



Debates

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Wednesday, 15 November 2006

The Assembly met at 10.30 am.

(Quorum formed.)

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

Health—hearing problems in babies

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (10.32): I move:

That this Assembly notes:

- (1) the importance of screening new born babies for early health intervention;
- (2) that early detection of a hearing problem ensures early treatment and better outcomes for the baby concerned; and
- (3) that the long term value of establishing hearing in otherwise deaf babies is immeasurable and allows individuals to integrate into normal school appropriately.

Early hearing loss is one of the most common developmental abnormalities present at birth. Hearing impairment in children is known to impact speech and language development, as well as general childhood development. Current international research suggests that early diagnosis and intervention such as amplification—through hearing aids or cochlear ear implants—and special education helps most children with hearing loss. Usually children who are diagnosed and receive intervention before the age of six months demonstrate better speech, language development and learning skills than those who are diagnosed at a later age.

Without a screening program, babies often are not identified or diagnosed until at least one year of age and often as late as two to three years of age after language delays become clear. When hearing loss is detected late, these babies are at higher risk of having poorer long-term outcomes in language and learning. The ramifications of this are enormous.

Children are more likely to perform below their grade level, be held back or drop out of school altogether. These consequences are in sharp contrast to those children who are identified early, who receive early intervention and then are found to function at the level of their peers by the time they enter school.

The National Health and Medical Research Council, known as the NHMRC, has noted that early detection of permanent childhood hearing impairment is one of the most pressing screening issues of childhood. In 2002 the council noted that screening is not only pressing but now also viable due to improved hearing technology. It is this access to better technology that has made universal hearing screening possible.

Without such programs the average age of detection of significant hearing loss is approximately 14 months.

According to the NHMRC, the level of prevalence of hearing impairment affects between one to two and 5.7 children per 1,000 live births. Applying this finding to the ACT, it means that we can expect that between five and 25 babies born each year will have some level of hearing impairment. The role of universal newborn hearing screening is to reduce the educational and developmental impact of permanent childhood hearing impairment for these children and their families.

Universal hearing screening is also an investment in the future of our society, as early detection and referral maximises outcomes and reduces financial costs on families, the health system and the community. Most importantly, it gives those children with hearing impairment the chance to reach their full potential through early intervention and management strategies.

Of course, screening is only part of the picture. The availability of appropriate services to meet the needs of children with hearing impairment is essential. Without these services, the benefits of hearing tests are minimised. The first infant hearing screening program in Australia was established in Victoria in 1992. It was not a newborn hearing screening program in which the test was performed at birth. Nevertheless, it was designed to provide early detection and intervention strategies for infants before one year of age. In Western Australia a trial into universal newborn hearing screening, funded by the state government, began in 2000. The Western Australian program was extended to a number of centres, with the aim to detect and initiate intervention procedures by six months of age.

The newly formed National Newborn Hearing Screening Committee began lobbying the commonwealth government in 2004 to ensure that every Australian child born with significant hearing loss has access to early detection and intervention services. Universal hearing screening programs have now been established in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and, to a limited extent, the Northern Territory.

Until now, the implementation of newborn hearing screening at a national level has not been realised. The struggle for national coordination continues. Universal hearing screening is now mandated in the United States of America, all of the UK and a majority of countries within Europe. Data is accumulating about the effectiveness of such programs. Interestingly, the prevalence of deafness detectable at birth is common throughout the world.

Obviously, for any screening program to be successful it must be universal. The ACT experience with newborn hearing screening dates back to February 2002, with the establishment of a program at the Canberra Hospital. At that time a targeted program was designed to screen all high-risk infants from the centre of newborn care or those with a recognised hearing impairment. The program was later extended to include routine screening of all newborn infants prior to hospital discharge.

Recurrent funding by the Stanhope government for a period of four years was provided for the first phase of the service, totalling \$479,000. By October 2004, and in accordance with the ACT government's commitment to the universal newborn

hearing screening program, hearing screening was extended to Calvary Private Hospital and John James Memorial Hospital. A budget of \$201,000 was allocated in 2004-05 for the implementation of this second program phase, with a recurrent funding allocation of \$130,000 for subsequent years.

