this manner. Let us look at the whole process because people feel the government has ridden roughshod over their interest and tried to push through this wholesale closure of schools and that is why it is in so much trouble on this issue. That is why so many of the delegates to your conference, the silent knights on the back bench here, knew from their factional colleagues that this was a near and dear issue to many constituents and why they took the position they did. They know in their heart of hearts that what I am saying is correct and it has been handled awfully.

I know the minister was thrown in the deep end here. It reminds me of that series *Yes, Minister*, when James Hacker would do something and Sir Humphrey would say, "A very courageous decision, minister." Minister Barr might be described as being very courageous. I think he has been thrown in the deep end and told like it or lump it. This will see how good he is. He has weathered the storm and presses on regardless. As the Labor Party position was expressed so widely and supported by so many government members, including ministers, we ought to hear from them today. We ought to hear them break their silence on this issue and show whether their allegiance is to supporting cabinet decisions, the factions or the electors who put us into this place.

MR CORBELL (Molonglo—Attorney-General, Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Planning) (11.11): Mr Speaker, the government does not support this motion. I am pleased to be able to make some comments on this issue. The

position we have heard from the Liberal Party in this debate is that they do not actually have a problem with school closures; they just have a problem with these school closures. The question I have to put to the opposition and to those that support this motion today is: when do you support the need to reform our public education system?

At the moment, 30 per cent of our public education system is underutilised, 30 per cent of the capacity is not being used. When do you decide that enough is enough? Is it when it is 40 per cent of the public education system that is not being used? Is it 50 per cent? Is it 60 per cent? When do you believe that schools have to close because the system is grossly underutilised? At the moment, only 70 per cent of our public education system is being utilised. Thirty per cent of it sits empty now. Are you going to wait until it is 40 per cent empty, are you going to wait until it is 50 per cent empty or are you going to wait until it is 60 per cent empty before you start taking some decisions to keep the system viable, to keep it alive and, to do more than keep it alive—to allow it to thrive?

That is the challenge that this government has grasped. We have said that having 30 per cent of it not being used, 30 per cent underutilised, approximately 17,000 to 18,000 places not being used, is not acceptable. That is not acceptable. That is not viable. How can we have a system whereby 30 per cent of it is not used but we continue to fund it, we continue to resource it in terms of infrastructure, we continue to have to maintain it? How do we justify that to taxpayers? How do we justify to taxpayers that we fund infrastructure which is underutilised to the level of 30 per cent of the entire system? That is the issue that has to be addressed in this debate.

Mr Speaker, the argument from those opposite is that the time frame is inadequate. Of course, that is an argument about consultation rather than an argument about the issues. It is always much easier in these debates to focus on the process when you know that it is harder to tackle the issue, which is what you would do. How would you respond to this public policy challenge? It is much easier to focus on the process and say that the consultation was not good enough, that the government has not spoken to certain people or that there are issues with detail around the edges. You focus on the periphery. You do not focus on the substantive issue. We know what the substantive issue is. The substantive issue is that 30 per cent of our system is not utilised, is not used. As I say, when do you say that enough is enough? Is that when it is 40 per cent underutilised or when it is 50 per cent underutilised? That is the issue.

Those opposite and those in favour of this motion focus on process. Let's go to the process issue. The law says what is the consultation period and the law says that it is six months, a minimum of six months. Six months is a significant period. I would put to those opposite that for people who are fundamentally opposed to this decision no period would be long enough. If the government had come out and said that it was a year, the criticism would have been that it needs to be a year and half or two years. At the end of the day, the consultation process will never be good enough for those who are fundamentally opposed to the decision.

We know that there are school communities that want a decision made now. Mr Barr is being told regularly by school communities to give them certainty, tell them what is going to happen. They want to know now. He has to say to them, "I cannot tell you now because the minimum requirement is six months. I cannot tell you until the earliest possible date, which is in December." That time frame was agreed to by all members of

this place. It was agreed to unanimously by all parties represented in this place. That legislation was passed with the support of all members of this place. That minimum time frame of six months was agreed to as the minimum adequate period.

That is the bottom line. We all agreed that was a reasonable period for consultation. You could go further if you wanted, but we all agreed that that was the basic requirement and we all agreed to it in this place, so do not come into this place and say that six months is not good enough when you voted for it. That is what you did. You voted for six months, the Greens voted for six months and the Labor Party voted for six months. We all agreed that six months was an appropriate period for consultation; we all agreed on that. I do not think it is acceptable to prolong such a decision for longer than that period. At a point, we need to make a decision. As a government and as a community, we need to give certainty to everyone involved. People need to know whether schools are going to stay open or will have to close.

Mr Speaker, this is not an easy issue. This is a very difficult issue. But it is a long-term structural issue that the territory simply has to tackle, simply has to address, and this government is prepared to tackle the issue. It is not an easy issue for us, it is not a simple issue for us and it is not an issue that gives us a lot of comfort. No politicians like to put themselves in a position where they are in opposition to a wide variety of voices in the community. No politicians put themselves in that position, unless they feel that it is a decision that is in the best long-term interests of the community. At the end of the day, that is why we are elected. We are not elected to make short-term populist decisions that may or may not allow us to get a leg up at the next election. We are elected as representatives to take the decisions that are in the best long-term interests of our community.

Right now, in this place, there is only one party that is prepared to take those long-term decisions in the best interests of the community, that is, the Australian Labor Party. All the Greens and the Liberals are looking at is short-term political advantage. Is it any wonder that they do not want a school closure to occur until within 12 months of the next ACT election? Is it any wonder that they are interested in putting in place a time frame that allows them to achieve maximum political advantage?

Let's understand what this motion is about. This motion is not about them standing up for people in the community or standing up in favour of school communities. It is about giving them political advantage. It is about allowing them to use it as a political issue at the next election and having a time frame and a closure process in place for a time when they can achieve maximum political advantage. That is what it is about. It is a cynical political position. It is not a position that is in the best long-term interests of the ACT community.

There is only one party in this place that is prepared to take the risks around the political disfavour that inevitably comes with these sorts of decisions because it believes that they are in the long-term interests of the community, that is, the Australian Labor Party. The Chief Minister has said repeatedly that this budget is not a budget that is designed for short-term political gain. It is a budget and it is a decision designed for the long-term benefit of the community, for a sustainable public education system where the resources are directed in a way where most students get the most benefit. That is what elected

representatives should be focused on. That is what they should be thinking about. That is why the government opposes the motion today.

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

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (11.21): Those opposite say that the government backbenchers have been silenced. I am sure that you all understand that I have not been silent or been silenced. Certainly, I have not been silent. I have not been silent on this issue or any other issue. You well know, I am sure, that I have attended all the public meetings that have been held in my electorate and also one that was not held in my electorate. I have attended all separate school meetings that I have been able to attend, or sent staff on my behalf when I have been otherwise engaged in appointments on Assembly business. I have had several meetings with parents and interested individuals in my office, at my frequent mobile office days and in their own homes. Like all of us, I have answered numerous emails from parents and other interested individuals and representatives of various schools and I will be attending another meeting next week. I attended last night's meeting with the joint P&Cs, one unfortunately not attended by all schools that are mentioned in the 2020 proposal.

I will continue to make myself available to all people in my electorate and also people outside of my electorate who want to meet with me, who want to speak with me on the weekends at my frequent mobile office days, who want to come to my office or who want me to come to their home or want to speak to me on the phone or via email because I see that my role is to work with the government and to represent the various views of parents and representatives to the government, to the minister. I have been doing that on frequent occasions, both personally in meetings in his office or by email or letter and by accompanying him to various meetings that he goes to. Not only that, but also by interpreting in the best way I can to people I work with what the government policy is about and why it is necessary to do what is being done, which was put very well by Minister Corbell just now.

I am not unsympathetic to Mrs Burke's angst over children with disabilities. I had a child with a disability in the ACT public system for many years. I know what it feels like to have a child with a disability in the education system. I have been visiting parents with children with disabilities during this period. I spent an hour and a half the other day in the home of a mother and her two children. So I am not unsympathetic to the angst that you feel when some form of change is taking place and you have a child with a disability. I have been through many changes in my life. My child with a disability went to school for some of that period in the Northern Territory under quite extreme conditions; so I am not unsympathetic to that.

But I do represent those views and those matters to the minister. I also know that he is not unsympathetic or not empathic to that. I know that the minister and the department are working hard to work individually with those parents and those families to achieve the best outcome that he can, that the department can and that the parents can. I know that the parent I was with the other day is not getting very angry. She is obviously concerned, but she is working through these things and she is trying to find the best outcome for herself and for her child. She is working with the matters that are before her. If we work with people, which has always been the way that I try to work, I think we can achieve the best outcome for all our children in the public education system in the ACT,

because it is all about our children that we are trying to do so. It is about the quality of education. It is about what we can achieve now and into the future.

Only last night I was discussing with two of the schools in my electorate a meeting that they will be having next week and this morning I was arranging for a departmental representative to be present with me at that meeting so that they can discuss with that representative and me the particular ideas that they have about ways forward. One of the things that have really impressed me about the meetings that I have had with various people is that they are wanting to engage in finding ways forward, what they can actually do to work with the government, because they are now realising that we do have to do something about the declining enrolments in our public education system and our crumbling infrastructure.

Mrs Dunne: Crumbling infrastructure! Give me a break!

MS PORTER: Much of the infrastructure is crumbling, Mrs Dunne. There are some excellent schools, as you know, that are not in such bad shape, but there are some that are in really bad shape. I will continue to work with the government to achieve the best long-term outcome for all children who are in the public education system in the ACT or who may wish to join our public education system, because that is what I see as my role in this place.

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (11.27): Mr Speaker, I will not keep you too long. As you heard earlier, this government will not be supporting this motion. The consultation process is in train. We are supporting that process. I have not heard in this debate any comment from the opposition, or the crossbench for that matter, on how they would improve the education system in the ACT, what they would do, where they would get the money from to improve the infrastructure in Canberra, what they would do with the \$90 million infrastructure spend on education. Do they think that the \$90 million is irrelevant? The school groups do not.

Mr Speaker, I bring you to a meeting I had with the school representative council at Kambah high last Friday. They do not think providing extra expenditure is irrelevant. In fact, they would like to see a new years 7 to 10 campus, perhaps with a CIT, at Kambah. But we still have not heard, as I said, from the opposition or Dr Foskey on where they would like to see education money expended. They have put up a wall against closures and they want to extend the process.

I also want to comment on Dr Foskey's remarks about the minister not listening to her in the chamber. Dr Foskey is not in the chamber at the moment. She is again not in the chamber. She is not in the chamber many times. In fact, she is not even here to move her own motions in the chamber. So I think it is quite hypocritical for her to say that the minister is not listening to her when she is not even here in the chamber to listen to the debate on the process.

The six-month consultation period is an agreed position. As we heard earlier, it is in law. But what did the Liberals have in place? One month. We have seen the press reports from 1990. One month was the consultation period under the Liberals. This consultation period is six months—six months, not one month. We are already seeing, as I have mentioned, parents and students having an input to the consultation process and making

responsible decisions on the future of their education. In closing, I reiterate that I will not be supporting this motion.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (11.30), in reply: I was just waiting. I did not want to close the debate and cut off Ms MacDonald's opportunity to speak in this debate, but she has obviously failed to rise to the occasion. As I said at the outset of this debate, this motion is a challenge to those five Labor members who voted for the exact words on 29 July. Let me remind members of those words:

That the ACT Government extend the consultation and decision period on school closures until the end of March 2007, and further that no school closures occur before December 2007.

This is not some cunning plot by the Liberal Party and the Greens. That was actually a motion of the Labor Party. This is what the Labor Party wanted. When you put it together, as I said before, the seven opposition members and the crossbench member all want it and there were five members opposite who were prepared to go to the Lakeside on 29 July and vote for it. The test today is whether we will get 13 people to vote for this motion. This is the Labor Party's doing. This is the Labor Party's motion and it is crunch time for the five people who voted for this motion on 29 July to put their hand up and vote for it again.

Mr Corbell has proved himself to be an utter mountebank in this debate by coming in here today and speaking contrapuntal to the way that he voted when the motion was debated in the state conference. We know that he is a mountebank because he said, "Look, I really didn't mean it when I voted over there," which was like saying, "It wasn't me. It was 36 faceless men and they made me do it, but I had my fingers crossed." Mr Corbell comes in here and, running a line that I have heard Mr Barr run, says, "This is the minimum for consultation, I cannot do anything less than this and I know that there are people who are asking for an answer now."

The reason that people are looking for an answer now is that if they have to wait until December they will not be able to put their children's lives in order. That is why they are asking for an answer now. The alternative, because you cannot give an answer now as there is a statutory minimum requirement, is to kick the consultation out to a better time, one in which all the planning can be done in a coordinated way and we are not rushing it over the Christmas period and messing it up, as we certainly will. That is why people are asking for a change in the consultation period.

Mr Corbell and Mr Barr have asked what the Liberal opposition would do. The Liberal opposition have made their position very clear. Mr Speaker, I would like to table documents showing the position taken by the Liberal opposition which have had considerable currency. I refer to a joint press release put out by Mr Stefaniak, the Leader of the Opposition, and me on 13 June and a letter written to people on 19 June pointing out our position on this subject. This letter was circulated at public consultation meetings and has gone out to countless people across the ACT. I seek leave to table those documents for the information of the Assembly.

Leave granted.

MRS DUNNE: I table the following papers:

Towards 2020—

Copy of letter to Members of the Legislative Assembly from Mrs Dunne, dated 19 June 2006.

Joint press release by Mr Stefaniak and Mrs Dunne, dated 13 June 2006.

Mr Corbell asked what the Liberal opposition would do. I will tell you, Mr Speaker, what the Liberal opposition would do. We are not going to stand here and say, and no-one has ever stood here and said, that we will not close schools. The Liberal Party has never said that it would never close schools, but I can tell you that we will not sit around for five years saying that there is no problem and then suddenly announce that we have to close 40 schools. We will not close down schools to make up for our inability to control spending and incapacity to live within our means, even in the good times. We will not close down 40 schools to save two per cent of the education budget, especially when they are putting six times that amount into other parts of the education system. We will not close 40 schools after telling you categorically that we will not close any. We will not announce 40 school closures and then pretend that we are consulting after the event.

Mr Corbell: What will you do?

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mr Corbell!

MRS DUNNE: We will not close schools to attract people to come to the government school sector.

Mr Corbell: What will you do?

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mr Corbell!

MRS DUNNE: We will not close down schools in order to test new combinations—

Mr Corbell: What will you do?

MR SPEAKER: I warn you, Mr Corbell.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We will not close down schools in order to test new combinations of age groupings. We will not tell you about the maximum utilisation capacity of schools, because capacity is not the issue here: education is. A day may come when we have to do the sums—if I am the minister for education, I have to do the sums—and we decide that a particular school should close or a particular cluster of schools is not as viable as it once was. If I do have to do the sums, I will not ignore the educational benefits of small schools, I will not ignore the costs that are imposed on parents when schools close and I will not ignore the disruption to people's lives because, as a conservative, I do not believe in ripping up institutions, especially institutions that people in this town, year in and year out, generation after generation, have put their heart

and soul to, unless there is no alternative. Closing schools should be an absolute last resort. That is why we have put forward this motion today.

We have heard so much balderdash here today from members opposite. We had the Chief Minister talking the other day about lengthy consultation under section 20 of the Education Act. I thank Dr Foskey for drawing members' attention to what really happened in relation to section 20 of the Education Act. Yes, it was amended and that amendment was passed without demur in this place, but we also have to remember that the minister responsible and her officials had emphasised that this period was a minimum and that they would do it better. We also have to remember that this minister's officials told the parents and citizens association, in the same way that they told me, that we did not need to hurry to put the guidelines for consultation on school closures back into the Education Act because there would be no school closures. The lie that has been perpetrated by officials of this government needs to be held out for the community to see and to see what is the calibre of these people.

The two previous ministers for education have shown themselves to be completely shallow and completely unconcerned about the true nature of education in this place. Mr Pratt, as the shadow minister for education, and I have over the years asked these ministers whether they were concerned about the drift from government schools to non-government schools. Year after year in estimates and annual report hearings, Mr Corbell and Ms Gallagher said that it was not a matter of concern.

It could be said cynically that every time a child leaves the government sector and goes into the non-government sector it saves the government money. They were not concerned and their words are in *Hansard* to be held against them. They were not concerned. For five years, these people were not concerned. For five years, Simon Corbell and Katy Gallagher, the two previous ministers for education, thought that this was not an issue. And suddenly what happens? The Costello report comes along, we have a vast opportunity to make some money out of some school sales and the new kid on the block suddenly realises, long after the opposition had been sounding alarm bells, that the drift to the non-government school system was a problem.

Mr Barr has said in here that he does not want to see the government system become a safety net system, a system of last resort, but when I said that in this place last year I was decried by the Chief Minister, who said that the things that I had said, almost exactly the same words as Mr Barr's, were absolutely and utterly outrageous and showed that I had no faith in the government school system.

My commitment to the government school system is on the record. I am a parent, a proud parent, of the ACT government school system. My children have attended government schools over many years. They have been served well by that and they are currently being served well by that. But when I have to explain to my eight-year-old, as I was this morning coming to work, why it is that the government wants to close schools, he does not understand. He does not understand why you would bother to put all of his schoolmates and their parents to the trouble that you have to save two per cent of the budget. An eight-year-old can work out that to do that to save two per cent of the budget is not a very good idea. So he says, "Mum, why do you reckon that they are really doing it?" We know why they are really doing it: so they can make a killing selling the land.

Simon Corbell, in his Simon says way, said, “I do not think it is appropriate for us to extend the consultation process. That was not the unanimous view of the people assembled in the courtyard outside last week, because when the same motion was put to them they unanimously agreed—

MR SPEAKER: Order! The member’s time has expired.

Question put:

That **Mrs Dunne’s** motion be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

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

Question so resolved in the negative.

Personal explanation

MS MacDONALD (Brindabella): Mr Speaker, I seek leave under standing order 46 to make a personal explanation.

MR SPEAKER: Do you claim to have been misrepresented?

MS MacDONALD: Yes, Mr Speaker.

MR SPEAKER: Proceed.

MS MacDONALD: Mr Speaker, during the debate on Mrs Dunne’s motion, Dr Foskey quoted from email correspondence from my office to a constituent. However, she failed to include a vital paragraph of that correspondence. What she read was:

Karin is under the opinion that it would have been easier for schools proposed with closure and the surrounding communities if the consultation period had have run from later this year to early next year. The information collected could then have been thoroughly analysed and collaborated and announcements regarding which schools would close or remain open could then have been made in mid-2007, with some schools closing at the end of 2007.

However, she failed to include the words:

However, it is obviously not possible to go back in time and reverse the decision to run the consultation period from July to December 2006 and Karin believes that dragging this process out any further would only add to the angst of all involved. She believes that the schools and those involved with them deserve to know what the future of their school will be in a timely manner.

She then read the last part of this email correspondence, which states:

That said, Karin will not be supporting Dr Foskey's Bill to delay school closures. She will, however, continue to work closely with the communities affected by proposed school closures and fight for schools and preschools in her electorate that should remain open.

Mr Speaker, that quite clearly sets out my position on this subject.

MR SPEAKER: I think you are debating the issue now. You cannot debate the issue. You can go to the personal issues. Just keep that in mind.

Mr Corbell: You have clarified it.

MR SPEAKER: You cannot clarify it because it then becomes a debating issue. It is about dealing with the personal issues and then getting on with the rest of our business.

MS MacDONALD: All right. I will just say, Mr Speaker, that I thought it was important that the paragraph which was omitted be placed on the record.

Industrial relations—reforms

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (11.46): I move:

That this Assembly:

- (1) acknowledges the relationship between job security and the health of workers;
- (2) acknowledges the growing evidence on the effects of the implementation of the new WorkChoices Bill on the health of workers; and
- (3) calls on the Chief Minister to convey to the federal Government the Assembly's wish that these draconian laws be repealed.

Over the last 150 days, members of the Australian community have had to work under the threat of the loss of their jobs, the loss of conditions, the reduction of safety in the workplace and the loss of protection from unfair dismissal. With many members of our community already working long hours and feeling pressure in the workplace, the added pressure of the WorkChoices legislation has increased the possibility of them losing their job and added a second layer of stress.

There have been many studies done proving that the effects of stress on people lowers their immune system and therefore causes illness, and in extreme cases death. The new industrial relations legislation, by providing the opportunity for employers to have staff work longer hours, often for less pay and less than optimal conditions, will lead to a higher stress level in workers. As many of you are aware, I have been a union official and have seen the effects of workers being taken advantage of. It is never a good thing. A report released by Unions NSW said:

There are social dimensions to IR reform which will change the relationship between the sphere of work, private households and the community. Fragmenting working time erodes the common time for families, friends and community activities so it also fractures social relationships.

The quality of family life, parenting, relationships and health—already under strain because of the well known “work-life collision”—will deteriorate further for those where the quality of jobs and earnings is affected. The emergence of social exclusion, disconnected areas and welfare dependency (including employers) will also grow over time.

Those words are very true and are also causing added stress to workers, causing higher stress-related illnesses. I know myself that there have been times that I have been stressed at the thought of not being able to provide for my children without accepting working conditions that were far less than optimal. I have always been outspoken enough, though, to stand up for my rights and for what I and other workers are entitled to. I have always been a member of my union and that has given me the protection of my rights at work. With the help of union officials if there were to be any disagreements, I was confident in the view that I would be well protected. Being alleviated of the stress of having to protect my working conditions on my own, I found there was more time to enjoy my workplace.

The Unions NSW report that I have previously mentioned also stated:

Most employees working longer hours describe giving up hobbies, sport and voluntary work because of lack of time, because they come home from work exhausted, or because they cannot predict when they will be available.

Voluntary work in social clubs, charities and organisations like the army reserves is also constrained for those working long hours and their partners, many of whom describe a “closing in” of their social circle and community: a work/eat/sleep cycle which constrains their days and leaves their personal community impoverished.

Yet again we see a strong connection between workers’ health and the WorkChoices legislation. The attack on the work/eat/sleep cycle can force dissatisfaction in the workplace and have the drastic effect of reducing the immune system of a worker. To be able to enjoy the workplace is a good thing as there is less chance of getting sick and needing to take time off to recuperate.

Within WorkChoices there is the new sick leave bonanza. According to WorkChoices, employees must now supply a doctors certificate for one sick day. I am not sure how many members of the opposition have tried to get an appointment at a doctor’s surgery recently, but it can be almost impossible to get an appointment for the day on which you are sick.

Many staff are now forced to attend the workplace even if they are unwell. This has forced sick employees to seek any means possible to obtain a medical certificate, just to keep their job. A report in the *Illawarra Mercury* has explained that, due to a glitch in the WorkChoices legislation, people can attend a range of medical practitioners to obtain a medical certificate. This glitch is thanks to Mr Howard and his friends on the hill for rushing through their unfair legislation.