The ACT has adopted the auditory brainstem response, or ABR, method for screening newborns. This method replaces tests such as the distraction test of the past that attempted to determine hearing impairment by, as an example, making noises to the side of the child to see if they turned to the source of the noise. Of course, all of us who have any experience with children—this extends to teenagers and young adults too—know that just because they do not respond to you does not mean they cannot hear you.

The new ABR screening tests no longer rely on outside stimulus. The tests are undertaken by auditory technicians and provide for pass or fail outcomes. If a child fails the ABR test, they are referred to a diagnostic evaluation for hearing impairment. The referral provides details on hearing thresholds and determines actual levels of hearing impairment. The testing not only determines whether a child has hearing impairment but it can also determine if a child has impairment in both ears or just one.

Children with impairment in just one ear, known as unilateral deafness, are provided with regular follow-up sessions, as some of them will develop bilateral deafness—that is deafness in both ears—later on. In addition, some children with congenital hearing problems may not present with hearing loss in the first few days and weeks after birth. So, despite the great benefits of the newborn hearing screening program, there remains the need to monitor children's progress even after a hearing screening pass in the neonatal period.

The field of newborn hearing screening is still in its infancy. The NHMRC has noted that the study into this area suggests that there may be additional risk factors that could assist in highlighting children who need special attention. Some factors that may be related to hearing impairment in infants might include admission to neonatal intensive care units; infections caught during the first weeks and months of life; face, head or skull abnormalities; a birth weight of less than 1.5 kilos; birth asphyxia; chromosomal abnormalities; jaundice; a family history of permanent childhood hearing impairment; and some medicinal compounds.

As more study is undertaken, the link between these and other causes of hearing impairment will become clearer and enable additional treatments and interventions. In terms of permanent childhood hearing impairment, the NHMRC has recommended that there is fair evidence to recommend universal neonatal hearing screening.

At this stage, according to the NHMRC, there is insufficient evidence to make a recommendation for or against genetic screening. The NHMRC has also found insufficient evidence to make a recommendation for or against school entry screening. I remember that when I attended Ainslie primary school, we were offered school-based hearing screening at the school and also as school excursions to the institute of anatomy, where hearing tests were provided.

There are some things that will become more obvious over time and with more detailed research into hearing impairment. The NHMRC noted that it found good evidence to recommend against distraction testing for infants.

While the ACT program has only been operating for the last four years, there are many positive outcomes to report. The ACT newborn hearing screening program has been successful in identifying infants with hearing impairment early. Babies identified as having a hearing impairment are being treated or remediated earlier than prior to the establishment of the program.

The ACT compliance with newborn hearing screening for the period 2005-06 is estimated at 98.6 per cent. It benchmarks well with other jurisdictions. Over the first three years of the program, approximately 31 babies were referred for diagnostic evaluation following newborn hearing screening during this time.

It is too early to make any claims about the long-term impact of the program, as the initial cohort of children tested is only around four years of age. The real test will come over the next two or three decades. Only then will we be able to determine whether the testing and early intervention has made a difference to the educational, social and financial outcomes of those children with hearing impairment.

Catching hearing loss early and putting in place measures to ensure early intervention and support must provide better outcomes for those children affected than doing nothing. I would like to commend the efforts of the ACT government in expanding the newborn hearing screening program in 2005-06 to cover all babies born in the ACT and not just those born in public hospitals.

Finally, all children should have the opportunity to communicate. A hearing loss that is undetected for even the first six months of a child's life can critically compromise their speech, language, cognitive and social skills, compared to other children identified earlier. I would like to commend the government for the extension of the program to cover all children born in the ACT.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (10.44): The opposition will be agreeing to the motion moved by Mr Gentleman today. We thank him for raising an important issue. It is interesting as a new parent—and I went through this seven months ago—when they take your baby down to the lab, in this case at Calvary Hospital, and the technician does the testing.

What a relief it is to find out that your newborn has hearing, because until that time you just do not know. I see a few heads nodding around the chamber of those who have also been through the procedure recently. Little David Arthur came through with flying colours. It was a great relief. I do not think any of us could know what it must be like for a new mother or new father to be told that their child has a problem.

It is interesting that not a lot of work has been done on the effects of deafness. In February this year Vicdeaf, which is the Victorian Deaf Society, and the CRC here commissioned Access Economics to do some work to find out how many people are genuinely affected, what the effect is and what the cost of that effect is, not only in

dollar terms but also in health terms. When you read this report, it is quite staggering. I will read selected parts from the report called *Listen Hear*—the economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia—done by Access Economics.