Under the WorkChoices reforms, employees can approach a variety of registered health practitioners, such as chiropractors, physiotherapists and optometrists, to obtain a medical certificate. Previously, that was the domain of the medical practitioners, or GPs as we often call them, but our somewhat less than esteemed colleagues on the hill have rectified the glitch in WorkChoices. They have stopped veterinarians from providing employees with medical certificates. I am glad to see that Mr Howard and Mr Andrews have failed, in part, to remove all access by employees to some form of fairness.

We all remember the case a few months ago of a woman in New South Wales who refused to sign an Australian workplace agreement at her place of employment. She refused to sign a document that took away the right for a sick day. Sorry, Mr Speaker, it did not take away the right; it just meant that it was impossible to have a sick day. The AWA stated that workers would have to give 24 hours notice before having a sick day. How ridiculous! Who on earth knows they are going to be sick 24 hours prior to the illness taking hold?

Here we can see yet again that the workers' rights are being taken advantage of, that the health of workers has been put in jeopardy. All workers at the work site are now being put at risk of further illness. Working on building sites or in mines, operating heavy machinery, cutting people's hair, making informative decisions or any form of employment is difficult enough without the added pressure of having to work while sick.

In the *Herald Sun* in July of this year it was reported that Australians are working longer and harder than they were 20 years ago. A report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has stated that there has been an increase in full and part-time working hours. The full-time working hours for men are now, on average, over 43 a week and women are working almost 40 hours a week. With the excess in working hours, there is a decrease in the amount of time being spent with family. 666 ABC radio reported last week that there had been a drastic reduction in tourism figures across Australia. The report stated that fewer Australians were taking the chance to travel within their own states and territories, as well as to see other parts of our wonderful country, compared to last year.

The fact that AWAs are now offering the opportunity to cash out holidays or, in fact, only offer a maximum of two weeks annual leave, is causing the destruction of our tourist industry. Holidays are a vital part of the working conditions of all employees. They give adequate time for the body to recuperate and relax. But with the introduction of WorkChoices comes the ability to reduce the number of holidays taken by employees. Workers now feel added pressures from working extended hours and giving up their entitled holidays.

At the 49th annual Tourism Ministers Council in Adelaide last week, ministers from most states and territories agreed that the drop in tourism numbers could be directly linked to WorkChoices. In a statement made last week, tourism ministers from New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia and our own Minister Barr all agreed that the Howard government's WorkChoices legislation is making it increasingly difficult for workers to use their entitled annual leave. With the added pressures of decreased job security, Australian workers take less annual leave. One-third of the full-time Australian workers do not take any annual leave in a year, yet we have the longest working hours in the developed world.

The added effect of fewer holidays is a major cause of higher health risks, greater chances of burnout, and less time spent with family. This has an effect on all concerned, workers and their health, workers' families and their health and children and their health. With mum and dad now working longer hours and taking less annual leave, the children spend more time in paid care or in front of television sets eating unsuitable food. This is now affecting the health of the next generation.

Last week in this very chamber, Ms Porter raised the issue of the effect of junk food advertising on our children. With parents working longer hours and taking shorter breaks, it has become increasingly difficult to have the time needed to spend with children and prepare their meals. Mothers, in particular, have begun to feel guilty about not being able to give their children the valued time needed and therefore often resort to feeding the children what they want, and that is not necessarily healthy.

Often that is not always the healthiest option, as I have said, but it is usually the fastest and gives the children the best feeling that mum and dad care. Unfortunately, with more children having nutritionally poor meals, there are higher risks of health problems. Child obesity has been linked with adult obesity and the eating of a lot of nutritionally poor food by children often leads to dietary problems, such as diabetes. So, Mr Speaker, it is not just the health of workers that is at stake here: it is the health of the future generations of workers.

All of these issues seem to point to the inception of the WorkChoices legislation and the fact that workers have been put under added layers of stress as they can lose their jobs easier. That, together with the added ability of employers to insist on employees cashing out their annual leave, can cause less down time and higher levels of burnout. With the extended hours of work, more parents are moving towards giving their children foods that are quick and easy but not necessarily healthy, as we have said, which in turn is causing all sorts of health problems for future generations.

A survey by NSW Health has clearly showed that the bottom 20 per cent of income earners in New South Wales had by far the worst health, including diabetes, obesity and high psychological stress. A spokesperson for NCOSS, the Council of Social Service of New South Wales, has also stated that the introduction of WorkChoices and John Howard's vision to make Australia more globally competitive through a new belt of lower paid jobs and longer working hours boosting productivity will ensure that poor health outcomes will become a feature of life for modest income earners as well.

It is also a cause of concern how much money the federal government has spent on getting the message out to the community about WorkChoices. This money would have been better spent on looking after the health of workers it is affecting. Mr Smyth is always calling on the ACT government, and in particular the health minister, to provide a further 100 acute care beds. I understand that hospitals are the responsibility of the states but, with all the money wasted on advertising such a flawed and unjust industrial relations system by Mr Howard, there could have been some extra moneys supplied to the states for added health care costs incurred by the draconian laws. Maybe Mr Smyth should talk to his mates on the hill about agreeing to providing some extra funding to aid for the loss of health conditions as part of the implementation of WorkChoices.

Mr Speaker, I stand here today as a slightly unwell worker—I have a bit of a cold at the moment—knowing full well that my employee, the electorate of Brindabella, would be more than happy for me to take the time to recuperate. I want to make the point that some of those members of the community have employers that do not look so favourably on the taking of sick leave. With many more Australians retiring later in life, yet more pressure is being added on the next generation of workers.

I believe that we must keep our workplaces safe and secure so as to maintain the health of workers. I call on my colleagues in the chamber today to stand up for the rights and health of ACT workers. I call on opposition members to stand up for the members of the community that have elected them to this Assembly, to fight for their right to a healthy workplace, to fight for their right to all employee-related benefits and to stand up against the WorkChoices legislation. I call on members of the Canberra community not to let these draconian laws affect the health of them and other workers.

The WorkChoices legislation is having a detrimental effect on the health of workers. We have a responsibility to take this issue to the government that made the legislation and inform it of the effects. The health of workers is a responsibility of all workers and employers, including the government, in Canberra and we should not let WorkChoices disadvantage our community.

MR SESELJA (Molonglo) (11.59): I really do not know quite where to start my rebuttal of the position—I would not say the argument—put forward by Mr Gentleman. I will do my best to tackle some of the claims, but I preface my remarks by saying that I guess this is what we always refer to as Mr Gentleman's Chicken Little motion. It is this: the sky is falling in and the Howard government is to blame.

Mr Gentleman brings on these motions every couple of sitting weeks and it begs the question: who is in opposition? Oppositions are often criticised for being negative and carping, yet all we ever hear from Mr Gentleman is how the Howard government is ruining everything, ruining things for the people of Australia. Clearly, that is not the case but we hear it all the time. We hear it from Mr Gentleman constantly. Despite being in government, he seems to have nothing positive to say. We expect governments to be talking about the positive difference they are making for the community, yet all we hear about are the so-called negatives of the Howard government.

In the previous speech, WorkChoices was blamed for virtually everything. WorkChoices is now responsible for childhood obesity and diabetes. It is responsible for the death of the tourism industry. We have heard previously that it is responsible for the end of barbecues and weekend sport. Is there anything else we could add to the list—the conflict in Lebanon or cancer? What else are we going to blame WorkChoices for? Perhaps we could blame the poor performance of Collingwood over the years on WorkChoices!

Mr Gentleman put forward not a shred of evidence to back up his motion. But he has often spoken in this place without any stats to back up his claims. Paragraph (2) of the motion states:

acknowledges the growing evidence on the effects of the implementation of the new WorkChoices Bill on the health of workers ...

There was not one piece of evidence to link the health of workers to the WorkChoices legislation. There were some vague articles from the *Illawarra Mercury*, which did not even draw a link with the WorkChoices legislation. Mr Gentleman offered no evidence, just a bunch of stories.

This is consistent with the approach of the union movement and the Labor Party on this issue. We know where Mr Gentleman gets his information. It is from his union mates, the TWU and the ACTU. We know how credible they are. On *Lateline*, Sharan Burrow of the ACTU said, “I need a mum or dad of someone who has been seriously injured or killed. That would be fantastic.” That is a disgraceful statement—an absolutely disgraceful and outrageous statement. These are the kinds of people that Mr Gentleman gets his information from.

Time and time again in the federal parliament Mr Beazley and Mr Smith have used personal examples, and time and time again they have got it wrong. They cannot be trusted. They never go to overall figures because the figures, which I will get to later, completely give the lie to what they are saying. They have to rely on individual stories, but so many of them have been discredited that we just do not know what to believe from the Labor Party. For instance, Mr Beazley was caught out on his claims about OH&S in relation to WorkChoices. He claimed that WorkChoices has prevented an occupational health and safety clause being included in a workplace agreement in the Newlands mine in Queensland. The Leader of the Opposition conveniently failed to mention that the Newlands mine agreement contains an entirely separate clause entitled “safety in the workplace”.

The Office of the Employment Advocate disallowed a separate clause proposed by the CFMEU that stated that employees would be given leave to attend bona fide union business. We do not know what that would mean. It certainly does not have to relate to safety; it could relate to anything. Recently, in the ACT, the CFMEU politicised a death by announcing in a statement that it would attempt to enter the site to investigate the circumstances to determine whether the Prime Minister and Minister Andrews have blood on their hands. This is the kind of rubbish that we get from the Labor Party in this place and from their Labor mates on the hill. Time and time again the information they present is not credible.

Mr Gentleman did not present any facts. He did not present anything. He talked about 150 days of people feeling less safe and less secure and how their health has been impacted over those 150 days. Let us look at what has happened in the 150 or so days since the WorkChoices legislation came in. There have been 159,000 new jobs created. In 150 days there have been 159,000 new jobs created. That is more than 1,000 jobs per day, and 129,000 of these jobs are full time.

The unemployment rate in this country is 4.8 per cent. Since WorkChoices came in it has gone down. The growth in jobs—159,000 jobs in the space of about five months; 1,000 a day—is perhaps the largest that has ever been seen. Yet in the several months prior to the implementation of WorkChoices, we heard Mr Gentleman in this place and the federal Labor Party saying that there would be mass sackings. What have we seen? We have seen 159,000 new jobs.

What Mr Gentleman is saying is that it would be better if WorkChoices had not been put in place; then we would not have seen a lot of those jobs created. It would be better, Mr Gentleman says, if those people who were unemployed previously had stayed unemployed. He would prefer it if our industrial relations system went backward rather than forward and if the 159,000 jobs that have been created since March had not been created. This is the level of argument that Mr Gentleman brings to this place time and time again. He has no figures to back his argument. He has stories that are consistently discredited. He does not want to focus on statistics because statistics give the lie to what he is saying.

Earlier the industrial relations minister implied that the last 10 years of the Howard government have been terrible in terms of industrial relations and economic growth. He did not say “economic growth”, but I can only assume—

Mr Hargreaves: You are not verballing him, are you?

MR SESELJA: I might be verballing him a touch. I think maybe even he acknowledges that economic growth has been pretty solid for the last 10 years or so. But he certainly did make a comment about how terrible industrial relations have been.

Let us look at what has happened. In 1996 we had the same mob, the same Chicken Littles, the same doomsayers saying, “We’ll all be rooned. It’ll all be terrible. We’ll tear these laws up.” Since 1996, 1.8 million jobs have been created. We now have the lowest unemployment rate since 1976 and there has been an increase in real wages of 16.8 per cent. These are fantastic figures. Everyone would have to acknowledge that these are fantastic figures. In the ACT, the unemployment rate is 2.8 or 2.9 per cent. The workers of the ACT are doing very well, thank you very much, under this industrial relations system.

Mr Gentleman does not think they are doing well. The Chief Minister has been telling us how well they are doing. Of course, he tries to take all the credit! Across the nation we are seeing fantastic economic times, fantastic employment conditions and the lowest unemployment seen in this country for the past 30 years. If it were up to the likes of Mr Gentleman and Mr Beazley, we would not have that.

Let us look at Mr Beazley’s record, because this is what we would be going back to. Mr Gentleman says, “WorkChoices is terrible. Kim Beazley is going to come in and tear these laws up. Wouldn’t it be great if he got in and we could go back to how things were in the good old days when he was in government?” When Kim Beazley was employment minister, unemployment peaked at 10.9 per cent, putting nearly one million Australians out of work. In May 1993, when Kim Beazley was unemployment minister, long-term unemployment peaked at 329,800. Kim Beazley has admitted that he was simply not up to the job of protecting Australian workers. He said, “I lost a lot of ambition and I stopped straining. I thought there was less capacity to achieve in that portfolio than just about any other I have had.” He is right about that. He did not achieve much, except to push the unemployment rate up. If the Labor Party gets back into government federally, that is what we will see again.

We will see a winding back of the positive reforms that have occurred under the Howard government. These reforms, by the way, were opposed in 1995 and 1996, yet, as recently as this year or late last year, Mr Corbell has stood in this place and said that we have a really good industrial relations system. This is the industrial relations system that has been opposed by this mob for the last 10 years. They cannot have it both ways. They cannot say, "We opposed it and it was terrible and the sky was going to fall in, but it has been really good. With these new changes, the sky is going to fall in and it is going to be terrible. Believe us this time." What have we seen? There have been 159,000 new jobs created.

It would be much more helpful to this debate if Mr Gentleman were able to bring facts and figures to the table. I can understand why he does not. They do not support his claims. He did not produce one shred of evidence to support his motion. That is the concern. If you are going to move a motion like this, come armed with facts. Unfortunately, the facts do not suit his arguments so he has not bothered to present them. I am doing my best to present them for him so that perhaps this motion will not be wasted and we can get on with the job of having a rational debate about industrial relations rather than the hysteria that is often presented by Mr Gentleman.

Let us have a look at what people have said about Labor's plans to wind back the industrial relations system. Access Economics, in a comprehensive report to the Business Council of Australia on the potential impact of the ALP's workplace relations policies, noted that the likely outcome from the abolition of AWAs is lower productivity growth and less accurate matching of wages and productivity at the enterprise level. Paul Keating's former economic adviser, John Edwards, warned that Labor's plans to re-empower the commission would "reintroduce the worst aspects of the old award system" and that "the Australian industrial relations system could thus leap back to the 1960s and 1970s when the arbitration commission routinely determined actual wages". In other words, it would be a return to the days of high inflation, soaring unemployment and declining real wages.

In the Labor Party's 13 years in office, real wages rose by rose 1.2 per cent. In 10 years under the Liberal government, they have risen by 16.8 per cent. That is 16.8 per cent over and above inflation. That means that not only are more people in work as a result of these changes, but also that more people are getting more money coming into their pockets. Yet all we hear from Mr Gentleman and the unions is that it is bad. Perhaps what is more important and more to the point in relation to the unions is that they think the last 10 years have been bad for them. They have been bad for the unions. They have not been bad for the workers. It is the unions that are declining.

Mr Stanhope: Talk about health in the workplace.

MR SESELJA: Well, we will talk about health. Mr Gentleman says, "Isn't it terrible. People are feeling stressed at work." Mr Gentleman is one to talk. I wonder how Ms Porter felt when he was verbally abusing her in the estimates process. Mr Gentleman lectures us about people feeling stressed in the workplace as a result of the workplace changes; he blames everything on WorkChoices. He produces no evidence. We know his track record. When he gets annoyed, he starts hurling abuse at his colleagues. The opposition has come to expect that, but he does it to his colleagues.

He has brought no evidence to back up his argument. He has repeated the tired old claims of the unions, which have been totally discredited by the facts over the last 10 years—in fact over the few months since the WorkChoices legislation came into effect. Mr Gentleman should go away, rework this motion and perhaps come back with something that we can actually have a rational debate about instead of a bunch of discredited stories that no-one believes anymore because people in Australia have got it very good. The workers of Australia have never had it so good.

MR SPEAKER: The member's time has expired.

MR BARR (Molonglo—Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation and Minister for Industrial Relations) (12.15): To return to the subject of the motion, the link between job security and the health of workers is undeniable. Ongoing studies have consistently drawn a parallel between job security and workers' health. For example, an ANU study from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health found a link between working conditions and the health and wellbeing of parents and their children.

The study found that health hazards at work were increasingly likely to stem from psychological factors such as stress rather than just physical conditions. It also found that employers must consider issues such as job demand and control and job security to maintain a healthy work force. The ANU study found that when workers are not able to negotiate improved family friendly provisions or flexible working arrangements that assist them in their caring responsibilities, they often suffer increased stress, leading to long-term effects on their health and that of their children.

More recently a study of male workers in Britain found that an effort-reward imbalance exists where high levels of work intensity, without reward, such as money, esteem or job security, can lead over time to a higher incidence of angina. The imbalance is likely to be experienced when the employee has little or no control over his work-life balance.

In the ILO report entitled *Economic security for a better world*, the link between individuals' economic security and their emotional wellbeing was examined. The ILO found that job security is a major contributor to economic wellbeing. The report found that, even though workers were paid adequately, they still experienced increased anxiety and stress due to job security worries. A key finding of the report is that people in countries that provide their citizens with a high level of economic security have higher levels of happiness on average. The report found that the most important determinant of national happiness is not income level, although there is a positive association. Rather, the key factor is the extent of income security measured in terms of income protection and a low degree of income inequality.

These critical factors are removed for many workers through the commonwealth-imposed industrial relations changes and the WorkChoices legislation. The removal of the unfair dismissal protections for so many working families in the ACT will result in a decrease in job security for workers in workplaces with fewer than 101 workers. Add to that the increasing likelihood that some larger workplaces, where unfair dismissal laws do apply, could use operational reasons excuse to sack workers and to remove job security for a significant proportion of workers in the ACT.

Firming up job security, as opposed to removing it, will assist workers to achieve and deliver on their best potential. Removing these fundamental protections further weakens the ability of workers to adequately bargain their wages and conditions. The effect on workers is profound. As is demonstrated through the research, a lack of job security leads to financial insecurity, stress and health issues. This has the potential to lead to tension within the family unit. The health impact cannot be overstated.

The maintenance of a safe working environment is the joint responsibility of employees, employers and the governments that regulate that environment. Unfortunately, the federal government rejects this responsibility. The ACT's Occupational Health and Safety Act includes right of entry provisions that allow authorised representatives to enter a workplace to investigate suspected contraventions of the act. Before introducing the WorkChoices legislation, federal minister Kevin Andrews stated that the federal government did not intend to override OH&S right of entry laws in the states and territories. While WorkChoices maintains state and territory jurisdiction over OH&S right of entry provisions, they are now subject to additional conditions under part 15 of the Workplace Relations Act 1996. These additional conditions seek, in the most part, to limit the safety oversight role that has been filled by the union movement.

The ACT government was not consulted about this matter before the regulations were made. The Howard government clearly views the workplace as an environment where employees must leave their desire for health and safety at the door. The ACT government rejects this proposition and will continue to do all it can to address the devastating effects of these draconian changes.

In the time remaining to me, I thought I might touch on a couple of the issues that were raised by previous speakers, particularly in relation to the evidence that was presented by Tourism Australia to the tourism ministerial council in Adelaide last Friday in relation to the 70 million days of unused recreation leave that had been accrued by workers and the evidence that one in three workers take no annual leave. When they dug a little bit deeper into why this was so, the issue of job insecurity came up as a considerable issue.

The ministers had an interesting debate on this issue and the commonwealth response, through Tourism Australia, is to start a campaign. I am pretty sure, 99 per cent sure, that they are calling it "No leave, no life". There are about 300,000 workers in their trial group that they are seeking to encourage to take more leave. The question that was put to the federal minister in this forum was: how does this campaign balance with the WorkChoices legislation where workers are being encouraged to cash in two weeks of their leave?

With these two clearly contradictory pieces of federal government policy, how can Tourism Australia do the job it needs to do to promote domestic and international tourism? On the domestic tourism side, which is 75 per cent of the market here in Australia, how can we encourage domestic tourism when industrial relation laws and the processes that the federal government has put in place are working directly against it? The federal government is seeking to have workers cash in their annual leave for more money, in some instances forcing some workers to do that in order to ensure that they can meet their daily bills, their weekly bills. This is a clear contradiction in policy.

Even the federal tourism minister, Fran Bailey, was unable to defend that approach. She agreed that it is a major problem that one-third of full-time workers in Australia do not take any annual leave; two-thirds take less than their four weeks entitlement. That is the sort of industrial relations system we have. Is it any wonder that in the last six years domestic tourism has taken a big hit? The evidence was that, no matter how much additional money the states and territories throw at marketing campaigns and put into their tourism budgets, the major issue is the 70 million days of unused recreation leave.

I am pleased that Tourism Australia and the federal minister are seeking to address that and I fully endorse the “No leave, no life” campaign. I think it is important that workers are able to use their full four weeks annual leave in a year. It is important for all of the health reasons that Mr Gentleman has outlined in his motion, and all of the research underpins that. You need that break, and all workers should have that entitlement.

In the remaining two minutes, I would like to respond to Mr Seselja’s assertions about the strength of the economy. Whilst we all acknowledge that the economic performance of Australia in the last 15 years has been outstanding, we need to look a little further back to see where that derived from. It was the economic reforms undertaken in the 1980s by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments that have underpinned Australia’s economic success over the last 15 years.

Even the Prime Minister, begrudgingly at times, has accepted that those major economic reforms drove the significant change in the Australian economy in the last 20 years. Any student of economic history who looks at the long-run implications of those reforms to the Australian economy would have to acknowledge that the position that we are in now is as a result of those major reforms that occurred in the 1980s.

Those reforms were, and continue to be, important. What is not necessary is the extent to which the playing field has been unbalanced by the WorkChoices legislation. We are starting to see the effects in other industries, such as tourism, where the fundamental unfairness of the WorkChoices legislation is starting to be seen. These problems will grow under the current arrangements, particularly as a result of the concept of being able to cash in two of your four weeks of annual leave. Those workers who desperately need that extra money will have no choice but to do that, and that will have poor outcomes for health and domestic tourism.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (12.25): It looks like Mr Barr’s staff had to trawl through the internet to find the evidence to back his arguments, but so did I. The fact is that WorkChoices has not been around long enough for us to be able to make definitive statements about its impact on health. However, I believe that there is enough evidence from trends and from research that has been done—and Mr Barr quoted that research—to indicate that WorkChoices is very likely to have deleterious impacts on the health of workers, and probably their families too. We all know that it is going to be quite difficult for some parents to get time off to spend with ill members of their family and other people that they are caring for.

There are other issues related to stress in the workplace. It has been well understood that stress in the workplace is a precursor to disease. It is not good for people. But there is also work being done that shows that people who have more control over their work have

better health. The statistics show, too, that people at managerial level, depending on their personalities and pre-existing state of health, are more likely to experience better health than the people they manage, especially if they manage those people badly.

There are quite a few issues here. The World Health Organisation, in its study of the social determinants of health—because work is one of the major social determinants in most people's lives—says that there is no trade-off between health and productivity at work; that improving conditions at work will lead to a healthy work force, which will lead to improved productivity and hence the opportunity to create a healthier, more productive workplace. Obviously, an industrial relations system that sets workers against employers and that disempowers people will have a deleterious effect on their health. I am looking forward to the federal government keeping statistics and monitoring this because, as the World Health Organisation says, ill people mean less productivity. It sounds like a lose-lose situation to me.