Before I get to that, if people are interested in the effect and the numbers in the ACT, they can get onto the Health First website and look up “Newborn Screening Testing”. The last paragraph says:

About 1 out of 1,000 infants are born deaf or with severe hearing loss. Infant hearing loss is screened for in the newborn when indicated and again at 3 months of age. If needed, therapy can begin before 6 months. If not detected before age 2, deafness will—

and it says “will”—

interfere with the child’s speech and language skills. Infant screening tests for hearing are quick and simple.

The fact that these programs continue under the current government is a good thing. I consulted with the ACT Deafness Resource Centre. Although one in a thousand will indicate that, with our birth rate at about 3,000 or 4,000, only three or four young Canberrans are affected. The information supplied to me from their experience suggests that the number can range from seven to 30 born per year in the ACT with hearing issues. That number is way too large. We need to take note of what causes it.

One in six Australians are affected by hearing loss. It is rising from less than one per cent for people aged younger than 15 years to three in every four people over 70 with a hearing problem. With the ageing population we have, by 2050 something like one in four Australians will have a hearing loss problem. The report goes on to say, “While interventions such as hearing aids and cochlear ear implants enhance a person’s ability to communicate, the majority of people with hearing loss”—about 85 per cent of them—“do not have such devices.” The report went on to look at the cost. It says:

In 2005, the real financial cost of hearing loss was \$11.75 billion or 1.4% of GDP.

It says that it represents an average cost of \$3,314 per person per annum for each of the 3.55 million Australians who have hearing loss—or for everyone, if you break it down further, \$578. It goes on to say that the financial costs do not take into account the net cost of loss of wellbeing, which is called “disease burden” in the industry, associated with hearing loss, which is a further \$11.3 billion.

We are talking about \$23 billion of impact. I do not use these numbers in a callous way just to say that this is an economic thing. People have gone out to try and quantify what the effect of this is in something that we can understand. It says that the largest financial component is the loss of productivity, which is about \$6.7 billion. The cost of informal care, it says, is the impact on the families, which is about \$3.2 billion.

Direct health costs to the health system are estimated at \$674 million in 2005. That includes hearing aids and cochlear implants. It says that 27 per cent of health expenditure—about \$67 million—is on children aged less than 14 years, who comprise less than one per cent of people with hearing loss, while noting that needs may be higher and impacts greater for children. Remember that children represent a very small percentage of it, but 27 per cent of the health expenditure is on children. As Mr Gentleman pointed out, early intervention is the key to some of this.

The report went on to try and quantify what is the quality of impact of life for somebody with hearing loss. This is worked out in disability adjusted life years, or DALYs. The estimated loss is \$11.3 billion in net terms. That is some 3.8 per cent of the total burden of disease from all causes in Australia. Deafness at four per cent is clearly a serious issue.

The report says that, for those of us that do not have hearing loss, severe hearing loss is comparable to having pneumonia on an ongoing basis. Imagine waking up every day with pneumonia. That is the level of burden that it projects. A dilemma is highlighted in the report on page 7. What are the projections? Is it getting better or is it getting worse? It goes on to say:

Projections of hearing loss suggest that hearing loss in the worse ear is expected to more than double by 2050 (a 2.2-fold increase).

The report says that the prevalence of hearing loss overall is projected to increase from 17.4 per cent—ie, one in six Australians—in 2005 to 26.7 per cent, or more than one in four, in 2050. It goes on to say that a significant amount of hearing loss—37 per cent—is due to excessive noise exposure. There are issues there that we certainly need to look at. It says that the impact of a person's loss depends on the intersection of three key factors: the time the person acquires their hearing loss, which is very relevant to what Mr Gentleman is saying here today; the severity of the hearing loss; and the communications demand then facing the individual.

When we look at hearing loss in children it is commonly congenital—ie, the child is born with it—but there are other factors that can cause it. I think of concern for all of us is that, particularly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, there is a particular ear disease called otitis media. The numbers are very vague, but the prevalence in Aboriginal children was reported from community to community to vary between 10 and 54 per cent. So we clearly have issues there.

Hearing loss across Australia in comparison to other countries in a way is good. Australia's hearing loss in new births per 1,000 is about 1.2, on international studies. In America it is something like 2.5. The United Kingdom has got it down to 0.9 per 1,000. Obviously there are things we can address.