I also found in my trawl through the internet a speech by Kathryn Heiler, the national policy adviser to the CFMEU. In it she says that in her work in the mining industry she noticed that the second largest group of people to be identified for retrenchment—obviously, the first were the activists—were the health and safety activists. That is a very interesting thing that might be another ramification of WorkChoices. We need to watch whether it is the people who are actually looking out for occupational health and safety that might be likely to lose their jobs. She also talks about changes in the Tasmanian mining industry, which has a 56-hour condition of employment regime. We only have to think of Beaconsfield to know where that might go. At one of the pits, workers were pulled up at 3 o'clock in the morning and sacked and sent home. We talk about stress in our employment; in the mining industry it could be death.

Mr Gentleman's motion refers only to the commonwealth and to WorkChoices. He tends to focus on WorkChoices because it is the commonwealth's legislation. When he talks about workers that are badly affected, he tends to talk about people in private industry or in the commonwealth. There are a lot of examples. It is pretty clear that I am not siding with the Liberals here, but we should not be ideologically bound on these issues. We have to look at what is in there.

I want to know why Mr Gentleman is not standing up here and talking about ACT public school teachers and ACTION bus drivers? Have I heard him speaking out for the taxi drivers? No, because their problem is not the federal government—

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

Sitting suspended from 12.30 to 2.30 pm.

Ministerial arrangements

MR STANHOPE (Ginninderra—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Business and Economic Development, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Minister for the Arts): For the information of members, my colleague the Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Health, Ms Gallagher, is absent due to unavoidable family responsibilities today. I will

be pleased to take questions that may have been directed to the Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Health. I will seek to be of whatever assistance I can.

Questions without notice

Planning—EpiCentre lease

MR STEFANIAK: My question is to the Minister for Planning. It relates to EpiCentre. Minister, you said on WIN news last night that no-one had a pre application meeting. An ACTPLA document dated 4 October and clearly marked “pre app meeting” contradicts your statement, it would seem. Minister, why did you say that no pre application meeting took place when clearly ACTPLA’s own records show that it did? I seek leave to table that record.

Leave granted.

MR CORBELL: The point I was making was that there was no development application lodged, nor could there have been, because you cannot lodge a development application without owning the land. The land was not sold, so no-one could own it. So no-one lodged a development application over it. To the extent that a pre application meeting could be held, given the prospect of a development application, that clearly was not the case.

But clearly a conversation took place between Austexx and the planning and land authority in the same way that conversations took place between one other bidder, the Canberra International Airport, and one other party initially interested in the site, ING. That is a very common and routine process. There is absolutely nothing suspicious in a potential bidder doing a due diligence assessment with officers of the planning and land authority, and that is what occurred at this time.

MR STEFANIAK: I ask a supplementary question. Minister, whom are we to believe—the official records or your own version of events?

MR CORBELL: I have answered the question.

Economy—wage price index

MR MULCAHY: My question is to the Treasurer. Given that the government expects to make an additional \$19,326,000 in the forward years to the 2009-10 financial year by using the wage price index, WPI, instead of the consumer price index, CPI, in relation to increased rates and charges, how does the Treasurer contemplate people on fixed incomes, self-funded retirees and others will cope with the increases when they do not enjoy the benefits of increases to wages and rely instead on the CPI at best?

MR STANHOPE: I find it a remarkable position that the shadow treasurer puts. It continues this fiction that somehow in the ACT we can find, for the purchase or payment of government services, money out of thin air. The wage price index is a far better reflection of the cost of government service delivery than measurements against the CPI. It is all right for him to suggest that the ACT government will deliver government services at a certain cost—and, as we know, the greatest cost in the delivery of government services is wages—but we will deliver government services at a level

commensurate with an increase in CPI and not commensurate with the cost to government as reflected through the wage price index.

This is a remarkable suggestion by the shadow treasurer, that governments can deliver a service that costs, say, \$10 as a result of the inclusion in that cost of wages and the annual increase in wages reflected through the wage price index, and at a time when there has been a \$9 CPI increase—the greatest cost or part of government service delivery, of course, being reflected in wages—but the full cost of wages should not be reflected in the cost of the government service delivery and we should simply accommodate somehow the \$1 differential between wage price and CPI.

Mr Mulcahy puts out these releases berating a government for seeking to reflect in its charges the cost of delivering the services, and if that cost, through a measure he would prefer, the CPI, is greater, where is the difference to be made up? Where will he get the money that constitutes the difference between CPI and wage price index in the cost of delivering a government service? Which magic wand will he use? Which hollow log does he think exists? Where does the government go? Look at the examples. Yesterday, Mr Barr, in answer to a question or in debate, referred to the percentage of the education budget that is reflected in wages. I think it is nine out of every \$10.

Mr Mulcahy: It is not the territory figure, though, for the whole of the territory.

MR STANHOPE: I think it is 90 per cent.

Mr Mulcahy: No, it is not 90 per cent.

MR STANHOPE: What is it?

Mr Mulcahy: It is 80 per cent.

MR STANHOPE: So, 80 per cent of the cost of delivering education in the ACT is in salaries—around 80 per cent. Around 80 per cent of the cost of delivering education services in the territory is reflected in wages, yet Mr Mulcahy wants to perpetuate a fiction that we can somehow discount that full cost in meeting the cost of those services. It is nonsense. It is a classic case of the simple, bottom-line fundamental of a job, that the money in must equal the money out. It costs so much to deliver government services and they have to be paid for. We in the ACT have historically paid about 20 per cent more than the national average, and that is the issue that we have tackled and attacked through this most recent budget. To suggest now that we should continue this fiction—

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

MR MULCAHY: I ask a supplementary question. What impact does the Treasurer believe increased government charges, including the switch to wage price increases, will have on people who are not property owners? Were those people considered in the government's deliberations?

MR STANHOPE: Yes, they were. The government was very sensitive to the impact of the increases in rates and charges on individual members of the Canberra community. That was very much in its thinking. The range of rates and charges and the increases that

are reflected in this budget again go to the question of the cost of the delivery of services. The people of Canberra have a right to expect the best possible services. We, as a government, deliver the best possible services commensurate with our income and the revenue we collect, which we then distribute and disburse consistent with our priorities.

It has to be understood—the community, every business and every householder understands—that if we want a range of services delivered at a certain standard there is a cost. The services being delivered by the ACT government over all its time in office and over the time of the previous government have been delivered at a cost of about 20 per cent above the national average.

By and large we have managed to achieve that significant additional expenditure over and above the national average by relying on land sale receipts, superannuation receipts, a number of other accounting standards and, to some extent, the GST, but not to the bountiful extent claimed by Mr Stefaniak in the release he issued yesterday in which he overstated the so-called GST bonanza by I think \$709 million. That is the extent to which Mr Stefaniak overstated the extent of the so-called GST bonanza. Mr Mulcahy in his question today and in his press releases relating to wage price index said it was a \$19.3 million burden.

Mr Mulcahy: Those are your figures. You put them in the Assembly yesterday.

MR STANHOPE: Have members ever seen a more artful way of expressing the impact of a particular rate or charge than by adding it up over a number of years, putting it into tiny print and stating, “This is not a single figure?” The wage price increase impact of this budget in this financial year is \$1.7 million, which tells a slightly different story. The amount of \$1.7 million is not quite as dramatic as the amount of \$19.3 million. That is artful spin that the shadow treasurer seeks to impose on us.

The questions he just asked were, “Where is the \$19.3 million? How will these people deal with this? Is this not a dreadful impost?” The impact of the wage price increase imposition in the budget is \$1.7 million. That is a very different story, is it not? It is a very different atmospheric. It is a very different impact from the one suggested in the question. It is a very different imposition and change to the nature of the charge—from \$1.7 million in this financial year to the shock, horror, \$19.3 million over four years in the shadow treasurer’s question and press release.

The impact in this financial year is \$1.7 million. Yet the spin, the story, the atmospheric, the shock, horror could not be achieved if we talked about this financial year and the impact each year of this change in the charging regime. That really shows the level of the shadow treasurer’s desperation. More importantly it shows that, in his desperation, he turned a \$1.7 million budget year impact into a \$19.3 million impact. He did that to start with but he is not confident of the story. There is no story in the impact this financial year, so he accumulated it over four years and turned it into a \$19.3 million drama when it is a \$1.7 million budget year impact.

The shadow treasurer is not particularly sure that he is onto a good thing, or that it is a real story. More important and more worrying—and this is relevant if the opposition ever managed to achieve government—the opposition is still living with the notion that it can deliver government services without paying for them. It costs the government, through

its wages, a certain amount to deliver government services. We believe it is reasonable for the government to be recompensed or to have revenue relevant to the cost of a service.

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

Bushfires—provision of Australian contingent

MR GENTLEMAN: Mr Speaker, my question is to the minister for emergency services. Can the minister advise if the ACT has been requested to provide assistance to the United States to help fight large wildfires in that country and, if so, what is the nature of that assistance?

MR CORBELL: It is important, I think, that the Assembly is aware that, as of tomorrow, four representatives of the ACT government, from the rural fire service and from the Department of the Territory and Municipal Services, will be travelling to or will already be in the United States to help provide assistance with the very serious wildfire situation that that country is currently facing.

On 8 August Australia received its first official request from the USA for assistance in battling their growing bushfire crisis. The United States has experienced extremely dry and windy conditions, with extensive lightning storms in the western states having caused no fewer than 1,000 new bushfires. The US is on its highest level of response. Due to the ongoing nature of the crisis, their available resources are depleting rapidly, especially aircraft managers and fire line supervisors. It is worth highlighting that the conditions currently being experienced in the United States are not dissimilar to the conditions we experienced here in the ACT during January 2003. Because of this, we have some experience that will be of help to the United States during their own particular period.

The request from the US early this month came as a result of the operating plan defined by the wildfire arrangement between the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture of the United States and the Australian and New Zealand participating agencies. The request was for 45 firefighting specialists. Members will probably already be aware that the ACT has committed two personnel—Mr Scott Cashmere from the ACT RFS, for aerial resource management duties, and Mr Neil Cooper from territory and municipal services, for field liaison duties. Both men left Australia on Thursday, 10 August.

The operational component of the Australian and New Zealand team were deployed to two separate fires in the north-west of the United States. These two fires are at the Tripod complex near Wenatchee in Washington State and the Mt Hood fire complex near Redmond in Oregon State. Mr Cooper was sent to the Tripod complex near Wenatchee upon arrival and began his firefighting duties on Tuesday, 15 August. Mr Cashmere undertook orientation and training before being deployed to the Mt Hood fire complex in Oregon on Wednesday, 16 August. Both men, I am pleased to advise members, are doing well. They are due to return to Australia on 14 September, depending on debriefing and connecting travel arrangements.

Yesterday the United States made another request to Australia for assistance. As a result, they have asked us again to be part of the joint team between the US, Australia and New Zealand. We have agreed, and two more firefighters from the ACT will join the Australian contingent. I can confirm today that Mr Dave Ingram, from the ACT RFS, will be travelling to the United States, along with Mr Hilton Taylor from TAMS. Mr Ingram will be undertaking aerial resource management roles and Mr Taylor will be undertaking a field liaison role. Both will be deployed initially to a base in Boise, Idaho, pending deployment to where they are needed most. They will be flying out of Canberra late tomorrow. I am sure members will join with me in wishing them a safe journey, a safe experience in the United States and a prompt return to Australia.

The fact that, for such a small jurisdiction, we have been able to contribute four members in two international deployments to assist in a very significant fire situation in the United States is, I think, a strong indicator of the level of skills and experience we have within our firefighting services here in the ACT. I wish them a safe journey and a quick return.

MR GENTLEMAN: Mr Speaker, I do not want to pre-empt any opposition questions here but, as a supplementary question, can the minister advise if the ACT is paying for this assistance?

MR CORBELL: The full cost for the four personnel to travel to the United States will be met by the United States government. That is a cost of approximately \$US17,000 per person. They meet all costs of overseas deployment. The ACT does not pay for any aspect of it. The benefit we get from this, though, is obviously that we have the opportunity for a number of our personnel who are involved in firefighting activity within the ACT to have the additional experience of being involved in a very large-scale fire incident.

The experience of working in a cross-jurisdictional framework dealing with different types of resources, different mechanisms for managing an incident, different skills in terms of communication and experience in managing fire and responding to wildfire, will stand us in good stead when they return, because they will come back to the ACT with that extra experience and extra skill. That will add to the experience available to us here in the ACT if and when we face bushfires in the ACT again.

Environment—Mulligans Flat nature reserve

DR FOSKEY: My question to the Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services concerns the imminent loss of positions—most particularly park rangers—in what was once Environment ACT. The minister would be aware of the discovery in July of an illegal bike track in the valuable Mulligans Flat nature reserve. When discovered, the government set up patrols by rangers in order to catch the culprits who had destroyed some of the critically endangered habitat when building illegal bike ramps, pits and jumps. Can the minister assure the Assembly that the imminent loss of a number of ranger positions will not make the illegal construction of such tracks more likely and the identification and prosecution of the culprits less likely.

Mrs Dunne: Come on, magpie exterminator!

MR HARGREAVES: I thank Mrs Dunne for the interjection. Firstly, Mr Speaker, can I say to Dr Foskey that the changes to the Department of the Territory and Municipal Services will have no effect on Mulligans Flat—quite the contrary. It is a bit of a shame that in the examination of this year’s budget, Dr Foskey particularly and also the shadow minister for the environment did not congratulate the government on the Chief Minister’s initiative to provide a fence around the Mulligans Flat nature reserve.

Mr Seselja: How remiss.

MR HARGREAVES: “How remiss,” says Mr Seselja. I am sorry about this, Mr Speaker, but Mr Seselja may find somewhere else to ride his trail bike.

For Dr Foskey’s information, one of the reasons it is so important to fence around Mulligans Flat is the need to keep out predators, particularly cats, dogs and foxes. I took the opportunity when I was in New Zealand and in South Australia for ministerial councils to visit a couple of places that have such fences and I confess that the fence in South Australia is probably the most appropriate. It is a very effective fence in keeping out predators.

The other benefit of a fence, of course, is to keep out people who would harm the nature reserve. The nature reserve has a number of things which endear it to all of us. There are sensitive woodlands, sensitive grasses and endangered species in that area. There is also a historic track which is part of the original coach path from Yass to Canberra. There are some people in Canberra who value the reserve, and I am sure that Dr Foskey shares the government’s commitment to it. We hope that that fence will keep out trail bike riders who would illegally construct jumps and pits in this area. The use of man-made jumps and things like that is in fact illegal and is a police matter. I would ask members who talk to their constituents about this to report the matter to the police, or at the very least to report it to Canberra Connect on 132281. If they do we will take absolute action.

I can assure Dr Foskey right now that any changes to the staffing profile of territories and municipal services will have absolutely no detrimental effect on that nature reserve. If anything, it will have a positive effect.

DR FOSKEY: I ask a supplementary question. Could the minister advise the Assembly of the cost of remediating the damage and the public safety risk that such an illegal facility represents?

MR HARGREAVES: I will have to take that question on notice. I do not know how much the remediation of those trail bike pits and jumps will cost, but I will endeavour to find out. I do not know if I will be able to do it today. It may take some compilation, but I will endeavour to get Dr Foskey an answer by tomorrow afternoon at the latest.

I have to say that once this was drawn to our attention we went public very, very quickly and told the public that this sort of behaviour will not be tolerated and that we will come down on it particularly heavily. If we can identify those people who have decided that this is a good spot to do their trail bike riding, we will bring every ounce of weight of the law against them.

I want to be absolutely clear about this. This will not be tolerated. This is not a piece of land that happens to be surplus land at the back of a residential development. This is not a bit of parkland in the suburbs. This is a very sensitive nature reserve. Let me say publicly that it is to the Chief Minister's credit that he recognised this and declared it as a nature reserve and has in fact ensured that we had \$350,000 put aside in this budget to construct that fence.

On that issue, I had a very, very brief conversation with Trish Harrup from the conservation council. I wish to have further conversations with them around how we as a community can look after Mulligans Flat. I think this is a community thing. It is a jewel in our community and we need to look after it. It needs to be done as a partnership between government and the community, the people who live adjacent to it.

It was the very presence of that nature reserve that prompted the government to introduce the cat containment legislation around those two suburbs that border the nature reserve. I know that the government is 100 per cent behind the Chief Minister's dedication to preserving it. I appreciate Dr Foskey's actually raising the issue again in the chamber, and I congratulate her on it.

Planning—EpiCentre lease

MR SESELJA: My question is to the Minister for Planning and relates to the EpiCentre sale. ING wrote to ACTPLA on 23 September 2005 seeking clarification as to the permitted land use for the EpiCentre site. You said yesterday that the LDA responded on 6 October 2005, after this letter was referred to the LDA by ACTPLA. The draft reply states that it would be up to ING to make its own assessment as to the permitted land use. On 4 October, ACTPLA held a meeting with Austexx in which the following minute was taken:

Each shop can be a maximum of 3,000m². There can be a number of shops on site and each shop can be maximum 3,000m².

Why was Austexx given an indication by ACTPLA as to the permitted land use on 4 October while ING was apparently told two days later to work it out for themselves?

MR CORBELL: ING were not told to work it out for themselves. It was remiss of me to not table the letter I indicated I would table yesterday. I apologise for that oversight. I now have that letter. I table it.

Ainslie Village—food service

MRS BURKE: My question is to the Chief Minister. Is it financially and socially responsible to cut vital funding, both in the short term and in the long term, to a food service for vulnerable residents of Ainslie Village who heavily rely on such a service? As Chief Minister, will you override the decision taken by the Minister for Disability and Community Services to close down the food service at Ainslie Village?

MR STANHOPE: It is certainly a difficult issue for the government and, indeed, for Centacare and the residents of Ainslie Village. As members would be aware,

Ainslie Village is currently moving from a SAAP-funded site to a long-term community housing site where residents will have access to a range of mainstream services which meet their individual support requirements. This transition has been in place for some time. Ainslie Village, in concert with the residents there, has been, through Centacare managers and Housing ACT most particularly, changing significantly in nature and scope. It is now being managed very much as a long-term community housing site rather than in the style of a hostel, which was very much its past.

The government has indeed endorsed substantial savings to be made at Ainslie Village over a period of two years as it moves from a supported accommodation site to community housing. Centacare currently receives SAAP funding of \$180,000 to provide subsidised meals for residents of Ainslie Village, and residents are charged by Centacare \$6 each for those meals. It was the government's proposal that that funding cease this year. A meeting with stakeholders on site, including the residents council and ACT Health, on 16 August last—in other words, last week—identified a number of issues on which the department will work with those clients to address throughout the transition. Those include a number of infrastructure issues, including issues about shared kitchen facilities in each block and the adequacy of those kitchen facilities for the residents of Ainslie Village.

It is certainly the case, recognised by the government, that the dining room provides a very important social hub. It is very much at the heart of some of the aspects and activities of the village, and we understand that. In that context, the department is currently negotiating with the Australian Red Cross to establish alternative meals provision on site from 1 October this year, which would be an interim arrangement in relation to the transition and the potential closure of the dining room. That proposal would include the Red Cross transporting meals to the site and making arrangements to sell and supply those meals through a volunteer program to residents of Ainslie Village.

Funding of \$60,000 also has been identified to support Ainslie Village residents during the phase-out of the services. It will provide life skills training to help people learn to shop and cook and also identify further infrastructure issues which may arise. The Red Cross will include this work in submitting to the department its broader volunteer program and meals proposal, which is expected to be received, I think, this week.

The department will continue to meet with residents on site to clarify the role of on-site providers, the residents and the site manager, including the development of assessment tools which would assist in identifying issues which have not already been identified or which may emerge as this proposal is continued or furthered.

At the heart of the decision the government has taken and is seeking to implement is, of course, the issue of the use or appropriate priority of utilising SAAP funding of \$180,000 to provide meals. This funding is essentially for supported accommodation, and that was at the heart of the decision and behind the decision which the department has taken in relation to the appropriate utilisation of housing funds for the provision and maintenance of a dining room. The minister, Ms Gallagher, discussed the issue with me subsequent to the decision having been made. She is acutely sensitive to the issues and the vulnerability of some of the residents of Ainslie Village. The minister has indicated to me that it is a decision and a process which she will closely monitor. In the event that, through this stage of very close and continuing consultation—

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

MRS BURKE: I have a supplementary question. I thank the Chief Minister for his response and I note his particular interest in this issue. Chief Minister, what resources and infrastructure will the government commit to and make available to the Ainslie Village complex after the Red Cross arrangements, which I understand are only to be in place for nine months, to assist with the positive move to independent living arrangements?

MR STANHOPE: I thank Mrs Burke for the supplementary question, as it gives me an opportunity to conclude the point that I was making. The minister can respond more fully in terms of her own thinking, but I can relay conversations that I have had with the minister in relation to her determination to monitor closely the transition and the implementation of this policy.

The minister is acutely aware of the vulnerability of some of the residents of Ainslie Village and of the prospect of some of them not responding to the personalised and detailed life skills training with which it is proposed that each of the residents be provided. The government proposes to provide a significant level of support during the transition. The minister, as I say, is acutely aware of that. We have committed \$60,000 for life skills training to ensure that people do have the skills to support themselves through the preparation of meals.

I know that the minister has continuing concerns about whether all of the residents of Ainslie Village will respond to that life skills training to the extent that they will be self-sufficient. We are aware of that and sensitive to it. If the minister has any continuing concern that some residents simply have not responded to the life skills training and have not developed the skills necessary to support themselves through the production or provision of meals for themselves, the government will, of course, respond to that in relation to the potential to continue a meal service in some form.

We will not abandon the residents of this community housing site. I think that each of us is aware—and I do not wish to overgeneralise it and I do not wish to patronise any of the residents—of the life circumstance and situation of many of the residents there. The minister is particularly and acutely sensitive to their needs and to the potential that, if some of the residents do not respond to the life skills training to the extent that, at this stage, we hope they will, of course we will have to reassess the extended, continuing meal support for Ainslie Village, but we will not walk away from that.

I did, I think, go to the other aspect of your supplementary question, Mrs Burke. I am sure that the minister would be more than happy to facilitate a full briefing on all of the government's proposals in relation to Ainslie Village if you were interested in that.

Mrs Burke: Yes, certainly. Thank you, Chief Minister.

Planning—EpiCentre lease

MR PRATT: My question is to the Minister for Planning and relates to the sale of the EpiCentre site. Last night on WIN news, you said that the inquiry made by ING was

“quite rightly referred back to the Land Development Agency because the lease and development conditions had not yet been revealed”. The lease and development conditions were released by the Land Development Agency on 17 November. If inquiries were being referred to the LDA prior to the lease and development conditions being issued, why did ACTPLA have a meeting to discuss the issue with Austexx on 4 October? Why were Austexx not referred to the Land Development Agency?

MR CORBELL: I will seek advice from officers and take the question on notice.

Kangaroos

MS PORTER: My question is directed to the Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services. Minister, I read with interest the media stories about the experiment to manage the number of kangaroos by limiting their breeding. Are you able to explain to the Assembly the purpose of the experiment and how it will work?