I note that Dr Foskey has circulated a motion saying that we need to make sure parents are informed. Clearly, early intervention is something we should look at. The real problem for many people is the way it affects them in their lives. The biggest impact is often in education. I notice the minister is here. I am sure he is going to have a few words to say. Turning to the projections for children, it says:

The number of children with hearing loss is projected to increase from 10,268 in 2005 to 11,031 by mid-century, an increase of only 7.4% over the period.

The report is saying that that is a function of population growth. It is not saying that there is a reason or an expectation that we will see a significant increase other than just as a percentage of population. It is interesting that, with all the modern technology we have, less than 10 per cent of people who are likely to benefit from technology have accessed it. There is an enormous amount of work we could do there.

I am not sure if this is an advertisement for the cochlear ear implant industry. Based on the work done by Access Economics, quite clearly there is a lot that we as a country can do for those that have hearing problems. It is particularly in education that a lot can be done. I will quote some of the data that is provided in the report:

People with hearing loss have poorer educational and employment outcomes than the rest of the population ... The number of people with more severe degrees of hearing loss reporting completing a trade course or higher is less than half that of the general population ... people with hearing loss were 2.42 times less likely to have completed high school.

Not only have they the disability of hearing loss but it is also compounded by the fact that their ability to complete education is also much more difficult for them. When you look at intervention services, \$20 million was spent for early intervention in 2005. When you compare that to the \$23 billion impact that deafness has on the community, \$20 million for early intervention does not seem to be a great amount of money that is spent across the country.

The report says that school retention rates for deaf and hearing-impaired children are poor. The British Association of Teachers of the Deaf reports that 86 per cent of deaf and hearing-impaired students leave school by the age of 16. If you extrapolate those figures to Australia, the population of deaf and hearing-impaired students is estimated to be 20,918.

The cost of a teacher for a child with deafness is about \$90,000 per annum. Support costs per teacher for a teachers aide are estimated to be about \$35,000, given the reports. The total extra cost for educating children with hearing loss was estimated to be \$117 million across the country. It is not a great deal of money. Appreciating always that there are competing demands for funding, it is really not a great deal of money when you compare what the impact is on the economy and what the impact is on them as individuals, when you think that it is the equivalent of living with pneumonia every day of your life.

This is an important motion, and the opposition will be supporting it. We thank Mr Gentleman for bringing it on. To all those who work in the field and do a fabulous job with assisting those born with hearing problems, I certainly congratulate you on the work you do.

It is incredibly important and vital that we intervene early. To all those who provide the care for children, in particular, with a hearing problem, again as a community I

think we should be supporting you as best we can. I look forward to working with the government to ensure that that happens.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (10.56): I thank Mr Gentleman for the motion as well. I agree, to an extent, with what he has proposed. On the face of it, it would seem to be a no-brainer to support it. I disagree with clause (3) of the motion, after a little bit of research revealed the complexities that are not captured by the motion. As members are aware, there has been an amendment circulated in my name.

This particular clause assumes that all deaf or hard of hearing children will eventually be able to hear with medical intervention. But hearing can never be 100 per cent assured, despite scientific advances. We must also recognise that not all parents of babies born deaf or hard of hearing want their children to use hearing devices at an early age.

The motion also argues that establishing hearing is highly valuable for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and necessary for them to be integrated into mainstream schooling. This issue is highly controversial within the deaf community.

It is highly likely that Mr Gentleman did not realise the permutations of his motion when he placed it on the papers, or perhaps the departmental briefing papers provided to him failed to pick up on these points. If that is the case, I urge the Minister for Health to ensure that the relevant public servants are provided with deaf awareness training, which is available locally through the ACT Deafness Resource Centre. For the time being, I would like to take this opportunity to provide a little bit of education about deafness. I move the following amendment to the motion:

- (3) there are a variety of treatments available to new born babies diagnosed as deaf or hard of hearing, and the parents of the child should be informed of all available options.

Some of you could accuse me, I suppose, of being overly politically correct, but this is a significant issue within the deaf community, as anybody who has had anything to do with it would know. To me and to the deaf community it is a matter of rights and choice.

It is also a matter of celebrating a language—albeit a silent one—and a culture and diversity within our community. There is a fundamental distinction between the lifestyles and beliefs of those who are big D and little d deaf. To explain that terminology I will quote from an ABC radio transcript that went on to win a human rights award:

Big D deaf do not see being deaf as a disability. Rather, it is seen as a discrete, rich and triumphant culture that is so powerful it does not really need medical intervention. This community believes that being deaf is a good thing. There are parents out there who—

though it might be hard for us to believe—

cheer with joy when they discover that their child is deaf. Rather than feeling disadvantaged by deafness, they feel passionately proud of it.

Just as we have languages like English, Japanese or Spanish, we in Australia also have Auslan. Sign language can be as rich a method of communication and as rich a mode of language as any verbal language.

Little d deaf people who are audiologically deaf or hearing impaired but do not belong to the deaf community do not use sign language every day of their lives. They do not identify as culturally deaf people. Where people choose to sit may often depend upon whether a person loses their hearing later in life or if it was never present. It may also depend upon the prevalence of deafness within the family. Individuals can also move between, or coexist with, the two cultures.

The motion as presented by Mr Gentleman today fits with the thinking of the little d deaf. By amending the motion I do not seek to take sides with big D or little d deaf beliefs, and though these issues are hard fought within the deaf community.

I do, however, seek to acknowledge the various practices surrounding people who are deaf or hard of hearing and to acknowledge their right to choose their lifestyle. Such a proposal would surely be more fitting with our human rights principles. Indeed, I suppose you could always call it another aspect of the right to choose.

Regarding newborn hearing screening, I am pleased to note that the ACT is well advanced and already screens 100 per cent of infants. Improved technology in the ACT will improve our levels of detection. Not all other states and territories are at 100 per cent screening yet.

Being able to identify a baby as deaf or hard of hearing at an early stage allows for the many options to be explored. If the parents choose it and it is appropriate for the individual baby, early intervention can be put in place. Whatever the form of that intervention, it will allow for improved learning and communication with, and by, the child at an age that is on a par with a child without a hearing loss, therefore giving the child in question an equal start in life.

In a perfect world, every parent would be able to make an informed decision about the path they choose for their child, but unfortunately this is not always the case. Deafness Forum Australia—the peak body for Australia—is aware of a degree of bias presented by audiologists and other experts in the field to which parents are referred once a child is diagnosed. For a practitioner who has never experienced deafness, there may be a greater preference for medical intervention and limited appreciation for deaf culture. I quote Harlen Lane, an American linguist and specialist in sign languages:

Hearing people have been perpetrating for a very long time some really terrible practices that have cost deaf people very dearly in dignity, in effective education, in civil rights ... hearing people take the posture of benefactors of deaf people. Hearing professionals know best. Deaf people who have been deaf all their lives and live deafness every day do not have an opinion that weighs in heavily.

There are a variety of options available for children diagnosed with deafness or as being hard of hearing. The families of the children should be informed of all of these.

Deafness forum argues that the decision as to whether or not to have a cochlear implant or other type of hearing device is a matter of personal decision for the parents.

In making any decision, it is considered essential that the decision maker has the best possible factual information on which to base that decision. That means they should be able to obtain non-biased information from all relevant sources about all the options available to them.

For children in particular, these options could include living with deafness and receiving a bilingual or bicultural education, enabling the child to make subsequent decisions of their own regarding their preferred methods of communication in particular situations. Information regarding options such as lip-reading and Auslan must be available along with information about cochlear implants, for example.

Deafness forum also believes that all medical authorities in deafness sector organisations should provide non-biased advice to parents regarding options for deaf or hearing-impaired children. They also believe that parents and the child involved should be supported in a non-judgmental way to implement their decision and, if they subsequently so choose, any later varied decision.

The Greens agree with these statements, while recognising a complexity about them and issues about parents making choices for children at all. But that is the kind of society we have. I hope our amendment meets the agreement of others in the Assembly.

MS GALLAGHER (Molonglo—Minister for health, Minister for Disability and Community Services and Minister for Women) (11.05): The newborn hearing screening program is part of a wide range of initiatives that have been implemented to maximise the potential of all in our community. It is particularly a flagstone feature of the ACT children's plan, where in 2006 we can promise that every child born in the ACT will have their hearing tested. Because of that testing, we can ensure that those found with hearing impairment can get access to early intervention and support services at the earliest possible time.