MR HARGREAVES: I thank Ms Porter for her question about a topic that has generated a great deal of interest. We received a number of inquiries about kangaroos, or skippies, from AAP Reuters and AAP New York. At present there are large numbers of kangaroos in the district. Whilst they are generally regarded as lovable skippies they can pose a risk to drivers and road safety. We need a humane method of managing the number of kangaroos.

This experiment is aimed in particular at managing the numbers in nature reserves or enclosed areas, and in urban nature parks. A previous experiment showed that injections with contraceptive drugs worked and interrupted the breeding cycle for up to two years. We are now working on increasing the size of the experiment and making it cheaper by introducing pellets into the food supply of kangaroos. We are working with researchers from the Marsupial Research Laboratory at Newcastle University to investigate this oral contraceptive for eastern grey kangaroos.

Thirteen kangaroos seen regularly on the Federal Golf Course, 25 in Belconnen and 29 at Tidbinbilla have been identified with ear tags and passive integrated transponders, another name for a microchip that enables a kangaroo to be tracked. Part of the difficulty encountered in the past has been catching the kangaroos to tag them. Without the tags they cannot be tracked and we cannot be sure how the experiment is going. However, new equipment and diligent target practice—

Mr Stefaniak: With .303s?

MR HARGREAVES: The leader of opposition is laughing at the image of kangaroos being used as target practice, which would not go down too well. New equipment and diligent target practice with tranquilliser darts has aided in catching kangaroos. This new experiment builds on work conducted over the past 10 years, including trials on captive kangaroos at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

Previous research showed that injections of a fertility control agent successfully prevented pregnancy in female eastern grey kangaroos. However, the move to oral delivery is essential for wild kangaroo populations. Aside from contributing to the current research on kangaroo fertility control, fenced groups of known aged individual

kangaroos are expected to provide long-term knowledge to use in ACT kangaroo management over the next 10 to 20 years.

MS PORTER: I ask a supplementary question. Kangaroos have a unique reproductive cycle that enables them to have up to three young at one time. Minister, can you explain that system and indicate how the drugs will help? Is there scientific agreement in this new process?

MR HARGREAVES: The concept of kangaroos having up to three young at one time is the Peter Costello rule of reproduction: one joey for mum, one joey for dad and one joey for the country. Ms Porter is right. Female kangaroos can have up to three young at different stages of their reproductive cycle. The first stage is for an embryo or bunch of cells in the womb in what is virtually a state of animation waiting for the right conditions to grow to a fully developed embryo.

The second stage is a joey in the pouch suckling on a teat and the third stage is a joey out of the pouch suckling, when necessary, on a different teat. The interesting thing is that the mother can deliver milk of different compositions to the different teats so that each joey gets the nutrition appropriate to its stage of development. The contraceptive being delivered interrupts this cycle by preventing the female kangaroos from becoming pregnant. This interruption is temporary and the normal cycle will resume when the effects of the drug wear off. This is important because we do not wish to get rid of the kangaroos; we wish only to manage their numbers humanely.

Referring to scientific agreements, I understand that Rosslyn Beeby from the *Canberra Times* is indulging in scientists at 50 paces. She got one scientist to say that this is not a good idea. The scientist said that this could be an ecological disaster. I send the following message to that scientist: This is not sterilisation; this is contraception. Professor Des Cooper of the University of New South Wales is very contradictory, which debunks any credibility or environmental credentials Rosslyn Beeby might have if she refers to what he has to say.

In May this year, when referring to the koala and kangaroo contraception program, Professor Cooper said, "It's primary objective is to find humane ways of managing koala and kangaroo populations by using contraceptives, preferably by delivering them remotely." That does not sound like an ecological disaster; it sounds like an endorsement. In 2001 Professor Cooper said, "Animals that are not sterilised by the vaccine will continue to breed and render the vaccine useless." If I had to choose between Dr Cooper and the Marsupial Cooperative Research Centre I would back the Marsupial Cooperative Research Centre because it is still developing the vaccine.

Another issue intrigues me. I understand Professor Cooper wants to implant the pill but he would have to catch the animal first before he could do so. So Professor Cooper wants to use Mr Stefaniak's rifle, drop a kangaroo, race over to it, pop in a pill or implant it, and the kangaroo would bound off later when it woke up. I would rather not put an animal through any kind of anaesthetic if it can be given a pill in its feed. That is a better way to go about it. I understand that this is a bit of a "scientists at 50 paces" job.

The University of New South Wales is at odds with the University of Newcastle, which is hard luck. Professor Cooper possibly—and I use the word "possibly" as I do not yet

have proof positive—has a commercial interest in the development of an implanted pill. I say to the *Canberra Times* that if it quotes scientists at 50 paces and there is divided opinion in the scientific world, it should print both sides of the argument. It should not just pick one that suits it; it should print both sides of the argument otherwise a reporter's credibility will be in tatters.

I just referred to two contradictory statements made by Professor Cooper on his own web site. The worst thing about all this is that Professor Cooper wants to tranquillise an animal and then implant a pill. That means that every two years or so an animal would have to be tranquillised. The Marsupial Research Centre is looking at ways to control the numbers of wild kangaroos without the need for an anaesthetic. I congratulate the centre on its work.

Education—enrolments

MRS DUNNE: My question is to the minister for education. On Wednesday, 16 October, your colleague Ms Porter told listeners to ABC Radio 666 that we had to get “our education system out of the doldrums so that it doesn't continue to fail us, doesn't continue to have parents leaving it like they're leaving a sinking ship”. Is your colleague correct when she says that the education system is in the doldrums, that it is failing and that parents are abandoning it like a sinking ship?

MR BARR: I thank Mrs Dunne for the question and for the opportunity to put on the record the government's strong support for public education in the ACT. However, as we have all acknowledged in this debate, there are some significant issues that our public education is facing, not least of which is the change in demographics that we are experiencing in our city. The most recent ABS data that was released, I think, on 30 June showed an eight per cent decrease in the number of people under 15 in the ACT in the last 10 years and, at the same time, a 45 per cent increase in the number of people over 65. This is further evidence of the ageing of our population and of the demographic changes that we need to address in looking forward with our public education system.

The point the government has acknowledged that we need to address is that there are fewer kids in our territory at the moment. Running parallel with this decline in the number of people under 15 in our city has been a well-documented drift from the public system into the private system. It has been at a rate of around one per cent a year in recent times. There are a variety of factors that are at play in terms of this drift, many of which are beyond the control of the territory government and they relate to the funding policies of the commonwealth government. Nonetheless, the government is seeking, through the *Towards 2020: renewing our schools* package, to address these specific issues, to ensure that this drift does not continue and that we are able to invest a record amount in public education. I note that members opposite seem to have no interest at all in engaging in a debate about investing in public education.

The government is embarking on a major reform process. In this budget, there is \$90 million over the next four years. In this budget, there is a program of major investment in our public education system, to address many of the issues that have arisen as a result of our system being largely put together in the 1960s and the 1970s and needing renewal. That issue is clear. That is why the government is engaging in this extensive consultation process and why we have put forward a major reform proposal. It

is clearly the case that, if we sit back and do nothing, our public education system will drift into minority status. That is unacceptable, and the government will not stand by and watch that happen. That is why we are investing a record amount of money in public education. There is no doubt that, across the territory, we can improve our performance in education. Of course we can, and we should always strive to do that.

One of the issues that the government is seeking to confront and that the opposition refuses to confront is the current inequitable distribution of resources within our school system. Schools that are smaller receive a subsidy for no reason other than that they are small—not for educational reasons, not for socioeconomic reasons. There are some schools that I feel deserve and require additional support, and that is what the government is seeking to do: ensure a more equitable distribution of our limited education resources across our system.

I believe strongly that we can do better in public education. That is the clear purpose of the government's reform agenda. We want to improve our public education system, but we need to have a hard look at how many sites we deliver our education from, how we can improve the quality of the physical infrastructure of our schools and invest money in additional IT resources and look at the curriculum and a whole range of other issues that are clearly combining to lead to this drift away from the public sector.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, have you delivered a broadside to your colleague for her statement that the education system is in the doldrums, that it is failing and that parents are abandoning it like a sinking ship?

MR BARR: I thank Mrs Dunne for her question. The important issue that we all need to address here is: how can we improve our public education system? I certainly welcome Ms Porter's interest in this issue, her passion for it and her desire to see our public education system improved. Ms Porter's position stands in marked contrast to the irrelevant rabble we have on the other side of the chamber who have absolutely nothing to say about the future of public education.

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

MR BARR: It is very clear. It is part of the subject matter. Ms Porter's interest in and support for reform in public education and improving our public education system is clear and demonstrated. It has been throughout her time in this place. As I say, it stands in marked contrast to the petty potshots that we see from the other side. There is no real interest in engaging on the issues. I am very pleased to be in a government with Ms Porter. She is a fantastic member who works very hard for her constituents and is someone who passionately believes in public education and the strengthening of our public education system. She is the sort of member that this Assembly needs. We need more people like Mary Porter in this place.

Australian Taxation Office computer centre—relocation

MR SMYTH: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Chief Minister, who is now the Minister for Business and Economic Development. Chief Minister, you would be aware that the federal government has decided to locate a new Centrelink IT centre in Adelaide.

Were you aware of this announcement before it was made? What action did you take or have you taken in an attempt to have this decision reversed?

MR STANHOPE: No, I was not aware of the decision until I sighted a copy of a press release from Mr Hockey. I did, however, meet with Mr Hockey some time in the very recent past, perhaps in the last month. During that meeting we discussed a range of issues. One of the issues discussed was the issue of skills shortages throughout Australia, particularly in relation to IT specialists, but Mr Hockey did not tell me at that meeting that he was proposing to establish a new IT hub in Adelaide.

The first I was aware of decisions taken by Mr Hockey in that regard was when I saw the press release. As I have said, it is a decision I regret. I regret it to the extent that it reflects on the federal Liberal government's commitment to Canberra as the national capital. Canberra was established as the seat of government. We exist because of a decision to locate the federal parliament and its supporting administration here within the national capital. I regret any decision that any government takes, most particularly a federal government—and in this instance a Liberal government—to slight the ACT in its national capital role and to undermine its national capital identity.

I would in fact beseech members of the ACT branch of the Liberal Party to impress upon their federal colleagues the disservice they do to Canberra as the national capital and to our reputation when they take action such as this that undermines our status as the national capital. Mr Smyth, I would hope that you would make representations to your Liberal Party colleagues about the damage the Liberal Party federally does to the ACT when it takes decisions such as this. They are decisions to be regretted.

It was a decision taken of course in the context of national shortages in a whole range of professions and a recognition of enormous skills shortages across the board. I think what is interesting in the decision is the implicit suggestion inherent in the location of a new hub that there are, running around the streets of Adelaide, 100 or thereabouts unemployed IT specialists. I can assure Mr Hockey that there are not. Mr Hockey will have as much chance, or as great a challenge, of attracting the 100 or so IT specialists that he proposes be employed in Adelaide as he would have had the hub—quite rightly and appropriately—been located here in the ACT.

It is to be acknowledged that the ACT has the highest number of ICT companies and ICT specialists per capita in Australia, with 8.6 per cent or thereabouts of the ACT work force identifying as being engaged or working in the field of IT, as against the national average of just over three per cent. I think it is interesting in itself that Adelaide can boast a labour force participation rate by IT specialists of somewhere in the order of three per cent and we have somewhere in the order of 8.5 per cent. But Mr Hockey and the Liberal Party federally believe they will have a greater chance of attracting IT specialists into this new hub in Adelaide than they would in the ACT. I think that is a very poor assumption.

In any event, had the commonwealth government, the federal Liberal government, pressed and pursued the issue of skills shortages—and that, of course, is what this decision begs. It is essentially an admission of failure by the federal government that it has not seen to its own employment needs, that it has not funded universities to train up,

in this particular instance, IT specialists to fulfil its own needs, let alone the nation's needs.

At the heart of much of the debate around skills shortages is of course the appalling neglect by the federal Liberal government, the Howard government, of universities. One of the great emerging crises in Australia is the crisis generated by a lack of skills and a lack of training. We see it in this particular instance in relation to IT. The commonwealth has simply not supported the training of the professionals it requires for its own work force, let alone the broader work force. That is a matter of enormous regret, and I am prepared to express that regret. I would ask the Liberal Party in the ACT to ask their Liberal colleagues to support Canberra as the national capital.

MR SPEAKER: The Chief Minister's time has expired.

MR SMYTH: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Chief Minister, since the tax office also took the decision to move jobs out of the ACT, what have you done to consult with the federal government on the need to keep jobs in the ACT?

MR STANHOPE: It is, I think, a matter of continuing concern that the Liberal Party federally continues to show a lack of support for Canberra. It is a subliminal form of Canberra bashing that the federal government is engaging in by refusing to recognise the fundamental importance of Canberra as the national capital and as the seat of government. The ACT is to a very significant extent suffering as a result of its enormous economic success, reflected most particularly through a 2.8 per cent unemployment rate here within the territory. Within the area of IT, the unemployment rate for IT specialists is probably zero. We have a booming economy. Since we came to government five years ago we have increased the work force here in the territory by 17,000.

Mr Smyth: On a point of order, Mr Speaker: under standing order 118 (b) the minister cannot debate the subject. The question is: what has he done to communicate with the federal government? We are yet to hear anything.

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

MR STANHOPE: The ACT is a victim of its own success, to a great extent. Since coming to government the work force in the ACT has increased by 17,000. Over that same period we have seen the ACT produce quarter after quarter, in every single range of indicators that you are prepared to focus on, the extent to which the ACT economy is beating the rest of Australia. This is highlighted by the 2.8 per cent trend unemployment that we are currently experiencing in the territory—17,000 additional jobs, the participation rate the highest in Australia at 74 per cent—an eight per cent higher participation rate. These enormously strong economic indicators—the strength of the economy, the extent to which it has boomed, the achievements of this government over the last five years—are just exceptional. And there is a consequence of that. The economy is so strong, it is booming, confidence is up, business is looking to the future, we have the lowest unemployment, the highest retail turnover—

Mr Smyth: Mr Speaker, under standing order 118 (b), he cannot debate the subject. The question is quite clear. What has he done—

MR SPEAKER: The standing orders provide for five minutes to answer the question.

Mr Smyth: Yes, and the standing orders also say that he cannot debate the subject, he must answer the question.

MR SPEAKER: Indeed, and while ever the Chief Minister sticks to the subject matter of the question, which is in relation to the IT matter you have raised, he has five minutes to answer it.

Mr Smyth: To communicate with the federal government. If he has not done it, he should just say no.

MR STANHOPE: In those 17,000 jobs we have created in the five years that we have been in government, which have led to a trend unemployment rate of 2.8 per cent—the lowest ever recorded trend unemployment rate recorded in Australia—there are of course a significant number of IT jobs. We have now, under this government, the highest level of ICT participation in the work force of any place in Australia—I think it is 8.6 per cent against the national average of 3.5 per cent—attributable to this government.

These are things we have done. We have ratcheted it up to the point where over eight per cent of all people in the territory are engaged in ICT, as against what the rest of the nation has managed to achieve. We have not done what the federal Liberal government has done, which is refuse to accept and acknowledge the issue of skills shortage, refuse to invest in universities or educational training.

In this budget which has been delivered, which we are currently debating, we have hit the \$500 million mark. A significant proportion of that is in relation to VET and the training and skilling-up of our work force with an enormous increase in apprenticeships, which is a feature of this government and our dedicated attention to the issue of skills. Indeed, in this budget again and through decisions taken reflected in the budget, we are about to establish a skills commission.

We have acknowledged that the number one issue within the territory is skills. We have engaged with the business community in a way which offends the sensibilities of the Liberal Party, because they of course regard the business community or sector as their own and would prefer it if they did not deal with or work in partnership with this particular government, which they do, to pursue a range of initiatives to attract people to the ACT.

We now have, for the first time in 10 years, since the great rush out of the territory, net positive migration back into the ACT. It has taken 10 years to recover from the damage which John Howard and Kate Carnell did 10 years ago. We have now recovered the position. This is the first time in 10 years that we have had net positive migration back into the territory.

We put our money where our mouth is—\$20 million dollars into NICTA—things that you would not do. We now have the leading-edge Australian centre of excellence in relation to ICT, something you would not do. You never ever put your money where your mouth was. A great lot of gunnas.

MR SPEAKER: The Chief Minister's time has expired.

Schools—closures

MS MacDONALD: My question is to Mr Barr, the Minister for Education. Minister, could you inform the Assembly of the next steps in the consultation process on the government's proposed reforms to the public education system?

MR BARR: I thank Ms MacDonald for the question. As members would be aware, on 6 June the government announced a major proposal to reform our public education system to respond to a range of significant issues that I was able to highlight in my previous answer to Mrs Dunne's question. As part of this reform process the government is embarking on an extensive community consultation process. It is a process that I am genuinely committed to engage in constructively with the whole range of school communities: P&Cs, school boards and all members of the community who wish to engage on these issues.

I do not think there has been a consultation process on this scale undertaken before in the history of ACT self-government. In the time since the government's proposal was announced, my department and I have been involved in over 550 meetings with groups and representatives to discuss the proposal. A considerable number of these meetings are still to come. Last night, you, Mr Speaker, Ms MacDonald, Ms Porter and I attended a forum organised by the P&Cs to talk about the proposal. Representatives from about 17 school P&Cs spoke. I will continue to meet with individuals and communities throughout this consultation phase in order to discuss the proposal and the future of public education. I know that my colleagues on this side of the house will continue to engage constructively in this process.

Eight community forums have been held, one in each of the education regions. These meetings have been well attended and have provided members of the community with an opportunity to raise issues of concern and to raise particular questions around some of the proposals and, in many instances, to bring forward some very positive ideas and suggestions around how we can improve public education in the territory. They also provided an important opportunity for me as minister to listen to the views of the community, to take questions and to clarify issues of concern. I have invited the community to provide feedback on the proposal through a range of other forms. Obviously, there is a written submission process. To date, we have received more than 1,000 items of correspondence, and the community has been engaging very constructively in the process.

The department's *Towards 2020* web site contains a range of information about the proposal, including advice on the impact on every school in the ACT. It also has detailed information on financial costings and enrolment data on schools proposed for closure or amalgamation. This site is regularly updated with further information as the consultation process progresses.

A phone line has been established so that parents and community members can speak directly to departmental officers on specific issues. I have also written to all school board chairs seeking their views, and similar letters have been provided to community groups.

School directors and other senior personnel continue to meet with staff and parent groups to work through their questions and issues around the proposal. Schools will also continue to assist parents and carers with specific questions, including advice and assistance on matters such as school enrolment in 2007.

The needs of students with disabilities and other special learning needs are receiving high priority. Parents of students with special learning needs enrolled in schools proposed for closure or amalgamation have been invited to meet individually with departmental special education personnel to discuss the particular needs of their child and to develop a transition plan, should the proposal succeed. Principals are meeting on an individual basis with parents of students in schools proposed for closure at the end of 2006 to discuss student preferences and determine what kind of support may be required if their school closes.

The government has also called for interested members of the community to provide written submissions. These submissions close on Friday, 3 November and will be carefully considered against the criteria that is required by section 20 (5) of the Education Act, which states:

Before closing or amalgamating a government school, the Minister must—

- (a) have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students; families and the general school community; and
- (b) ensure that school communities affected by the closure or amalgamation have been adequately consulted during a period of at least six months.

The next step in the process is a series of educational seminars. The first of these, on the new curriculum framework, was held last Thursday and was very well attended—so well attended, in fact, that we have been asked to run the seminar again, and the department is arranging for this to happen. A series of other seminars will be held over the next six weeks, and that information is available on the departmental web site.

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

Supplementary answers to questions without notice

Environment—Mulligans Flat nature reserve

MR HARGREAVES: Dr Foskey asked me earlier this afternoon how much it cost to remediate the illegal bike tracks and jumps at Mulligans Flat. The total cost was around \$700. This included staff time, the use of a backhoe and operator, and reseeded of the area.

Planning—EpiCentre

Planning—sections 84 and 89, Civic

MR CORBELL: In question time yesterday Mr Seselja asked me a question related to a file note made by the chief planning executive on 17 November last year, following a meeting with Austexx representatives on that day. The note, which includes the names of those attending, is headed “DFO—Fyshwick” and reads as follows:

Want clarification of shop clause for land use policy at Epicentre site.
Have requested our interpretation.
Not seeking preferential treatment.
Reinforced our caveats about the meeting.
Had a discussion about definitions, the draft lease, a DCP off Canberra Ave.
The authority will provide a consolidated position in writing.
Issues with LDA potentially. Auction issue.
Advice prior to auction.
Provided with copy DFO legal advice.
Might need to discuss with Minister.

Mr Seselja asked me:

... did the chief planning executive raise his concerns over pre auction advice, as noted in his meeting notes? If so, what was the nature of those concerns?

The answer to Mr Seselja is that, first of all it should be noted that Austexx subsequently wrote to ACTPLA on 23 November 2005. The chief planning executive responded to this on 8 December last year and this document has been released to the planning and environment committee. A check of meeting agendas around 17 November showed that my meeting with the chief planning executive on Monday, 21 November 2005 included an item the chief planning executive added to the agenda entitled "DFO—Fyshwick." There are no notes of that meeting. As I said in my response yesterday and earlier in the media, it was a reasonable thing for Mr Savery to bring to my attention the fact that bidders were making inquiries about the sale of the land. Further, Mr Savery has advised me that his clear recollection is that he did not raise matters of concern about the pre auction process.

Also yesterday Dr Foskey asked me a question about the change of use charge for sections 84 and 89 in the city. I can advise Dr Foskey that the change of use charge was assessed at \$3.890 million for section 89 city, and \$9.134 million for section 84 city. Both these amounts were paid. However, the payer, QIC, appealed the assessment for both sites to the AAT. The AAT joined the appeals to be heard as one appeal. ACTPLA employed Mr Paul Powderley of Colliers International to provide an independent report, as the valuations provided by the AVO on behalf of the authority and Knight Frank on behalf of QIC were a significant way apart. Colliers indicated that the added value would be in the vicinity of \$6 million to \$7 million.

During the AAT process no outcome or resolution was achieved at mediation. However, the parties continued to negotiate and an agreement was eventually reached that the combined amount of CUC payable for both sections 84 and 89 would be \$6.350 million. The approval included off-site works at a cost of \$800,000 which was to be deducted from the CUC payable. This resulted in a consent decision by the AAT which provided that final CUC amount. As a result, through this process, there were no before and after values. The total amount paid by QIC after the cost of off-site works were deducted was \$5.550 million.

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee Scrutiny report 31

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (3.46): I present the following report:

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee (performing the duties of a Scrutiny of Bills and Subordinate Legislation Committee)—Scrutiny Report 31, dated 23 August 2006, together with the relevant minutes of proceedings.

I seek leave to move a motion authorising the report for publication.

Leave granted.

MR STEFANIAK: I move:

That scrutiny report 31 be authorised for publication.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

MR STEFANIAK: I seek leave to make a brief statement.

Leave granted.

MR STEFANIAK: Scrutiny report 31 contains the committee's comments on the Remuneration Tribunal Amendment Bill 2006. I commend the report to the Assembly.

Industrial relations—reforms

Debate resumed.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (3.47): Members will have to take themselves back to just before lunch, otherwise I will need to repeat the speech. I would rather not use my time in that way. You will remember that I asked why Mr Gentleman's sense of righteousness about the impact of WorkChoices was not extended to concern for the ACT's public schoolteachers, ACTION bus drivers, and even taxi drivers, who are feeling sorely beleaguered at the moment. I was surmising that, no, he may have private concerns about those people but he is not speaking out because their problem is not the federal government but the ACT government. The minister looks quite content to implement the provisions of WorkChoices where that suits and to say that that is the law. It is easier for Mr Gentleman and other ALP members to attack private employers and the commonwealth, while overlooking the erosion of conditions caused by this budget and the government's approach to enterprise bargaining with teachers in government schools. Does Mr Gentleman worry about how a reduced number of department officials will cope with the stress as they deal with the enormous ramifications of the 2020 strategy for government schools and the teachers they support? Again, if he does he is keeping that to himself.

I wonder how the Minister for Industrial Relations, who is also the minister for education, is juggling these two seemingly contradictory elements. Does Mr Gentleman

worry about conditions of workers in the ACT community sector, whose workload grows ever greater, as the federal government's policies on welfare-to-work kick in, as housing affordability decreases and homelessness increases, and the budget cuts reduce services.

I mentioned yesterday that the community sector has been sorely disappointed by this government, which promised much with its social plan. I have watched, as I am sure members of the government have, people burn out in the community sector where there is so much to do. There is so much goodwill and desire to do it but a lack of resources to provide the capacity. Of course this was already happening before the commonwealth's WorkChoices legislation came in. Mr Gentleman's concern for workers is, as always, exemplary, but it is always at some remove from where I believe he could actually do something very directly to support them.

I note Mr Gentleman apparently does not think that I should ever leave my seat, even for health-related purposes like the taking of nourishment, toilet breaks and mental health purposes. I have noted that that is something that comes up every now and again. It would be good if he could find something substantive in my arguments to attack, not my inability to be in two places at the same time.

The erosion of working conditions and the impact on workers' health began, I believe, some time ago, not just with WorkChoices. In fact it was quite active around the time the accord was brought in, which I believe was by a Hawke government—and I think that was an ALP government—and I believe that Mr Barr himself noted that Mr Howard made a similar comment. I would like to hear Mr Gentleman move from WorkChoices to welfare-to-work reform.

MR SPEAKER: The member's time has expired.

MR STANHOPE (Ginninderra—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Business and Economic Development, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Minister for the Arts) (3.51): As my colleagues on this side have pointed out, the negative impacts of the WorkChoices legislation on the health of workers is clear. Studies—and we are aware of this—constantly show that workers exposed to poor working conditions, particularly insecure employment, suffer worse health outcomes. It now appears certain that the health, mental health and occupational health and safety outcomes of workers will suffer incrementally as a result of the WorkChoices changes. The most obvious impact will be on workers' occupational health and safety.

Dr Toni Schofield, senior lecturer at the University of Sydney, has suggested that the cuts to union rights will have a dramatic impact on occupational health and safety. This is largely because the reforms are aimed at freeing up small and medium-sized businesses from regulatory supervision and union involvement, exactly the businesses where large numbers of injuries occur and where the intervention of a safety conscious union is most needed. The impact on big business can also not be underestimated, particularly when coupled with the federal government's attack on union involvement on construction sites. The safety of workers will undoubtedly be put at risk without unions like the CFMEU on site to ensure safety corners are not cut.

These changes are also likely to see an impact on the wider health system. Last year the New Zealand health ministry released a report, *Decades of disparity: socio-economic*

mortality trends in New Zealand 1981-1999, which examined a period during New Zealand's history in which similar industrial relations changes were made. That report found that inequality increased in the New Zealand community because of that legislation, leading to rising mortality rates and a gap in life expectancy between low and high income groups. If such impacts are repeated here they are likely to place a greater strain on the public health system, with lower income earners unable to afford private health insurance.

Dr Don Edgar completed a family impact statement on the WorkChoices legislation for Unions ACT after the Prime Minister failed to live up to his election commitment to prepare such statements for the legislation. Dr Edgar found:

My main concern about the proposed industrial relations regime is that it will pit worker against worker, family against family, region against region, rather than seeing how closely and positively connected are the three elements of a good society—healthy families, healthy workplaces and healthy communities.

Dr Edgar also listed potential damage to the mental health of workers and their families as a key problem in the legislation. That is no surprise, as several studies have found a connection between working conditions and workers' mental health. Forget about the information-rich and the information-poor. WorkChoices will return Australia to a time of the haves and the have-nots—those that have robust, healthy lives and those that struggle with poor health outcomes because of poor occupational health and safety and stress over job security.

New Zealand is not the only country to have completed comparative studies on these issues. The Whitehall study, which examined workers' health in Britain over 20 years, also found that workers there who feared for their job security were more likely to be ill and/or absent from work. Those that were most worried about their employment also suffered a greater incidence of coronary heart disease. With WorkChoices effectively scrapping unfair dismissal and workers already being openly sacked for operational reasons, there is no doubt that WorkChoices will have an impact on how workers feel about their jobs.

One of the more frustrating aspects of this legislation is that it simply does not achieve its stated aim of improved productivity. The World Health Organisation suggests that Canada lost \$8.8 billion in lost productivity in 1998 due to mental illness, while the United Kingdom loses an estimated \$14 billion a year. Beyondblue suggests that six million working days are lost to depression alone each year and that depression costs the Australian economy \$3.3 billion a year in lost productivity. The research is clear. Taking away jobs, reducing a living wage to a minimum wage and placing all power in the hands of business helps no-one in our economy. Instead it reduces productivity and places a greater strain on the health system.

WorkChoices also cannot be separated from its ugly twin sister, the draconian welfare-to-work changes. Together they strip low-income earners of their bargaining power and force those once on disability support and single parent payments to choose work with poor pay and conditions or the loss of their social security payments. This too is likely to have an effect on mental health in the community. In a bitter irony, those who are on a DSP due to mental illness will not be spared from the welfare-to-work changes

and are being forced to choose between low payment or no payment. These reforms will not only lead to new health problems in our community but also exacerbate existing ones.

I take the opportunity to applaud those members of the community, our leading community organisations such as St Vincent de Paul, Centacare, Anglicare and the Uniting Church, who now refuse to participate in the commonwealth's odious new arrangements for enforcing its welfare-to-work changes. It is a real statement when an organisation such as St Vincent de Paul says bluntly and directly to a government, "We are not prepared to work with you in partnership to deliver these services because we believe they are immoral." That is what St Vincent de Paul now thinks of the federal government's welfare-to-work changes.

It is perhaps one of the greatest incidents of leadership I have seen from the community sector to have an organisation like St Vincent de Paul, on behalf of the Catholic Church, saying to the federal government that it believes its welfare-to-work policies are immoral and that it cannot work with the federal government to implement them because of that immorality. That is a great sign of leadership by St Vincent de Paul and the Catholic Church, and I think a message to the commonwealth government around what Australians on the street think of this immoral federal government. "Immoral" is the description St Vincent de Paul applies to this particular policy.

It is not surprising that workers who fear for their jobs and fear for the future security of their families suffer mental health problems. The ACT government is doing what it can to limit these effects on our community. We have invested heavily in work-based mental health programs to protect ACT workers from the worst of those impacts. The government funds a range of mental health initiatives aimed at improving mental health in the workplace, as well as providing valuable early intervention services. The OzHelp program provides a quarter of a million dollars to provide life skills and suicide prevention training to the recognised vulnerable group of young, predominately male, apprentices in the construction industry. OzHelp is a proactive outreach model which engages apprentices in their workplaces. The program also provides counselling support to those who seek it. The program has been externally evaluated, with excellent results. It has attracted interest across Australia and is planned to be replicated in other states.

The government provided funding to the suicide education program to the tune of \$166,000 in the last financial year. Although focused on suicide prevention, it takes a population health view of its role. Its education program includes many elements which are aimed at developing skills among key workers and organisations. The government also provided \$130,000 in this budget for a new initiative in workplace mental health promotion. It will seek interest from organisations outside of government to develop and provide a workplace mental health promotion program to deliver to business, government and other organisations throughout the ACT. The program will work in partnership with the Beyondblue workplace mental health program. Beyondblue provides workplace education for managers and workers in recognising and responding to depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses in the workplace.

It is my hope that the ACT government's investment in workplace mental programs, coupled with the occupational health and safety reforms Mr Barr referred to, can lessen the worst impacts of WorkChoices and indeed of welfare-to-work. However, I fear that

these draconian reforms will have a negative impact on the ACT community. In that regard, I think the response of unions, community organisations, representatives of working men and women and Australian families has signalled their thoughts and feelings around this most appalling legislation.

In the context of WorkChoices there is now a litany of examples of abuse—abuse which of course the Liberal Party insisted would never occur. They said that employers would work within the spirit of the legislation and respect the rights of their work forces. But we know now repeatedly and I think continuously—we will see more and more of this as the legislation bites—the extent to which the WorkChoices legislation will be abused and the impact it will have on our communities, on our families and on individual working men and women.

We have seen just in this last week, in relation to the welfare-to-work reforms, which to some extent should be considered in this debate, the response of leading moral community service providers such as St Vincent de Paul and their absolutely damning critique of welfare-to-work. Their expression, their refusal, is unprecedented—and there is a whole stream of community sector providers who are refusing to work with the commonwealth because they believe its welfare-to-work programs are immoral.

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (4.01), in reply: I would like to thank all members of the Assembly that have stood in support of this motion. The health of workers is a very serious matter that needs to be addressed. My colleagues have raised concerns over the occupational health and safety issues that will arise since the introduction of WorkChoices. There have been strong links to the higher levels of unsafe workplaces and the introduction of Howard's new IR laws, as Ms MacDonald would have stated. I would like to reinforce those issues.

With the introduction of WorkChoices there has been a prevention of unions attending workplaces to inspect issues of OH&S. Pressures on employees to negotiate away conditions such as meal breaks, public holidays and two weeks annual leave in order to remain competitive are detrimental in terms of occupational health and safety and workers compensation.

A report titled *The Shape of Things to Come* has stated that WorkChoices will create a vast pool of low-paid workers with worse health and shorter life expectancies than their wealthier peers, promoting a general decline in health standards. In a second report, Marion Baird of the University of Sydney's business school stated that WorkChoices is likely to undermine and alter employment rights and entitlements, and will impact on the ability of workers to participate in families and communities. Another report of research conducted by researchers at the Australian National University assessed almost 1,200 employed professionals aged between 40 and 44 years for depression, anxiety, physical and self-rated health. The researchers found that 23 per cent reported high job strain—high demands and low control—while 30 per cent reported high or moderate job insecurity. Job insecurity and job strain were both clearly associated with poorer physical and mental health, even after adjusting for factors such as gender, education, employment status and personality. Job insecurity was particularly strongly associated with poor health outcomes, with the likelihood of depression for those in insecure employment being four times higher. The research team concluded:

The results of this study raise concerns about the adverse health effects in people who might be experiencing both high job strain and high job insecurity. As the labour market becomes more globalised and competitive, employees are more likely to encounter these two work conditions simultaneously. Therefore the influence of work on health is an important focus for future population health research, policy and intervention.

By the way, Mr Seselja, who is not here at the moment, may be interested in where this particular information came from. It is “Work and health in a contemporary society: demands, control and insecurity” by RM D’Souza and others, in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, volume 57, pages 849 to 854, 2003. The two reports I have quoted support the facts that I and my colleagues have raised in speeches made here today in relation to this motion. For Mr Seselja’s benefit, I will repeat these reports and what they said. A report released by Unions NSW states:

There are social dimensions to IR reform which will change the relationship between the sphere of work, private households and the community. Fragmenting working time erodes the common time for families, friends and community activities so it also fractures social relationships. The quality of family life, parenting, relationships and health—already under strain because of the well-known ‘work-life collision’ ... will deteriorate further for those where the quality of jobs and earnings is affected. The emergence of social exclusion, dis-connected areas and welfare dependency (including employers) will also grow over time.

The other report quoted was the survey by NSW Health that clearly shows that the bottom 20 per cent of income earners in New South Wales had by far the worst health, including diabetes, obesity and high psychological distress. A spokesman for NCOSS, the Council of Social Services of New South Wales, has stated that, with the introduction of WorkChoices and John Howard’s vision to make Australia more globally competitive through a new belt of lower-paid jobs and lower working hours, boosting productivity will ensure poor health outcomes will become a feature of life for modest income earners as well.

Mr Seselja stated earlier on that all he ever hears from me, the unions and the Labor Party is how Howard is ruining the lives of Australians. I have to agree: if the unions and the Stanhope Labor government, as well as other Labor governments and the Labor Party, are not prepared to stand up and speak out against these laws, who will? Certainly the federal government will not stand up for the rights of workers, and certainly the members of this chamber sitting opposite will not stand up for the rights of employees.

Yes, we have received information, as Mr Seselja indicated, from our unions and I am proud to say that we have, as they are the ones who have spent the time with workers who have been affected by WorkChoices. The unions are the ones who have to listen when their members are told they cannot have them assist in the bargaining of new workplace agreements. The unions are the ones who used to be able to access work sites and ensure safety procedures were followed but now, with the introduction of WorkChoices, there are many workplaces that unions cannot access.

Dr Foskey, I think, is supporting the motion that I have moved today, although sometimes it is a little hard to tell, as she still finds ways in which to criticise the

government and me. Dr Foskey stated that I have not been vocal about ACTION buses and I have not referred to workers in workplaces in the ACT. Maybe your memory is failing, Dr Foskey, because just last week I was very vocal about the workers employed at the SITA yard in Hume. I stood in this chamber and spoke about how the management and employees were having issues negotiating their certified agreement. I should say that that agreement has now been reached. It appears that management approached the workers and asked them to come to back to work, and they have reached an agreement, which is great. Also, during estimates, Dr Foskey, I asked questions in relation to issues at ACTION. With regard to your comments about sustenance, I hope you have been able to have some because I want to make sure that everybody in this workplace—all the staff in the Assembly—has a healthy workplace.

Mr Seselja stated that 159,000 new jobs have been created under the Howard government. Out of the 159,000 jobs created, how many do you think have adhered to award wages? How many of those jobs have taken away the basic rights of workers? WorkChoices is responsible for the loss of conditions for employees, for the loss of OH&S provisions. I would like to take a moment to think about what Mr Seselja said this morning in his speech. He raised the fact that there have been 159,000 new jobs and 129 of those were full-time jobs. I believe the Howard government has calculated some 7,000 new jobs in the ACT out of this year's budget—that is right, 7,000 new jobs. That will be good, but what Mr Seselja may not know is that there were 14,000 jobs cut from the ACT in 1996 by the federal government.

There are going to be 7,000 jobs created here by the federal government out of this budget. If we use that, we see a net loss of 7,000 jobs. If we use the same test on the numbers Mr Seselja worked out earlier on—that is 159,000 new jobs—does that mean there were 318,000 jobs cut so that we could have 159,000 jobs created? But I will get back to the topic.

There have been many cases of Canberra workers being sacked because they have refused to sign AWAs. Indeed, at the moment the LHMU is going through a dispute with cleaners at the defence complex. They have been offered AWAs at some \$25 a week less than their current employment conditions and, I understand, without conditions referring to leave and family leave. I urge all members to support this motion and thank them for their time today.

Question put:

That **Mr Gentleman's** motion be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 9

Noes 6

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

Question so resolved in the affirmative.

Leave of absence

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

That leave of absence be granted to Ms Gallagher for today's sitting.

Education

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (4.15): I move:

That this Assembly calls on the Chief Minister to establish an inquiry under the Inquiries Act 1991 into the future of the ACT education system over the next 25 years with the following terms of reference, procedures and timelines:

(1) Terms of Reference—The inquiry will examine:

(a) Schooling the in ACT:

- (i) the current structure of the schools system and possibilities for the future development of all sectors of the system;
- (ii) the education, economic, social and environment benefits and costs of the current ACT schooling systems across all sectors
- (iii) the education, economic, social and environmental impacts of any changes in schooling;
- (iv) developments in early childhood education;
- (v) national and international comparisons with the ACT schooling system;
- (vi) factors affecting the employment and retention of a high quality teaching force;
- (vi) factors affecting high school retention rates;
- (viii) factors affecting the drift from the government school sector; and
- (ix) provisions for students with disabilities in all areas of the ACT education system;

(b) Vocational Education and Training:

- (i) the demand for vocational education and training and whether that demand is being met;
- (ii) the relative performance of the ACT's providers of vocational and technical education;
- (iii) the effectiveness of the ACT education system in addressing skill shortages;

- (iv) linkages and co-operation between the vocational education and training sector and education sectors; and
 - (v) responsiveness of the vocational education and training sector to the needs of business and the wider community;
- (c) Higher Education:
- (i) the demand for higher education and whether that demand is being met;
 - (ii) the preparedness of ACT students for higher education;
 - (iii) factors affecting educational outcomes of ACT students in higher education;
 - (iv) national and international comparisons with the ACT higher education system;
 - (v) linkages and co-operation between the higher education sector and education sectors;
 - (vi) responsiveness of the higher education sector to the needs of business and the wider community; and
 - (vii) any other related matters;
- (2) The inquiry process—The process should take the following steps:
- (a) call for submissions on the future of the ACT Education system and related matters;
 - (b) require submissions from key stakeholders;
 - (c) conduct public hearings and cross-examination of interested parties;
 - (d) stakeholders including, but not restricted to, the key agencies and organisations; and
 - (e) take submissions on the draft and finalise the concept and framework document for delivery to the ACT Government; and
- (3) Timeframes for the inquiry—The final report to be presented by 31 March 2008.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the Canberra community has been very anxious and concerned about the school closures policy contained in the *Towards 2020* proposal announced in the June budget. We have seen unprecedented public meetings in various communities since the budget, with parents, teachers and students trying to make sense of this plan to close 39 schools. Of concern is both the monumental scale of this *Towards 2020* document and the fact that it emerged in the budget without any lead-up consultation with the Canberra community. The government had not talked about closing schools. It has not been engaged with the community in any discourse about this approach. The Canberra community is reeling from the implications of this draconian approach.

The motion circulated in my name gives effect to what the opposition and many in the community have been calling for, and that is a wide-ranging, fully independent inquiry into the future of our schools. We need to establish a rigorous inquiry under the Inquiries Act 1991 into the future needs of education and training in the ACT for the next 25 years. We cannot afford to put our education system at risk at the whim of an inexperienced education minister who has had to try to sell a last-minute schools closure policy that the government hatched shortly before the June budget.

We have made too much of an investment over the years in Canberra to develop a first-class education system to sacrifice that on the altar of budget processes only. The plain fact is that there are very few things as important to our community as education. The community expects, and has a right to expect, that the government will give education the highest priority. It is an investment in our children and, therefore, our future.

The government produced its *Towards 2020* document in this year's budget. While the government had flagged the possible closure of some schools and preschools, the proposed closure of 39 schools and preschools shocked most people in the community. There was absolutely nothing in the Canberra plan about closing schools—not one word. The evolution of the Labor Party's position on this issue is very interesting indeed. On 11 August 2004, the then minister, Katy Gallagher, said:

At this stage, there's no plan to closing any school. I haven't turned my mind to it at all. But at some stage in the future ... the community will have to have a conversation about this ... old schools, new schools and about what they want from the future.

This is what an inquiry would achieve. Her spokesman was even more definite and definitive the next day. The *Canberra Times* reported:

A spokesman for Education Minister Katy Gallagher categorically ruled out Labor closing any schools during the next term of government.

It went on:

"The Government will not be closing schools," the spokesman said.

On 18 May 2005, Ms Gallagher's office told the *Canberra Times* that "no schools in the ACT were slated for closure because of low student numbers". Two months later the government announced the closure of Ginninderra district high school and Higgins and Holt primary schools to build a so-called super school. Ms Gallagher was keen to reassure parents with students at other schools that this was not a precursor of things to come. And, while not ruling out school closures, she said:

We have a situation in Canberra where we have 97 schools, and a declining student population, so we will monitor enrolments at every school ... there are no plans to close other schools.

The government assured parents that it would not close these schools if this proposal did not have the support of the local community. These words were exposed as empty when Ginninderra district high school was closed six months after the announcement.

In fairness to Ms Gallagher, it is clear that she had no plans to close 40 schools and preschools. The opposition obtained documents which made that perfectly clear. Shortly before she lost responsibility for the Department of Education and Training she signed off on *Education 2010* in April 2006—I believe it was 13 April 2006—which was to have been an effort to consult the community about the future of education. So how have we arrived at this point where we now have a scorched-earth approach to schools?

We think that a combination of factors led to this draconian *Towards 2020* plan. The Stanhope government has finally discovered that its profligate expenditure was threatening the economic future of the ACT. It also, I think very importantly, received a secret report on the functional review just prior to this year's budget. *Towards 2020* was therefore hatched shortly after the government received the functional review. *Towards 2020* is half-baked and was thrown together over a very short period before the June budget this year. Is it any surprise, therefore, that the government has been copping some flak over its decision to shake up the school system? None of its positions stack up and they are not supported by the facts.

Let us take the case of Chifley. The demography of that area suggests an increase in students over the next few years, not a decline, yet a school closure has been flagged for that suburb. The community knows that Labor's school closures policy does not add up. Indeed, the education minister seems to be making it up as he goes along.

The *Towards 2020* proposal has not stood up well to scrutiny. Clive Haggart of the AEU told the estimates committee when he appeared before it:

The document itself is being treated with absolute derision by the teaching profession—the lack of data, the simplistic assumptions that are contained within and the impossibility of some of the proposals containing the students that are supposed to go to particular schools when their own closes. There is no consideration of timetable. A 6 December decision by government to close schools will mean that we have no capacity to staff schools adequately, whether they shut or they remain open for the beginning of the next school year.

Peter Malone of Unions ACT told the estimates committee:

The proposals for school amalgamation and closure are ad hoc and underfunded, which will lead to considerable community distress without strengthening the public education system.

Jane Gorrie of the P&C told the estimates committee:

There is a real concern around the quality of the data that is being tabled, anyway, as part of the 2020 proposal. With the concern around the quality of the data, then obviously everyone in the community feels totally concerned about the whole proposal and the validity of the proposal, and whether it is actually going to deliver any of the things that it promises to deliver.

The data supplied by Mr Barr does not stand up to close scrutiny, nor do the costings. The opposition, together with community groups, have repeatedly shot holes in this proposal. Even within the Labor Party many people have grave doubts about the wisdom

of this proposal. Last month nearly half of the members of the ACT Labor Party, and a majority of the caucus, voted at their conference to delay implementation of this plan.