This early intervention ensures that those children with hearing impairment get the best possible treatment and care to maximise their health, educational, social and financial outcomes. This program obviously provides wonderful peace of mind for parents. Many of us in the Assembly have benefited from the newborn hearing screening program already. It also helps to give children the best possible change in life. If we follow on from what Dr Foskey has said, choices are available to them.

In establishing a level of hearing impairment in the first weeks and months of life, we provide the opportunity for early intervention which we know leads to much better outcomes. But of course hearing testing is only the start of the program. As Mr Gentleman said, screening is only useful if we have programs available to children and parents following positive test results.

Whilst the data management for the program is still developing, I can report that, from 2005-06, 5,311 babies were identified for screening and that, of these screenings, 5,234 newborn infants were screened. There were 15 refusals for screening from

parents. That equates to an ACT compliance rate of about 98.6 per cent of eligible infants. I am not sure that, with those figures, you will get much better than that.

ACT newborn hearing screening program records show that, of those babies screened in 2005-06, 31 babies were referred for diagnostic hearing evaluation and that, of those 31, 18 referrals for diagnostic evaluation came from within the ACT, comprising 58 per cent of all babies. That is presumably because we have a lot of babies from outside the ACT.

Thirteen were identified at TCH out of 2,071 infants; four were identified from the 2,009 infants tested at Calvary; and one infant was identified at John James Memorial Hospital from 1,154 infants tested at that site. A further 13 newborn referrals for diagnostic hearing evaluation came through the New South Wales state-wide infant hearing screening program.

The numbers we saw at TCH are in the expected range from a major tertiary hospital. However, the numbers referred for diagnostic testing from the other sites, particularly Calvary Private and Calvary John James Hospitals, were perhaps underrepresented. We will be monitoring those results to see if referral patterns change over time.

The screening program is operational seven days per week across all ACT maternity hospital sites. This level of coverage is essential, given that many mums and babies do not stay in hospital for extended periods, and also that many babies decide to arrive when they like, such as on weekends, and could miss out on the Monday to Friday service.

The seven day a week service is preferable to a recall service for missed screening, as such programs have proven to be more time consuming and less effective in universal coverage. The specific needs of high-risk infants have also been looked at as part of this program. Particular care is taken to ensure that babies who require admission to the centre for newborn care are followed up comprehensively.

I think more work needs to be done to evaluate the effectiveness of screening in this high-risk population. At this time we cannot say for certain whether there are a higher number of babies with hearing impairment after intensive care; however, as the relationship between intensive care and hearing impairment has been suggested by some, it would be unwise to ignore the possible linkage.

Of the 31 newborns identified through the screening program in the last financial year, 15 different categories of hearing loss have been identified. Some of the outcomes of the screening and diagnostic testing include one infant with profound bilateral sensorineural hearing loss who is under consideration for a cochlear implant.

Another infant diagnosed with moderate to severe hearing loss is being considered for hearing aids. Eleven infants were referred for medical examination to a general practitioner and/or paediatrician. Of these infants, seven were referred or advised to seek ear, nose and throat specialist follow-up.

All babies were referred for follow-up at eight to 10 months of age with Australian Hearing. Australian Hearing is an Australian government agency dedicated to help

people manage their hearing impairment so they have a better quality of life. They provide a full range of services for children and young people up to the age of 21, eligible adults, aged pensioners and most war veterans. These figures show that our clinicians are finding instances of hearing impairment. Children are being referred to the appropriate service for remedial intervention or support.

Since 2002 the program has identified a number of babies with significant hearing impairment who would otherwise have been diagnosed much later, which may have affected their language development. There are now two children with early cochlear implants because of the screening process.

The long-term value of establishing hearing in otherwise deaf babies is immeasurable and will allow these individuals to integrate into school appropriately. I believe it will provide them with choices in terms of support they may seek as they grow up and their parents decide what support they would like for them.

Hearing aids are being fitted early in other infants. Other long-term achievements remain to be evaluated once they have reached school, then university and then go out into the world. A number of other children who have been noted as at risk of hearing deterioration are being followed closely so we can intervene proactively.

Establishing the program is not an end in itself. We will continue to monitor the program to ensure that people of the ACT have access to best practice services. We also need to review the way we provide these services and the equipment used to test children, to ensure that we find all of those who will benefit from early intervention and support. We also know that the program is not the whole answer. Hearing loss can present after the neonatal period. This form of hearing loss can also result in delayed language development if not picked up early.