What the opposition is offering the government today is a sensible way ahead. Indeed, it is actually a way out for the government—a way to stop this madness. You would hope that the government would agree to this inquiry. This inquiry will not be a witch-hunt on *Towards 2020*. That is not what the inquiry will examine. It will not be an exercise in embarrassing the government. It will be run by a board of experts, in accordance with the act, who will take the community through an extensive examination of current and future needs of education and training in the ACT. The Canberra Liberals' plan to hold an inquiry offers a way to sit down and actually work out the future for education and training in the ACT. As you can see from the terms of reference, the inquiry would report by the end of March 2008, and that timetable will allow the inquiry to listen to community views and develop plans about the future of ACT education.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the inquiry has very comprehensive terms of reference. Firstly, it will look at the current structure of our school system and its future development. The report of the review of government secondary schools supported the integrity of the current college system, yet the government proposes replacing that system with a year 7 to 12 secondary school in north Canberra for no obvious rationale. The inquiry would look at the costs and the capacity of the system. We need to get accurate data on the costing capacity of our school system, not the slanted data produced by the government to date since its announcement in relation to the 2020 plan. The inquiry would be tasked with examining the social, environmental, educational and economic impacts of change in schooling, and this needs to be taken into account in assessing any proposals.

Maintaining high retention rates is another important element of our proposed inquiry. Our education system has an excellent record on retention rates. The college system plays a key role in keeping the retention rates higher, as shown by the statistics. We need to ensure that we maintain and enhance the strong performance of our school system. The government's ill-considered changes are a threat to ACT schools maintaining and enhancing their reputation for high quality schools.

The *Towards 2020* proposal penalises schools that cater for students with a disability. This inquiry will take the needs of special needs students into account through its terms of reference. Also included in the terms of reference is the issue of skills shortages. This is a key issue for ACT businesses. We are currently facing a shortage of skilled workers in the ACT, and the inquiry will consider this as a key issue that needs to be addressed.

We suggest that this inquiry should get under way within 21 days. We have a chance to step back and ensure that our education and training systems continue to meet our needs well into the next century. It has taken nearly a century to develop the ACT schools system into the best in Australia and one of the best in the world. Unfortunately, it seems that this government, through the Chief Minister and the education minister, want to destroy it in six months. I would hope they just stop and rethink. Indeed, I even recall that one of the main planks of the Labor Party platform during the 1998 election concerned a comprehensive inquiry—I do not believe this was to be under the Inquiries Act, but a comprehensive inquiry at any rate—into the ACT system.

The ACT system has had many innovations. The college system innovation, which has served us so well, came in after about three or four years of detailed work, starting in 1976. Strangely enough, the draconian step taken by the government in relation to the 2020 document does at least highlight that we are at the crossroads with our education system. The need for an inquiry is certainly timely when you take into account what is proposed and also what has happened in our system in the last 30 years. A wide-ranging inquiry would serve us well in determining what will happen over the next, I would suggest, 25 years or more.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I know there are members of the government who value education. They showed at the Labor Party conference that they do not agree with the government's *Towards 2020* approach. Frankly, my motion presents the government with an opportunity to bale out of its current approach with dignity—indeed, there needs to be some consistency with prior Labor Party policies—and stop community anxiety about their children's schooling and future. It gives them an opportunity to enable all persons in the community with concern for education to make representations and be heard at this inquiry. I am speaking about not only parents and people within the education sector but also people in business, the universities and the non-government sector—anyone with an interest in this most crucial area. This is a matter of great concern for so many Canberrans right across the board—not just the parents of children who attend schools slated for closure—who take pride in our system and take pride in the value of education.

This is a crucial matter. People are our greatest resource in Canberra, and a good, strong education system is the best way of ensuring that this territory can continue to go ahead. We need to be smart about this, and this inquiry would give everyone a chance to contribute. I urge all members to vote to establish this inquiry. Sadly, I doubt very much that that is going to happen but certainly people should have the chance to stop and consider the need to proceed properly with change.

No-one denies that there may well be a need for some schools to amalgamate or close. This 18-month process would give everyone the chance to go through that in a thorough way and look at all issues in relation to ACT education. I think there is great support in the community for a sensible approach like this. People realise and know that the student population of some schools has been declining over the years. People also realise that in some areas student numbers have increased. This inquiry will enable any change to be done properly, not in the half-baked way that has occurred since 6 June. I commend this motion to the Assembly.

MR STANHOPE (Ginninderra—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Business and Economic Development, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Minister for the Arts) (16.29): Mr Deputy Speaker, the government will oppose this motion. Indeed, this is the second stunt of the day in relation to education and, of course, 2020. It is not all that common that we have to deal with two stunt motions on the same subject on the one day. We opposed and dealt with the stunt this morning and we will oppose and deal with this stunt this afternoon. While the opposition might tell us that its call for an inquiry into the ACT education system is motivated by a desire to ensure that Canberrans continue to have access to a world-class education, it is simply another stunt—another ill-conceived, deliberate attempt to delay any action to implement the government's *Towards 2020* proposal. In doing that, they do the Canberra community a great disservice.

The *Towards 2020* proposal is in fact many steps ahead of exactly what the opposition purports to be calling for in this motion. The fundamental principle that underpins the government's *Towards 2020* proposal is to provide children and young people in the ACT with a vibrant, responsive and world-class public education system that is second to none—something which we currently have and which we are not prepared to risk. The changes are certainly comprehensive. No-one pretended that this approach would be easy or universally popular. But this government, unlike the previous government, had the courage to put forward a proposal that people can actually comment upon and one that we believe is the best course of action for the Canberra community. We did not and do not intend to simply engage in a popularity contest or talkfest.

The terms of reference for Mr Stefaniak's proposed inquiry call for an examination of the "education, economic, social and environmental impacts of any changes in schooling". The Education Act 2004—legislation passed by this Assembly—provides:

Before closing or amalgamating a government school, the Minister must ... have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students' families and the general school community.

That is exactly and precisely what the government are doing in our comprehensive and ongoing consultation process over the specifics of the *Towards 2020* proposal; it is consistent with that determination. The minister and his officials have now attended over 400 meetings in relation to these proposals and this policy. We have consulted, through the minister directly and through his officials, on over 400 separate occasions in formal face-to-face meetings in our determination to consider the educational, financial and social impact on students at schools—precisely, of course, what the motion mimics.

The government gave careful consideration to a range of sound educational and financial considerations before putting forward a proposal and taking it to the community for their response. If the opposition were willing to engage in this process properly instead of being motivated constantly by politics and the lure of the constant rotating or rolling stunt it would see that a great many of the issues it raised in this motion are already addressed in our forward-thinking education system and in the policy expressed in the *Towards 2020* proposal. To give an example, the proposed inquiry, we are told, would look into developments in early childhood education. The government is well aware that across the world there is increasing recognition of the importance of early childhood development in setting the foundation for learning, behaviour and health through the school years and into adult life. Investing in early intervention and high-quality education in the early years has lasting effects on the child's social, emotional and intellectual development.

In recent years the ACT government has made a significant investment to reduce class sizes in the early years of schooling. For this reason, the *Towards 2020* proposal asks the community to consider early childhood schools—providing five years of continuous learning in the one setting during the vital early years of learning and development. The proposal also ensures strong linkages between preschools and primary schools, providing a stable learning environment for young children. Additionally, there may be opportunities for early childhood schools to explore the possibility of establishing linkages with childcare services and services provided by other agencies similar to those

in the child and family centres in Gungahlin and Tuggeranong. By providing integrated education, health and family support services there is a greater opportunity for early identification of learning needs, intervention and prevention to enable students to achieve their full potential.

The proposed inquiry would look into linkages and cooperation between the vocational education and training sector and education sectors. The ACT Department of Education and Training and the Canberra Institute of Technology already work collaboratively to develop innovative strategies that seek to promote relationships between the ACT school sector and the CIT. Transition arrangements, joint professional development activities and ongoing information exchanges are examples of the ways in which DET and the CIT are building robust partnerships and pathways between the sectors. The CIT central programs provide expanded opportunities for both college and high school students to study courses not available at their primary college. These programs contribute to the students' year 10 and 12 certificate and may lead to further studies and pathways to college, CIT and/or their chosen vocation.

The Department of Education and Training workplaces program is responsible for organising work experience and vocational placements for government colleges, high schools and special schools. Work experience placements are short-term, unpaid participation in the workplace. The purpose is to provide guidance for students in the transition from school to working life. Vocational placements are undertaken by years 11 and 12 students and involve structured training and competency-based assessment which occurs in the workplace. The ACT work placements administrator, located in the Department of Education and Training, works with the student to industry program in the organisation of vocational placements. The work placement administrator offers a "central placement" service for those host employers who do not wish to be approached directly by the students and the schools. This service enables placements to be organised directly between the WPA and the host employer. A total of 3,837 placements were so arranged in 2005.

The motion further proposes that the inquiry would look into linkages and cooperation between the higher education sector and education sectors. In May this year, as I am sure the opposition is aware, the ANU Vice-Chancellor, Professor Chubb, and I launched the ANU secondary college, which will give students and their college teachers access to the resources and skills of Australia's pre-eminent research university. Some of Canberra's most academically able secondary college students are able to study courses that will count towards their future university qualifications, thanks to a partnership between the ACT government and the Australian National University. In 2006 these fields are mathematics, chemistry and physics. If the demand is there we hope to expand into other disciplines in future years for future students. Mr Deputy Speaker, I could go on with a host of examples of how the government is working together with education providers and with the broader community to ensure that our students are provided with greater choice and diversity through the provision of high quality learning environments and opportunities.

The opposition really do need to stop creating these delaying tactics that will lead only to long periods of instability and uncertainty for the Canberra community. They need to genuinely engage in the process with the government and the community and consider the opportunities in our *Towards 2020: renewing our schools* proposal. It is clear that the

opposition have missed the point. They have failed to see that *Towards 2020* is about ensuring the sustainability of our high-quality education system, now and into the future, and making it possible for the ACT to continue to lead Australia in education, lifelong learning and training.

They have also exposed, through this motion and their approach to this debate, that they have no education policies. In fact, they have no policies at all. But what they do have, of course, is a clear understanding of the issues which the government faces and which at one level it is seeking to deal with through the process of renewal, and this is reflected in the budget, the budget decisions and in this new, detailed policy position reflected in *Towards 2020*. And how do we know that they know what the issues are? How do we know that they embrace them? How do we know that they honestly know that the government is right? We know this from the words spoken in this place by members such as Mr Stefaniak and Mr Smyth, and previous members such as Mr Humphries and Mr Kaine and other members of the Liberal government. How do we know what Mr Stefaniak really thinks about *Towards 2020* and about the need for us to cement our capacity to support public education in the territory? We know this from a statement recorded in *Hansard* made by Mr Stefaniak when he was a member of the Liberal government and the minister for education was Mr Humphries. This is what Mr Stefaniak said on this very subject in 1990:

I also want to talk about a few points about our school system and about the school closures.

... the neighbourhood system has changed a fair bit in recent times in that, on the figures we have, it seems that in some cases up to about 30 per cent of enrolments at certain schools are from out of area. That tends to put another slant on the argument often used by the Opposition of the distances some kids are going to have to travel to go to school.

Our system is very good. Mr Humphries realises that; the Government realises that, and Mr Humphries has continually stated that this excellent system will be maintained. I think we have always had a good system here. It might have been better in the past than it is now, because I note that about a third of our kids are in private schools and a lot of those schools have waiting lists. That has been the case for many years, but I do not really think that I want have to delve into that part of the debate today.

Mr Stefaniak went on to say:

I am probably the only member of this Assembly who went through the ACT state school system, from kindergarten ... to year 12 at Narrabundah High School. I can recall quite clearly in my years in high school that many students ... were bussed in from Curtin, Lyons, Chifley and Hughes before those schools went up in the Woden valley. It is interesting to note that those same kids who started off in year 7 or 8 at Narrabundah, when Woden Valley High and Deakin came on stream, remained at Narrabundah and made that quite considerable journey often in buses, often by riding their pushbikes there. I can also recall walking, as a five-year-old, to kindergarten at Griffith. I can recall many students I went through infants and primary school with walking considerable distances to get to school.

I think it was in those years that we got on to a neighbourhood school system, and in each of the suburbs that blossomed in Canberra—in the expansion in the late 1960s

and 1970s—a primary school was provided. But the Federal Labor Government in 1988 realised that that really was something that could not continue. And this government, regrettably—because it would be desirable if we did have the money to do that—realises that that, unfortunately, is a luxury we ... cannot afford.

Mr Stefaniak then said:

I think Mr Humphries should be commended for the very hard, agonising and difficult decisions he has had to take—and, indeed, this Government has had to take.

No-one likes closing schools. It would be lovely if we could keep that system. We cannot, unfortunately.

We are standing on our own two feet now and, unfortunately, just as in the rest of Australia—just as in those Labor States that recognise the same problem—... rationalisation has to take place ...

“Rationalisation has to take place” is what the Leader of the Opposition thinks. He continued:

... Mr Humphries is doing all he can to ensure that this is as painless as possible and that the excellence of the education system remains.

That is just an excerpt of what Mr Stefaniak had to say; that is just an excerpt of what Mr Stefaniak really believes. That was the Liberal Party’s position in 1990, that was their belief in 1990, and nothing has changed since 1990, except that the situation has been exacerbated by 16 years of inaction. Nothing has changed except that Mr Stefaniak is now the Leader of the Opposition and not a member of the government. Mr Stefaniak now seeks to make political capital and political gain—to use political spin and take political advantage—out of a position which is at complete odds with what he thinks and believes in his heart. So this is not an honest motion. This is not the position which the Liberal Party took in 1990 when it announced its decision to close 25 schools. The Liberal Party announced in 1990 that it would close 25 schools, and this was Mr Stefaniak’s justification—

Mr Stefaniak: How many were closed, Jon? How many were closed?

MR STANHOPE: Mr Stefaniak rightly interjects, “How many were closed?” Mr Stefaniak did not have the strength then, just as he does not have the strength now. Mr Humphries did not have the strength then, just as he does not have the strength now. The Liberal government then did not have the strength which this government has. So, Mr Stefaniak, you are quite right: you announced that you proposed to close 25 schools but you did not, because you lost your courage. You wobbled. You fell over. Your cabinet abandoned its support for the minister for education. You did not have the strength of your convictions. Your motion today is a stunt. You know it is a stunt, we know it is a stunt, and the whole of Canberra knows it is a stunt. It is dishonourable to the extent that it does not reflect what you honestly think and feel and what you are on the record as saying.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (4.44): History is a wonderful thing. We have had discussions about the role of history in education and we have just seen the revisionist history, according to Jon Stanhope, of school closures in the ACT. Of course, we always

have people who ask, “What happened back in 1990?” We are not talking about 1990. What we are talking about today is 2006 and the 39 schools that this government is proposing to close, plus the one that is already committed to closing.

But further than that, we are talking about the real future of education in the ACT. It is worth reminding members of the Assembly and members of the public that the last comprehensive inquiry into education in the ACT, called the Campbell inquiry, was conducted in 1972. This inquiry was held because at that stage education in the ACT was at a crossroads. The New South Wales government was going to pull out of the provision of education services in the ACT and, as a community, people sat down and worked with a board of experts in looking at the future of education in the ACT. The ACT Schools Authority was formed and the notion of the introduction of the college system in the ACT was considered. As I suggested to the minister the other day, it might be informative for him to read the findings of the Campbell inquiry and to look at the painstaking manner in which this inquiry was conducted—the painstaking manner in which this inquiry engaged with the community and took note of the community’s views.

Recently I had the privilege of having a conversation with one of the officials who worked with the Campbell inquiry and was involved in the setting up of the ACT interim schools authority and the implementation of the college system in the ACT. He would be known to Mr Stefaniak. I understand he was the deputy principal at Narrabundah high school when Mr Stefaniak was attending that school. He went on to become the principal of Narrabundah high school and eventually the founding principal of Narrabundah college. Perhaps the minister could draw on the considerable expertise and knowledge of this gentleman—I can give you his contact details, minister—so that we might learn from what went on then. There needs to be a real study of education in the ACT.

The Campbell inquiry took a painstaking approach. If you talked to the people involved in this you would find that they took the community with them. The real message to come out of this inquiry is that because the community was involved we have been able to develop a world-class education system with a fine, independent, free-standing secondary college system which has, and has had for many decades, the best retention rates in the country.

The community wanted a change. The community wanted to see a better education system than the one that had hitherto been provided by the New South Wales education system. They wanted a change and this was achieved through the process of inquiring and engaging with the community. It was not a case of saying, “Here is our plan and we will implement it—we are just telling you how to do it” but of almost starting with a blank sheet. The approach should be: “We have to change our education system, we have to change the structure. How do we do this as a community?” Mr Barr is proposing to pull apart what we have.

As a result of that painstaking process we have an education system that, on most of the measures that you can look at, provides a superior system to any education system in the country. The people in the ACT have an above average education system—the best education system in the country. The minister is saying, “I came in on 18 April and by 6 June I came up with a whole new system of how to run the education system, even though I probably do not even know very much about how the current system is structured.” Notwithstanding this, the new kid on the block, who has no educational

background, no ministerial background, no background in how the current education system works, has the answer to it all. He has become the oracle of the future of education. Madam Temporary Deputy Speaker, how arrogant is that? How arrogant is it that he just comes in and, without even getting to know his portfolio, decides he is going to gut it? This is what has happened with this arrogant minister today.

Yes, he does know something about the portfolio. By his own admission he is also a product of the education system, but because you have been schooled in the education system it does not mean you know how it runs. It does not mean that you understand the intricacies. Without understanding the intricacies, without understanding why we have a secondary college system, without understanding what it is that goes into contributing to the ACT having the best education system in the country, an above average education system, we are just going to dismantle it all. Well, the people of the ACT tell me that they are not happy with that. They make a contribution to this education system in blood, sweat, tears, taxes, chook raffles, fetes, lamington drives, chocolate drives, running the canteen, reading to their children, assisting in classrooms and taking their children to sport. They own this system much more than Andrew Barr owns this system.

We have seen the arrogance of this minister and the Labor Party in general. We had it here this morning when we heard Mr Corbell say, "I do not think it is in the best interests of people that we extend the consultation." We have witnessed the arrogance of this Chief Minister saying, "The Labor Party has decided, in its wisdom, what is best for you, and we are going to put it forward." This is what he said about consultation when he was talking to parents of Ginninderra district high school outside the state conference last year. He admitted that there was no way that that was going to change. His consultation for the closing of Ginninderra district high school was consultation on how it will close. There was no consultation then, and there is no consultation now, on the economic, social and environmental impacts.

I would like this minister and his officials to tell us how many times in the 500-odd meetings have they asked parents, or parent bodies, or schools, or communities, "What is the economic impact? What do you think is the economic impact of closing Tharwa primary school? What do you think is the social impact of closing Chifley primary school? What are the economic and social impacts of closing Rivett primary school?" You have not asked those questions and the people involved have not been given the opportunity to give answers.

Mr Stefaniak's motion today is about the real future of education. It is more than 30 years since we inquired into the future of education in the ACT. Ms Porter says that the education system is in the doldrums, it is failing, and parents are abandoning it like a sinking ship. If the Labor Party thinks that, they should be saying to the community, "Gee, we think we are in the doldrums. What do you, the owners of this system, think we should do, as a community, together, collectively?" The Chief Minister uses newspeak such as "educational renewal". I had a letter from a constituent the other day that said, "Please do not write back to me and tell me why you consider closing 39 schools is renewal, because it is not".

The people of the ACT know that if you take away a quarter of the schools, which would more than decimate the school system in the ACT, you will not be renewing the school system and you will not be creating an environment where people will not want to

abandon the system, because this minister has sent the message that this is a sinking ship and you had better get off if you want to get your children educated. Anyone who can afford to will leave the system. What he will do by his actions is leave this system as a rump system, as a safety net system, for those people who cannot afford to go anywhere else. That is not what this Liberal opposition wants. This Liberal opposition wants a public education system for everyone, and the only way you can do this is to work with the community to map a way forward, and this motion does that.

MR BARR (Molonglo—Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation and Minister for Industrial Relations) (4.54): As the Chief Minister has already noted, the opposition's motion has very little to do with the future of the ACT education system but is simply another attempt to delay the government's investment in public education. Change is hard—and I understand the passion and commitment the community is showing for our public education system—but the opposition's tactics do nothing to make the change easier. Delaying the 2020 proposal inevitably also delays the capital program that is an integral part of the reform package.

This government believes that scarce resources should be directed on the basis of educational need, not on the basis of geography alone. We believe that every child in the ACT should have access to quality learning environments, and that is why the government is making the single largest investment in public education in the history of self-government. This investment includes a \$20 million outlay on information technology in our schools. The ACT will lead the nation in the use of IT in teaching and learning. Renewal of school IT infrastructure will ensure that students can enjoy all the opportunities that state-of-the-art access to the internet and cutting-edge technology can provide. Students in the ACT will be able to share their experiences with students around the world through video links. They will be able to carry around multimedia portfolios of their work throughout their schooling, perhaps even in their iPods. That is why we are committed to providing the latest technology in schools—to create closer links between parents, children and teachers in the ACT and throughout the world.

But modern schooling is not just about wireless networks and new computers. It is also about quality teaching and learning environments. Our public schools are badly in need of repair and renewal, and in recognising this problem the Stanhope government has committed \$130 million over the next four years to upgrade and renew our ageing school infrastructure. This renewal process will include upgrading heating and cooling systems, fixing leaking roofs and improving playgrounds. There will be a strong focus on improving the look of government schools through external and internal repainting, and recarpeting of classrooms. We will also be investing in new halls, gymnasiums and specialist teaching areas in schools across the territory.

Once we have completed this major upgrading of school facilities we will be increasing the school maintenance budget by 25 per cent to ensure that facilities are kept in top condition. We as a government refuse to accept that students and teachers should work in surroundings that would be unacceptable in other workplaces. We will invest the money needed to ensure that our classrooms are worthy of the students and staff that work in them. In short, we will be ensuring that our school facilities live up to the promise of our students.

The reality is that the ACT population is ageing and, as a result, educational and community needs have changed in many suburbs. Families are also making decisions about where their children will attend school based on more than the distance from their homes. For this reason, the government needs to put schools in locations where the children are and where the community wants to access them.

The ACT education system costs, on average, 20 per cent more than in other states due in part to the fact that we have a number of small schools and preschools, and in many of these the cost of educating a student is above the ACT average and rising each year. This government is not prepared to take the opposition's "do nothing, head in the sand" approach to education provision in our city. Spending on education accounts for one in every four ratepayer dollars and we think that is a worthy investment. Education is an important foundation for our community and for the future of our society but we need to make sure that resources are being appropriately allocated. The government is proposing to rationalise the number of schools to ensure that all students, now and into the future, can receive the best possible education programs in contemporary facilities.

I do not take the closure of any school lightly, but our students deserve the opportunity to attend the best schools, not just in growing suburbs but in established areas as well. This requires constant upgrades and improvements to our infrastructure that simply cannot occur without other changes in our system. The *Towards 2020* proposal will have the effect of removing over 10,000 empty desks from our school system and will ensure that the community receives value for their education dollar. This proposal will make immediate and far-reaching improvements to our education system. The choices we make today will secure a sustainable education system into the future. The government is consulting with the Canberra community on its proposals for a sustainable education system. We have embarked on a comprehensive process of seeking views through a series of consultation meetings and individual meetings with government members and officers of the Department of Education and Training via a process of formal submissions and proposals on the future of our education system.

At the end of this extensive consultation process the government will consider all the feedback and submissions. We will be willing to make the hard decisions and take the necessary action to ensure the continuation of our high quality education system. I call on the opposition to stop these pointless delaying tactics, to remove their heads from the sand and to engage in taking positive action for the sake of our community's future. That means being prepared to engage in a debate about education models and about the provision of education within regions.

It is with considerable concern that I note the continued misrepresentation of a proposal to have some year 7 to 12 high schools in our system. This is not—I repeat: this is not—an attempt to move away from the college system. It is simply putting forward a proposal that we might have some alternative models in our system. I note that in the private sector virtually every secondary school is a 7 to 12 school. Daramalan, Merici, St Edmund's and Canberra Grammar are all 7 to 12 models. It is not something that is completely unheard of in educational terms.

One of the issues that has come forward, and one of the reasons why there is a drift out of the public system, is that we do not offer that model. In my view, our public education

system is big enough to have that choice. That is why we have put forward a proposal to have some 7 to 12 high schools—not to make every high school a 7 to 12 school and not to remove all colleges but to simply put forward that choice. As I have indicated, if there is not strong support for that model in a particular region then, of course, the government would not proceed with such a model. But there has been interest in different regions of the city in that proposal.

It is certainly interesting to be able to engage with the community around those issues and around how we can look at meeting the needs of the 70 per cent of students who do not go on to attend university. That is one of the key features of the 2020 proposal. There is a strengthening of pathways into vocational education and training. This is something the government takes very seriously. It is something that I note has received bipartisan support at various public meetings. I note that at a Tuggeranong Community Council meeting Mr Pratt was certainly in support of further investigation of vocational education and training pathways in the Tuggeranong region. I think that is an important thing for the government to do. I have indicated previously that the need to address educational provision post year 12 in the Tuggeranong region is something that is very high on my agenda.

In any overall look at the education system we would need to consider where we need to strengthen the system and whether we may have issues concerning simply too many schools and not enough students to sustain the number of schools. These are all part of this broader consideration and cannot be ignored. The problems will not go away if we continue to delay making the tough decisions and looking at these issues.

There has been a lot of criticism from those opposite about previous ministers for education allegedly not being prepared to engage in this debate, yet the second an education minister engages in this debate I am criticised for even raising the issues. How dare I! This is what is occurring. We consistently get this walking both sides of the street—we get it all the time. In relation to budget policy more generally, the opposition is generally in favour of restraining expenditure and is specifically against every proposal. It is walking both sides of the street. Is it any wonder that Mr Mulcahy cringes each time one of his shadow colleagues gets up and makes a further commitment that would drain the territory's limited resources on some Liberal Party folly. You can see it on his face when certain members make their statements. He knows the difficulties in providing a sustainable education system. The government is prepared to engage in these issues in a constructive manner and I look forward to those members of the community who are interested in engaging with us doing so.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (5.04): This motion gives us a picture of what the Liberal Party would do if it were in government and it indicates that it has learned from its early experiences in government. Perhaps it has learned more from the poor process currently being employed by this government, which really is a lesson in what not to do. On the other hand it would not hurt if the Liberals responded to Mr Stanhope's constant reminders of history by admitting that they might have made mistakes in the past and that they would not do it that way again.

They certainly should not give in to Mr Stanhope's he-man challenge, "You did not have the guts, and we did." When Mr Stanhope speaks that is pretty much what the debate boils down to. I will not endorse this motion because I fear that it reflects the Liberals'

historical private school preference. If I am forced to vote against the motion in division I will not do so emphatically because, frankly, almost anything would be better than the 2020 process. However, I do not think that is a good enough reason to vote for the motion.

I do not support the opposition's proposed inquiry into the ACT education system, as I do not believe it asks the right questions. I do not think we can say what are the right questions. We need a moratorium so that school communities and other supporters of public education can continue their good work without the stress of deadlines being placed on them and in the knowledge that at the time they are doing that work their schools have a guillotine hanging over them. We must call in expert advice and, through public consultation, establish what questions we need to ask.

Quite a few things need to be said in debate on this motion. Some of the issues referred to in the motion could well comprise some of the questions that need to be asked, but we should not limit ourselves only to those questions. It is not possible to complete this huge task by 31 March. We need a moratorium, as much has to be done in that time frame. As I said earlier—and this is the opinion of the Greens, not Liberal or Labor members—the motion does not cover all the questions that need to be asked. I do not know whether it even covers the right questions.

The education department was exploring growth in this area in an attempt to strengthen the ACT public education system before the 2020 plan and accompanying budget cuts were unleashed. I said yesterday, and I will probably have to say it again tomorrow, that the functional review established a sense of panic amongst bureaucrats. Apparently that report was completed in April and the budget was released in June, which did not give anyone a great deal of time. It certainly did not allow for any scrutiny of the functional review.

I would love to know, and I will keep asking, what was said in that report as it set the cat among the pigeons and frightened many people. We now have an aborted 2010 plan that was utilising the government's community engagement process and we have the commencement of consultation. The government had already consulted stakeholders and it was setting up additional consultation. I would be interested in attending the seminar entitled "government schooling—looking into the future" to be held on 29 August. That is one of the seminars mentioned in a letter Mrs Dunne received as a result of a freedom of information request.

What research has been done? Where are the futurologists? Where are the people whose job it is to look to the future to the year 2020, which is only 14 years away? We are in a world that is changing so fast we cannot say with confidence that we know what it and public education will look like then. It was wrong of the government to call its plan Towards 2020. The expression "20:20 vision" means that someone has the ability to see clearly out of both eyes. I do not believe there is any evidence to suggest we can see clearly to the year 2020.

I have said time and again that the 2020 plan is not a plan for a world with oil shortages. We will be trying to take cars off the road and to make people more reliant on public transport. Cities in other states and countries have already moved back to the neighbourhood plan that Mr Corbell said just the other day was old hat. I am concerned

about the government's consultation process. Mr Barr said it was about answering people's questions. I think he sees consultation as a simple exchange, but it does not appear to include listening to any great extent.

This morning government members criticised two opposition members, and probably me, for not coming up with ideas. They asked, "Where is your 2020 vision?" I have mentioned quite a few ideas. A few weeks ago one of the issues that came up in my conversations with Kambah High School related to introducing technical education, CIT programs, into that school. That is one idea that we have come up with.

Mr Barr: Yes, I have already talked to them about it extensively.

DR FOSKEY: I am not saying that I first thought of the idea; I am saying that it arose as a result of discussions. Consultation involves having discussions.

MADAM TEMPORARY DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Burke): I ask Dr Foskey to direct her comments through the chair.

Mr Barr: We are deeply engaged in discussion on that already. That is what we are doing.

DR FOSKEY: Another concern that has been raised by a constituent of mine is that people are not getting the answers to their questions that they want. Apparently, it is taking Mr Barr a long time to reply to emails. I do not know how letters are going, but I believe that email replies from Minister Barr's office are taking over 10 weeks. Apparently, one of the reasons for it is that emails are going to the department to be answered. I believe that occurs so the department can keep track of consultation. It also enables the department to keep a list showing the stance of certain individuals on this action.

If those people are teachers it is a matter of particular concern. Members know that teachers have a number of concerns, both as educators and as parents. If the government is keeping track of them to establish whether or not they are concerned about the 2020 process that is a worry. People are writing to Minister Barr, as a government minister, to find out what he thinks. The education department is also being stripped of staff. There have been massive staff cuts in the education department. Ninety of the 350 staff will lose their jobs, which is more than a quarter.

The education department has been given an increased workload to deal with the minister's job at a time when people are going through the stress of losing jobs. It is a worry. I do not think that is consultation.

Mrs Dunne: Mr Speaker, under standing order 47 I would like to clarify some words. I believe Dr Foskey misunderstood me and misquoted me in her speech.

MR SPEAKER: It is usual for that to be done at the conclusion of debate.

Mrs Dunne: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (5.15): The opposition stands—it always has and it always will—for a strong and robust public education system. No matter what trends there may be in the drift from government to non-government schools we must put in place a strong system to ensure that every child in our society is well and professionally educated. I thank Mr Stefaniak for moving this motion and for his rather visionary model of inquiry into the ACT education system. I thank Mrs Dunne for helping to engineer that inquiry. It is about time we had some vision regarding education, as we are not seeing it from members on the other side of the chamber.

This Assembly's mission is to determine why there has been a constant drift from public schools to non-government schools. The government does not have a clue why there is such a drift. We have asked government ministers repeatedly in question time and in estimates committees, "Where is your evidence? Where is your data? What information do you have that establishes why there has been a constant drift?" We cannot get an answer. Instead we have this government's 2020 plan, a last minute, panicky knee-jerk reaction, all wrapped up in the machinations of the Costello review to close schools. The government's 2020 plan is not a vision about where we should be taking education. The government did not consult properly with the community in regard to its 2020 plan; it is a *fait accompli*.

Proper consultation on school closures in 2007 should have commenced in early 2005. If the government is to commence shutting 39 schools from Christmas this year onwards, that consultation process should have commenced in early 2005, and it should have involved a couple of phases. The first phase in 2005 should have involved the department and the government talking to schools and to school communities, discussing possible closures and asking, "How do you think you stand? What shape do you think you are in?" Once that decision had been made the government and the department should have given families in the schools that were to be closed a minimum of 14 months notice so they could go through the preparations required to get their families ready for what was going to occur.

In a time of changing needs and demographics it is time to re-examine how the ACT stacks up in relation to its educational and academic standards. The opposition is proposing an inquiry because nothing has emanated from the other side of the chamber. We must determine the need before we can make any dramatic decisions, which is what this government is trying to do at the moment in a hit and miss way. What about our education standards? Over the past four or five years the minister, his predecessor and her predecessor have stood up in the chamber and talked about education standards and how we rate against the OECD average.

The standard comparison mark has suddenly been placed into question. To be fair to the minister, Australian schools more broadly were subject to the TIMSS system, or the trends in mathematics and science study. Under TIMSS the first study was conducted in December 2004. Other comparative studies indicated that ACT schools and a lot of other Australian schools rated in the top echelon of schools. In December 2004 TIMSS showed—of course, TIMSS is mathematics and science based—that 15 countries beat our year 4 maths students and 13 countries outperformed our year 8 students.

People might say, “So what? Show me your TIMSS and I will show you my preferred study.” Educationalists in this country are saying that the TIMSS review is a hard-core academic study of performance versus other studies that this government and other Australian governments have used. Educationalists are saying that the studies this government and other state governments prefer to use are much more esoteric in nature. TIMSS is a good, hard-core analysis of academic performance. TIMSS shows us that ACT schools, like most schools across this country, are falling well behind the OECD average. The December 2004 study and studies that have been conducted since then show not only that we still maintain that negative marginal gap; they also show that United States schools, English schools and other schools have increased their performances, whereas we have not.

These issues must be analysed, which is why there must be an inquiry into academic standards. We must also examine the 2004 ACER test to establish where our schools stand. It is not good enough to compare our schools against other Australian schools. The government is right to ensure that we assess our schools against the OECD average. This country needs to perform; it needs to develop its skills and capabilities against the OECD average. After all, we operate in a global economy and that should be our benchmark. We must examine these issues more closely. I want to speak briefly about the contentious issue of values education. I can hear members on the other side sighing.

Mr Barr: It was more next to you actually, but anyway.

MR PRATT: I also noticed some members close to me sighing. I want to throw values education on the table. Values education, which is a debatable issue, is fundamental to the way ahead. It is fundamental to the reason for the drift from public schools to non-government schools. The Labor government and its apparatchiks in the education system have always paid lip service—and they continue to do so—to values education. I put it to members that a good inquiry launched by Mr Stefaniak will examine this contentious and debatable issue of values education. Such an inquiry might tell us a lot about the drift from the public school sector to the non-government school sector.

Finally, I wish to touch on the learning and teaching environment, the environment in which our schools operate, safety aspects in our schools, bullying, violence and the retention of teachers. Why are we losing so many good young teachers after five or six years? Why are they drifting away from the public school sector? Is the department supporting our young teachers? I do not believe our schools have a sufficient number of mentors and lead teachers to look after and nurture younger teachers and help to retain them in the system.

Mr Stefaniak’s terms of reference relating to the retention of teachers is very important. I will not labour this issue but I have spoken to Mr Barr, written to him and asked him questions in estimates committee hearings about violence at a particular school. I have not received answers to my questions. Those issues must be assessed as part of an inquiry into our learning environment.

MR SPEAKER: Order! The member’s time has expired. Earlier Mrs Dunne raised a point of order under standing order 47. I may have erred because what she has to say might well be pertinent to the debate at hand. I ask her to proceed.

Mrs Dunne: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Thank you for admitting that you erred. It does not hurt to do so. The world does not come to an end when people admit that they have erred. In the course of debate Dr Foskey said she was concerned because the Liberals never admitted that they had learnt the lessons of history and they never said that their approach in the 1990s was wrong. That is not the case. I have said that in this place on more than one occasion.

MR SPEAKER: Yes, but did you say it in this speech?

Mrs Dunne: Yes, Mr Speaker. I did not say in this speech that we had learned from the ALP how not to do it. Dr Foskey also said that I should not give in to the he-man approach of Mr Stanhope. I assure you, Mr Speaker, that I would never give in to Mr Stanhope's he-man approach.

MR SPEAKER: The member will resume her seat. Mrs Dunne, you trick me once. I call Mr Seselja.

MR SESELJA (Molonglo) (5.26): Mr Speaker, I guess the question is whether you erred the first time or the second time.

MR SPEAKER: Well, I feel as though my generosity has been taken advantage of.

MR SESELJA: Quite rightly, Mr Speaker. I am sure Mrs Dunne will not get away with it again. I commend Mr Stefaniak for moving this motion. The first and most important reason for this motion—it is one of the reasons we are where we are—is the lie the Labor Party took to the 2004 election. It gained a majority at that election in part on the basis of a lie. The former education minister gets very sensitive about this and says that she did not say it. Technically, I guess that is true. Technically, they were not her words; they were said by a spokesperson for her. She did not want to do it herself but she sent out a spokesperson who said in the *Canberra Times* on 12 August 2004:

Minister for Education, Katy Gallagher, in the pre-2004 ACT election context, categorically ruled out through a spokesman the closure of schools by Labor in the next term of government.

The spokesperson said, “The government will not be closing schools.” In August 2004, just prior to the last election, this issue was obviously an issue of concern to some residents. Mr Pratt, who raised this issue as shadow education minister, was criticised by the Labor Party. The Labor Party sought to differentiate itself from Mr Pratt, who said quite honestly and clearly, “There may be a case for the closure of some schools due to the changing demographics.”

Members interjecting—

MR SESELJA: Prior to the election that is what Mr Pratt said quite honestly, but the Labor party was not honest. The Labor Party, through its spokesperson, said it would not close any schools. The Labor Party achieved majority government, in part on the back of its promises. No doubt education was one of the important policy areas at which people

had looked, so the people of the ACT were misled. Two years later the government is proposing to close 39 schools. We have gone from zero to 39 in a very short time.

What has changed since August 2004? What did the Labor Party not know about prior to the last election? I put it to members that nothing has changed other than the fact that we now have a majority Labor government, and we now have a four-year term. We have an election behind us and another election is still over two years away. I think that is all that has changed since the Labor Party made that promise. We need to put this issue into context. We need to remember that this is why we are here.

The big argument put forward by the education minister and by the government is, "We are the first to take this on. We are courageous. We are setting out a vision." But this is being rushed through. We know why it is being rushed through; there is no mystery about that. Prior to the last election the Labor Party said, "No schools will be closed." The Labor Party has broken that promise. It made a lie of that previous statement, so it has to do this as quickly as it can. If it were to put in place a proper process, such as the inquiry proposed by Mr Stefaniak, heaven forbid, some of these schools might close prior to the election. In fact, a lot of schools might close prior to the election.

The Labor Party is relying on the fact that if it gets all the pain out of the way now, the people of the ACT, who were duded at the last election in relation to this issue, will forget. They will either forgive the government for closing schools or forget in the two years leading up to the next election. That is why the government is rushing this through. That is why it is opposed to a proper process where we could look at all these significant issues. Members on both sides of the Assembly acknowledge that there are problems in the education system.

Ms Porter labelled education as a sinking ship. I do not agree with that. There are significant problems in our education system. However, if a ship is sinking people normally jump off it. By closing 39 schools the government is banking in part on a drift to the non-government sector. More people will jump off what has been described by Ms Porter as a so-called sinking ship. In part the government is banking on that. We must debate these issues in a considered way and not in the way proposed by this government.

This change is so significant that six months clearly is not enough time. We heard the minister say, "That is the legislative process. It is the minimum legislative process." Why would the government deliberately bring about a situation where in December this year, just prior to Christmas, potentially 22 schools will close? Why would it deliberately do that? It wants to get all the pain out of the way now, as quickly as possible, so that hopefully people have recovered by the next election and the government can get on with it. That is what the government was banking on when it took this issue to the people, when it lied about this before the last election. We have heard a lot about consultation.

MR SPEAKER: Withdraw that statement, Mr Seselja.

MR SESELJA: I am sorry, Mr Speaker, I withdraw. When the government went to the people of the ACT it told them one thing prior to the last election that it must have known, or should have known, was not true. Now the government has gone back on what

it said prior to the election. I do not know what people want to call that, but I believe most people feel they have been somewhat misled.

We have heard a lot about consultation. Mr Barr is constantly telling us, "I have been to X number of meetings. I have sat there and I have given the same answers. The education department has been there with me. Sometimes it has been wonderful and sometimes it has been hard." What is the ultimate consultation that we have available to us in our democratic system? It is called an election. This government failed the test.

The government wants to take the high moral ground on this issue and say, "We are taking the hard decisions." Why did it not tell the people of Canberra about the hard decisions it was going to take prior to the last election? That is the ultimate consultation. The government should have gone to the people and said, "This is our plan. We want to gut the public education system. We want to close 40 schools. What do you think?" The people could have made their decision on that basis.

If the government had done that it would be very hard for us to argue against it. If the government had taken this issue to the people at the last election and said, "We propose to close 40 schools", we would have some respect for it. The government did not do that; it deliberately hid its plans. It deliberately sought to downplay any prospect of school closures. The government did that on one of the biggest and most important issues at the last election, and it failed the test. So when it seeks to take the high moral ground we need to look at it in context.

If the government were serious about this, if it wanted to make decisions for the long term and take the community with it that would not be done through a series of meetings where everyone knows what is going to happen. Everyone knows that they would tell the minister what they think and the minister would do what he planned to do anyway. The government could have taken this to the election but it did not. That is why we have moved this motion. That is why we want to take a proper and considered look at this issue. This government is desperate to ensure that we do not take a considered look at this issue. It is afraid that if it becomes stretched out too close to the next election it will pay for it in 2008.

MRS BURKE (Molonglo) (5.36): In a forthright manner Mr Stefaniak's motion is designed to assist the Stanhope government to take a step back from its hasty decision to close in the order of 39 schools across the territory to the detriment of families—a decision that will, most importantly, impact significantly on childhood development in the ACT. Last Wednesday, 16 August, the government sought to breach convention and filibuster and waste time allocated for private members' business. The Liberal opposition does not wish to neglect a topic of great interest to the electorate, as Mr Corbell sought to highlight in the matter of public importance last week. Mr Stefaniak's motion, calling for a comprehensive inquiry into the future direction of the ACT's education system, encompasses a sensible approach to investigating longer-term planning and a significant investment of resources into the education arena, especially for those students with a disability. I pick up on one facet of the motion—early childhood development and education.

The Liberal party does not walk away from debate, as Mr Corbell would have us all believe. Rather, the opposition is genuinely interested in engaging in forums that have

been appropriately apportioned the time of the Assembly and its committee structure. The Liberal opposition believes that a comprehensive inquiry as set out by the Leader of the Opposition will provide the government of the day with a clearer picture of where school closures may be required and reformation of the system. The Stanhope government may well continue to espouse that it is consulting widely and that it is faced with the dire issue of a 30 per cent fall—as pointed out today by Mr Corbell—in the usage of the public education system in the ACT. If such a decline is so evident, why has the Stanhope government taken such a rash decision to shift straight into closure mode?

Mr Gentleman asked in this Assembly today what plan the Liberal opposition has concerning the expenditure of some \$90 million on capital for the education sector. I am confident that having a full and frank inquiry would be the first step, given the Stanhope government has now, in what seems like an instant, taken the decision without reviewing the consequences and backlash it must surely have realised would be bubbling just under the surface across the electorate. My colleague Mr Seselja has adequately pointed out there is a plot behind all of this that is not that hidden if you look at it. The minister is smiling, so obviously we have hit a bit of a nerve.

An inquiry into the education system in the ACT cannot be undertaken lightly. Last September my colleague Mrs Dunne asked the Stanhope government to form a select committee to look into the establishment of a new school—for example, in West Belconnen. The call for the formation of a select committee was well intentioned. The Chief Minister did not want to have any examination of the potential impact, both negative and positive, such a new super school would have had on the community. Almost a year later the opposition, and indeed the Canberra community, are poised to watch the proposed closure of 39 schools across the territory. What a quantum leap in policy direction that is.

Ironically, all this occurs in a budgetary period, when the government has signalled an apparent \$90 million capital injection into the education portfolio while, at the same time, writing off in the order of \$65 million in capital. In essence, the opposition is putting to the Assembly that we should take stock of the current state of the government education system in the ACT, seek further input from the community and relevant organisations associated with education and deliver comprehensive findings via a proper reporting process that is attached to an inquiry. Much has been said about what happened in the early 1990s. Consultation would have been the key word there. The consultation that happened in the early 1990s was full and open and frank, not like we have had here, when people knew their schools were closing via the *Canberra Times*.

I touch on another of the terms of reference, namely the provisions for students with disabilities in all areas of the ACT education system. As of August 2005, 1,722 students received special education resources in ACT government schools. Assembly members must agree that is scant funding to support the access and participation needs of an increasing number of students with special needs who attend government schools. During the estimates hearings, the Minister for Education and Training was questioned about how the government, once school closures commenced, would be able to deliver specialist education services to children in some 19 schools that cater specifically for students with some form of disability. It is apparent that no plan is forthcoming.

The minister was vague in answering such questions as how many schools earmarked for closure also currently cater for children with a disability—we have heard varying numbers reported—or how many schools earmarked for closure have been retrofitted for the specific needs of children with a disability. In addition, when questioned about the future use of surplus school buildings, a knee-jerk response was forthcoming. Put simply, the buildings could be used by the general community, including some disability groups. The government cannot in any way be conscious of the inimical effect such changes to the education system will have on children with special needs. An inquiry into the state of the education system, now more than ever, seems to be a sensible way to conduct a more comprehensive, public and open investigation into all of the social, economic and environmental impacts for all students and their families.

It has been said in this place that this is a stunt. That is a code the government uses for anything it does not want to hear from the opposition. We will write that off and treat it with the contempt it deserves. The arrogance is disappointing. The opposition is trying to offer the government an out clause—time to stop and think and have a proper consultative approach with both the members of this Assembly and the broader Canberra community. I did take on board this morning the comments by Ms Porter, but at the heart of this debate is that the Stanhope government has failed miserably to bring the community with it on this vitally important issue, one that strikes at the heart of tens of thousands of people.

There has been a massive failure in relation to students with a disability. Ms Porter of all people would know that parents she is talking to simply have to get on with it. They have no option. They cannot have the luxury that they might go to this school or to that school. They are doing all of that, but their decisions are not quite as straightforward as if their children have no disability. This is not a delaying tactic, as has also been said in this place. It is an effort to do things much better, collectively, as a group of 17 MLAs. It is an indictment on this government, and it will go down in history. We have to ask ourselves: are these school closures for the betterment of this community, or is there a hidden agenda that will translate the valuable land on which many of these schools stand into money?

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (5.44), in reply: I thank members who spoke for their contributions. Mr Seselja is probably spot-on about the real plans of the government, which are to get this over and done with quickly and hope people will forget it. People have very long memories. They still remember the school closures of the 1990s. Ask the people of Cook. I am not sure Dr Foskey is certain what the motion is all about. It is very broad and general, as it needs to be. It provides a period of 18 months. If she has concerns about that, if the inquiry by an independent board of experts needs to go further, there is precedent for that in the Gallop report, which was extended past the reporting term. She seemed a bit confused about this motion, so, I just point that out.

It is incredible that the Chief Minister calls this proposal—a formal inquiry under the Inquiries Act—a stunt. How many inquiries did the Labor government have from 2001 to 2004? I can think of a large number of inquiries—one that we got the Canberra plan from—and reviews. They were legion. Some of them might have been stunts and some

of them were quite justifiable but it is a bit rich for the government to say this is a stunt when it had a number of wide-ranging inquiries.

Mrs Dunne: Seventy-odd.

MR STEFANIAK: I am told by Mrs Dunne 70-odd. This in an inquiry into one of the most important areas of government—the delivery of education. We have not had a proper inquiry into education since before the college system started in 1976. I think Mrs Dunne mentioned 1972. I point out to the Chief Minister again that when Roberta McRae was education spokeswoman she hung her hat on a full-ranging inquiry into the ACT education system. So it is very rich of the government to say this is a stunt. It is not. It would be wide ranging. It would look at what is needed in our system. It would take evidence from a wide range of people to let them have their say and it would come out with recommendations that would point the way ahead—not in a piecemeal fashion, but to point the way ahead for several decades to come—to build on the success of our system. All governments since self-government have done something to help build on the success of our system.

I also find it incredibly rich for the Chief Minister to talk about what was said back in 1990. We have all said a lot of things in this place. The Liberal Party has never been against the need sometimes to close schools. It is a sad thing and it has to be done properly. There might have even been a couple of times in the past when we could have done it better.

Mr Barr: I was about to say Charnwood high.

MR STEFANIAK: Mr Barr says Charnwood. I am happy to take him on about that one because there was a reasonably short consultation period there. But it had a choice. I can remember discussing whether it would like to twin with Melba. At the end it chose not to do that. When the Chief Minister was berating us about that, Mr Barr mentioned Stirling College. Stirling College, along with Phillip College, voluntarily twinned as the Canberra College, and it is still there. I wonder for how long under this government, but it is still there.

Members can learn a fair bit about consultation from the previous Liberal government. I mention the Spence and Melba school community consultation that went on for at least 12 months, under the auspices of the guidelines Mrs Dunne tried to re-introduce with the consent of the AEU and the P&C back in May this year. It was a successful amalgamation, but I think poor old Melba—Mt Rogers as it is called now—is for the chop under the government's proposal. Indeed, right up until June, the standard line from the Labor government, as it was from the Labor opposition, was very much against school closures. Some little comments were made by Mr Barr's predecessor that some schools might at some stage have to close. But Labor has a consistent history of always objecting to school closures—even to ones that were inevitable and quite sensible. Suddenly we have this conversion on the road to Damascus—not even on the road, probably in the suburbs of Damascus—and we get the 2020 document, that was crafted—

Mrs Dunne: I would not say crafted.

Mrs Burke: No, it is too smart.

MR STEFANIAK: Maybe crafted is too kind, Mrs Dunne. Cobbled together, shall we say, at some stage after 13 April when the functional review came down. We have what we used to call in the military situating the appreciation. You have made your decision, you know what you want to do, and you try to make it look as if there is some justification and scientific basis for this. So you come up with about nine convoluted ideas that a lot of school communities are somewhat bemused by. It is painfully obvious to everyone that the 2020 document is not a very well thought through document, and the basis the government gives why these 39 schools should close, in many instances, is very flawed indeed. The data does not add up, and people are not buying it.

I was talking to Clive Haggart not all that long ago. Clive and I have had the odd disagreement in the past, and the odd agreement. When we introduced a minimum class sizes policy for kindergarten to year 2, Clive indicated that was the best thing that happened since self-government. By the same token, of course, he had beaten me around the head over industrial action in the past. Clive said the AEU and teachers were not even consulted on the 2020 document. Just like the Labor backbench, it was news to them when it was dropped on 6 June.

If the government wanted a review of the education system, and wanted to do anything significant that was going to affect it—and I would suggest that closing 39 schools is very significant—the least it would do is consult with teachers and with the Australian Education Union, especially if it was a Labor government. One would also expect it would consult with the P&C at the very least. Mr Barr says it is a consultation period in accordance with the act, but it is a consultation period after the event. The government has come down with the 2020 document, this mantra from heaven, which has been dumped on the table—there it is, and here are the 39 schools; let us now talk about it.

Mr Barr: It is a proposal.

MR STEFANIAK: It is a proposal. It may not be a *fait accompli*. We will see what happens. The minister might pull back in some areas. We will see. It might have been an amazing gambit and the minister might have other things he wants to do, and this might be some ambit claim. It may not be an ambit claim, though, to listen to the Chief Minister. This might be exactly what is going to happen. But the community sees through it as sham consultation. You probably cannot have a total win-win situation. There are always some people who will never agree with it. If the government wants to consult and try to take the community with it, the vast majority will probably appreciate that some schools may have to close. The question is which schools, and how best you go through that process of making further improvements to our education system in the ACT.

Because it is such an important area, the government has to do that in a thorough way, not do it by dropping a cobbled together document on the table and saying that 39 schools are closing in six months; let us talk about it now. The start line should be talking to people, having—as we are suggesting in this instance—an independent inquiry under the Inquiries Act, where people have a chance to make their submissions, where school communities can be consulted, where people outside of the school community

who have a very real interest and bearing on our education system—like the business sector, the universities, the vocational education and training sector—can all have their say and make their recommendations.

When the college system started it was good enough to be dedicated to talking to people for about two or three years, to ensure that what we came up with—which was quite revolutionary—worked. Surely at least 18 months should be set aside for a full inquiry under the Inquiries Act. The government has not put up any reasons at all why this should not occur.

Mrs Dunne: Except that it is not its idea.

MR STEFANIAK: Except it is not its idea. Thank you, Mrs Dunne. This is something the community would want to see. This is something of a duty regarding education. The government should support it.

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

Question put:

That **Mr Stefaniak's** motion be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 6		Noes 8	
Mrs Burke	Mr Smyth	Mr Barr	Mr Hargreaves
Mrs Dunne	Mr Stefaniak	Mr Berry	Ms MacDonald
Mr Mulcahy		Mr Corbell	Ms Porter
Mr Seselja		Mr Gentleman	Mr Stanhope

Question so resolved in the negative.

Adjournment

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

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

Vietnam veterans

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (5.58): I raise just one matter. To start with, I congratulate the Chief Minister on an excellent service for the Vietnam veterans a week before the opening of the war memorial for the people from the ACT who served in the armed forces. Congratulations on that, Chief Minister. That was very well received by the Vietnam vets, as was the Prime Minister's apology and the reception he gave at Parliament House.

I mentioned earlier last week that I was looking forward to catching up with my old friend Tony Sharp, the elder brother of platoon commander Gordon Sharp who was killed at Long Tan. I also had the opportunity to catch up with a lot of veterans, a few of

whom, in latter years, in the late 1970s and during the 1980s, I had the honour to serve with as well.

It was a fantastic series of events, culminating in a magnificent ceremony at 10 o'clock on Anzac Parade. There were further events over the weekend. It meant a lot to the veterans, especially, for the government to formally acknowledge that they had not been treated well. I am delighted that, whilst there are many people in Australia now who have grave concerns about whether we should be in Iraq or not, the diggers returning from Iraq will never have the same problems from the community as those returning from Vietnam did. And that is as it should be.

Service men and women go overseas to fight for their country. They go overseas because they are told to. They go overseas because it is a civilian government who orders them to do that. It is not their choice whether they go to war or not but, in the finest tradition of Australian service men and women—the finest tradition of the Australian army, air force and navy—the diggers who went to Vietnam did us proud. Long Tan was just one battle where they did that absolutely magnificently. The diggers have continued to do us proud since then, wherever they serve around the world. They continue to do us proud now by their feats in Iraq and Afghanistan, regardless of whether people think they should be there or not.

There are some outstanding issues, which I commend to the government to have a look at. The Vietnam vets are keen to set up, and possibly go in with a local charity, another small office somewhere in the south of Canberra. I will certainly be talking to them further about that and be liaising with the relevant government ministers as they develop that proposal.

I also point that they are having some problems at present in paying reasonably significant rent for the old depot at Page where they now have a Vietnam vets facility. It used to be, I think, part of the MBA's ITAB training area. Before that, it was a parks and gardens depot. It has been turned into an excellent facility for Vietnam vets, but they are paying a fairly significant rent. They have very little by way of money. They are after about \$13,000 a year. Again, I will take that up with the relevant government ministers.

If any group in our community deserves special consideration, it is a group that represents ex-soldiers—men and women who have put their bodies on the line for their country. In many instances, they have come back wounded, with a number of problems, and a lot of stress as a result of their service for their nation. There can be no greater calling and no greater sacrifice made than to put your body on the line for your country, as a member of the Australian armed services. We should do anything we can to help. I do not think they are asking for much at all.

I will certainly be making some representations on their behalf. They will be making representations. I commend those representations to the government. I hope those representations will be considered favourably. They do not want something for nothing. Because they are having some problems, I hope that the government can see their way clear, despite the significant financial problems the territory has, to offer them some assistance.

All in all, it was an excellent series of events which I know all the vets who came thoroughly enjoyed. The Vietnam veterans motorcycle group finished the parade by driving off on their Harleys and other powerful motorcycles after the Federation Guard, the three APCs and the Iroquois helicopters had done their bit. All in all, that culminated in an excellent finale to what was a great series of events. I commend the organisers, the local organisers especially, on the effort they put in.

Auswide

Kama scout group

National day of honour

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (6.03): I rise to highlight three recent events that I was asked to officiate at recently. I do so because they are good examples of community building. The first was the official opening of the first Auswide project outlet in Belconnen where I spoke, along with Senator Humphries, in recognition of this important event. Auswide was established in 1987 as a skills-share in Merimbula on the South Coast. It now has staff of over 60 and offices in Merimbula, Bega Valley, Cooma and three outlets in Canberra. Auswide is a not-for-profit organisation which provides practical assistance and training to those who are wanting to return to the work force or are entering the work force for the first time.

We all know that the ACT has achieved a record low unemployment rate of 2.8 per cent, so one would think that returning to work or entering the work force was as simple as fronting up. However, in this fast-moving, changing world the workplace is changing too and re-skilling is often sought. We are aware that the ACT and the nation are suffering a skills shortage at the moment. The ACT government has again committed additional resources to this matter in the 2006-07 budget.

Projects such as Auswide are, therefore, important. I was pleased to see that Auswide has a relationship with Volunteering ACT and Volunteering Australia in referring some people to voluntary work to assist them in gaining valuable work experience and confidence in the workplace. Our confidence is often the first thing to be dented if we become unemployed or have difficulty finding a suitable position. This is also an important role for this project, helping people feel better about themselves and their prospects. So I was pleased to congratulate the staff, including the site manager, Paul Thompson, and the CEO of Auswide, Kevin Stevens, and celebrate with them.

The second event was the opening of the Kama scout group's newly refurbished kitchen. This recognised the behind-the-scenes, very important repair and maintenance work conducted at their hall through a \$20,000 grant as part of the ACT government's renewed community facilities infrastructure program. I congratulate the Kama president, Bronwyn Parsons, and the group leader, Rob Bashfield.

As with many such programs, the funds that the ACT government provided made up only half of the equation. The other half, like much of the repair and maintenance, is hidden and goes on without much fanfare. This is the contribution of in-kind support and labour by the scout leaders, parents, volunteers and the local business community. It is because that contribution is often hidden that it needs to be recognised by this Assembly.

I am always pleased when asked to join with the community to celebrate hard work and success.

This brings to mind one of the other events I attended on Sunday. Early on Sunday morning, I attended the Christian Life Centre's national day of honour in Charnwood. The service recognised the contribution of volunteers and paid workers in aged care and public office holders. In his address, Pastor Sean Stanton rightly said that, whilst governments may provide resources, it is only through working together as a community that real results are achieved.

Schools—closures

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (6.07): Following the minister for education's statement that he stands by every statement of fact he has made regarding ACT schools, their costs and their numbers and every piece of information on the Department of Education and Training web site—this is in response to questions without notice last week—I have received some emails from people connected to some of the schools under threat. Here are extracts from two of them. A parent from Cook, quoted from the 2020 document:

... enrolments in schools such as Giralang, Cook and Southern Cross have declined over recent years, with only 40 per cent of school capacity being utilised.

These are the numbers that we have had thrown at us again today. Yet if one looks carefully at the table in the very document in which he says that, it shows Cook's enrolment at 91 per cent capacity. Furthermore, the parent argued that it is:

... misleading to say that Cook's enrolments have declined in recent years (they were 139 in February 2001 and 136 in February 2006)—

three people—

and nor does the Department even expect them to decline—with a forecast enrolment of 135 in 2010.

People find these inaccuracies offensive. The 2020 document did not even include Cook primary school on the map of current schools in the Belconnen south-east region, which, in their eyes, has wiped them off the map before consultation even began. The mailing address for feedback for the Belconnen south-east region is listed as Belconnen north-west. Okay, it is a paste and copying mistake, but it is significant to people. Even that small detail is yet to be corrected, despite it being pointed out to the minister and the chief executive. According to the constituent who contacted me:

The printed material should never have been put out in this form, but to leave it on the web site uncorrected is to treat the region, especially those schools proposed for closure, with contempt.

Comments from a Gilmore parent were:

'Towards 2020' states Gilmore Primary has a projected enrolment for 2010 of 175. However, the 'ACT Government Schools Projected Enrolments 2007-2011' (which uses the February 2006 census figures) puts the projected enrolments for Gilmore Primary in 2010 at 210 students (200 mainstream and 10 special needs).

'Towards 2020' also puts the capacity of Gilmore Primary at 625 by including four double demountables that are not used...

They are hardly useable and only remain on site as storage for the Department of Education and Training. The comments continue:

In addition, the figure of 625 was reached before the maximum class sizes for different year groups was reduced by the ACT Government meaning they are calculated at 30 or 31 a class.

I could start to collate many examples of inaccuracies for the minister. By suggesting that all nominated schools are suffering falling enrolments and carrying massive excess capacity, the government is attacking the level of support that they would have. That is why it is important to correct the record. In light of these corrections of the minister's mistakes—and there are many more that could be pointed out, and parents and constituents have pointed them out—he would gain more respect if he admitted them and corrected them.

Policing—international experience Vietnam veterans

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (6.11): There are two subjects. The first is the international deployment group and the AFP. It has been announced that \$500 million will be provided by the federal government to boost the IDG. I note, and the house should take note, that most police unions around the country have expressed concern that, with the creation of this IDG, there will be a drain of capability from many state police forces. They are right. Mark Burgess, from the Police Federation of Australia, said:

While we cautiously support what is being said, our major concern is what it will mean to the resourcing of the state and territory police. To increase the numbers that they're proposing, it's only going to be done if they can second or recruit state police officers.

That is the point. Because our policemen look for international experience, they are going to be attracted to the recruitment. We already have a dearth of experienced constables and sergeants in the ACT police service. We know that. The joint police study, belatedly tabled after the estimates hearings, tells us that our police station teams are understaffed in terms of police team leadership. The concern I have is that we are going to lose police. I do not know quite what the answer is, but I would like to see the federal government sit down with state governments and come to some cooperative arrangement on how they fund, boost, train and recruit police for the international deployment group without draining the state and territory forces.

There is a need for an IDG. Australia is deeply committed in its area of influence and too often now the burden falls on our defence forces to provide what really are gendarmerie or police force operational services in some of these particular places. We need an IDG but it cannot be at the expense of state forces.

The last thing I would like to quickly mention is this: I echo the comments made by Mr Stefaniak about the commemorations and celebrations for the Vietnam veterans last

week. They were the forgotten lot. My class was the first graduating class from the military college at Portsea not to go to Vietnam. Four of my classmates did. Two of those are now suffering post-traumatic stress syndrome. They need help. It is important that the community rally around these guys because they were doing what they thought they had to do. That was not the way that they were treated when they first came back. While I have said it here many times, on the anniversary, if you like, I will say it again, just to remind people.

It was good to see David Sabben, the commander of 12 platoon, the platoon that got caught up in battle of Long Tan. His wife, Sue Sabben, was my schoolteacher; so you can blame her for my lack of skills, perhaps. It was good to see David Sabben. He is in good shape. He was my first platoon commander when I was a young soldier.

Freedom day celebrations

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (6.14): Today, 23 August, is one of great importance in Australia's history. Forty years ago today the Gurindji people walked away from Wave Hill station and the British pastoral company, Vesty's, and set up camp at Wattie Creek, or Daguragu, as it is known by the Aboriginals—a day now known as freedom day.

Today, during the lunch break, I attended the 40th freedom day celebrations at the Aboriginal tent embassy where indigenous and non-indigenous Australians alike gathered not only to remember the actions of Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people but also to recognise the importance of what had begun on that day in 1966, when Vincent Lingiari said to Vesty's, "Righto, I am finished up. Today I am going to take all my people because you never give me money and I bin go to hospital. You never give me good clothes, nothing!" Then he turned to the Gurindji people and said, "You mob going to follow me now?" He spoke words that would pave the way for the rights of indigenous Australians for the future.

This was not just a battle for fair pay and decent conditions, it was so much more: it was the rising up of a people that were discriminated against. It was the first time that Aboriginals really took significant action and the first time they all stood up as one. In walking away from Wave Hill station, the Gurindji people walked away from terrible working conditions, pathetic pay and racist double standards. They began their journey to freedom

Before 1968, there was legislation in place that outlined a specific amount and stated that it was illegal to pay an indigenous worker more than that amount in currency or goods. Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people helped change that. Before 1968, if an indigenous Australian was eligible for government benefits there was legislation in place that stated the payment had to be given to the pastoral company the individuals worked for, not to the individuals themselves. Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people helped change that. Before the 1967 referendum, indigenous Australians were unable to vote. Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people helped change that.

Since the actions of Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people on 23 August 1966, indigenous Australians have fought for their rights, with great success. Some of us will remember the moving images of the great former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam on

16 August 1975, eight long years after the Gurindji people left Wave Hill, pouring a handful of Daguragu sand through the fingers of Vincent Lingiari, when he said:

On this great day, I, Prime Minister of Australia, speak to you on behalf of the Australian people—all those who honour and love this land we live in.

For them I want to say to you:

I want to acknowledge that we Australians have still much to do to redress the injustice and oppression that has for so long been the lot of Black Australians.

Vincent Lingiari I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof, in Australian law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands part of the earth itself as a sign that this land will be the possession of you and your children forever.

To which Lingiari replied:

We are mates now.

It was a powerful scene—and I do not think anyone can deny that—and a powerful thought, considering that in 1969 the Liberal government refused to even discuss the issue of eight square kilometres being given back to the Gurindji community. I conclude by reciting the title of a famous Paul Kelly song: *From little things, big things grow*.

Planning—EpiCentre lease

MR SESELJA (Molonglo) (6.18): I take the opportunity to comment briefly on some of the goings-on with EpiCentre, particularly in light of the tabling by the planning minister of the document that we were asking for. The minister has tabled a document dated 6 October 2005, which was a response to ING's request for information. The response came from the LDA, even though the question initially went to ACTPLA. ING wrote to ACTPLA on 23 September 2005 formally requesting that ACTPLA confirm whether or not discount outlet retailing was to be a permitted use under amendment 175 to the territory plan as it relates to the site and under the terms of the EpiCentre EOI, with which we presume ACTPLA are closely familiar.

After that, we saw, from documents we have managed to get from the planning and environment committee, correspondence between ACTPLA and the LDA. We have email correspondence with, essentially, an agreed response. The agreed response was that the LDA, not ACTPLA, would respond to ING. Essentially, the answer to their questions on variation 175 to the territory plan was that they would leave them to work it out for themselves. The response of 6 October states in part:

The range of permissible uses and their definitions is evident in the Plan. The onus lies with the prospective proponents to consider the provisions of the Plan and formulate their own conclusions as to whether the permissible uses accord with their aspirations for the site.

That letter was agreed to by both agencies, ACTPLA and the LDA, and was cc'd to Garrick Calnan of the ACT Planning and Land Authority. That contrasts with the record of discussion of a meeting on 4 October in which Austexx and ACTPLA met. That was two days before that letter went from the LDA, in which we have the words:

Each shop can be a maximum of 3,000m². There can be a number of shops on site and each shop can be maximum 3,000m².

The key question is twofold: why were ING and Austexx apparently treated differently? Both came to ACTPLA seeking clarification, but only one got a response from ACTPLA. The other got a response from the LDA. ACTPLA's response appeared to give some information to Austexx, whereas the response to ING did not. It essentially told them to go away. This meeting and this letter happened two days apart. Yet we have two prospective bidders getting two different pieces of information—one helpful, one unhelpful—from two different agencies. The question is: why was it referred to a different agency? Why did ACTPLA not answer it? Why was the LDA's answer to ING that much less forthcoming with crucial information?

If there is any doubt on this matter, we have a later email, on 8 November, to Rob Purdon on behalf of Austexx from Hamish Sinclair, which clearly says:

... a "shop" is limited to 3,000m² per establishment, NOT by Crown lease.

This is correct ... the 3,000m² limit could apply to a number of individual establishments ... within a larger Crown lease for the site held by a single lessee.

This needs to be resolved. This is a serious breakdown in this process. Why was one prospective bidder getting different treatment and different answers from two different agencies?

We essentially have here two different bidders, both coming to the ACT Planning and Land Authority, seeking clarification in the context of significant confusion. On 4 October, we get one answer from ACTPLA to Austexx. On 6 October, we get a different answer, a much less helpful answer, to ING from the LDA. The question is: why did this occur? This, to me, appears to be quite outrageous. It is outrageous, and the minister really needs to clarify for the people of the ACT and the Assembly why this has occurred, what investigations he is making into this, and whether he is still satisfied that this process was completely fair and completely objective. These documents go against what the minister has said numerous times in the media on a number of issues. It contradicts much of what the minister has said.

MR SPEAKER: The member's time has expired.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.24 pm.