In summary, we are really pleased with the establishment of the newborn hearing program. Certainly the parent feedback around it is very positive. We will continue to monitor its progress to ensure that all children born with a hearing impairment are tested and that those who fail the test are referred to appropriate services.

I think this motion is worthy of Assembly support. We will certainly support the Greens' amendment. I take the point of Mr Smyth. I do not think Mr Gentleman is in any way being negative in his motion or denying choice to parents, should they want to seek other services for their children based on the screening process. But I acknowledge that there are groups within the deaf community who do not see particular medical interventions as necessary to support their hearing impairment. I acknowledge Dr Foskey's point, but I think the motion deserves the support of all of the Assembly. In the interests of agreement in the Assembly, the government is happy to support Dr Foskey's amendment.

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (11.14): I was just going to acknowledge Ms Gallagher's support for the Greens' amendment. I advise that I am happy with that too.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Community housing

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (11.14): I move:

That this Assembly:

- (1) recognises the growing importance of community housing in the provision of both social housing and affordable housing across Australia;
- (2) notes:
 - (a) that the ACT Government's Affordable Housing Steering Group is due to make a final report in March 2007; and
 - (b) community concern that the Government appears to be moving away from its general support for community housing; and
- (3) calls on the ACT Government to:
 - (a) develop a policy for community housing in partnership with both the community housing sector and the Affordable Housing Steering Group;
 - (b) produce an action plan for that policy; and incorporate the plan within the ACT Government's 2007-08 budget.

I have moved this motion today to elicit a public commitment to community housing from the government and in the hope that a plan to support the growth and development of the sector can be put in place in time for the next budget. This motion focuses on the more traditional notion of community housing, which is a form of social housing that is open to people on low incomes and takes some account of a newer category that the sector describes as affordable housing, which is the provision of housing at less than market rent to people for whom public housing is not available but for whom public rents are too high.

In calling on the ACT government to recommit to support the community housing sector, we need to understand its changing shape as well as its profound value. AHURI research from 2003 titled "How does community housing help strengthen communities" found:

Community housing providers, community stakeholders and tenants explicitly identify community-building objectives as an important element of their activities.

Collectively, community housing providers undertake a range of activities from improving housing access, personal development, brokering more effective access to community services, supporting social and economic engagement by tenants and supporting economic initiatives.

The focus of their activities is on strengthening communities in ways that support greater social inclusion for their tenants or target groups.

While it has been said that public housing can do the job as well as community housing, and cheaper, that is not a view that I accept. Not only is public housing limited in responsiveness by a brief that has become more and more welfare focused, it does not have, in the ACT or elsewhere, the community-building capacity that is the strength and purpose of the community housing sector.

In September 2001 the ACT government released a consultative paper titled *Community housing in the ACT—future directions*. This paper included the goal of expanding community housing to 1,000 properties by 2005. Minister Wood and the department subsequently consulted with the sector and issued a revised paper in May 2003 titled *Community housing in the ACT—future directions policy framework*. Note that this was a policy framework. It did not, to quote from the paper's introduction, "purport to represent the concluded views of the ACT Government or Minister for Housing in relation to housing policy matters".

The goal of expanding community housing to 1,000 properties by 2005 was absent from this paper, but the government's commitment to expand a diverse community sector remained. The 2003 paper also told us that the community housing policy and action plan were yet to come. Unfortunately, they have never arrived.

Over this time the sector has evolved. It includes a number of small providers that had the reasonable expectation that they would grow in accord with stated government intentions. Some of these organisations, such as Canberra Community Housing for Young People, CCHYP, have used a mix of community housing and SAAP funding to deliver concentrated and effective support for their tenants as needed. This more active approach has allowed them to maintain challenging tenancies, the benefits of which to the people and the families of the people involved, to the community and to government agencies have been immeasurable.

Unfortunately, all the momentum on community housing under Bill Wood from 2001 went when he left the Assembly in 2004. The recommendations of the affordable housing task force and the proposed community housing action plan, amongst other strategies, disappeared. While community housing took one step forward between 2001 and 2004, it has taken two steps back since.

In September 2005 the minister's housing advisory forum hosted an open discussion on community housing. It also issued a community housing discussion paper that summarised the views presented. This discussion paper once again talked about the need for an action plan. More than a year later, no action plan! The 2005 discussion paper also mentioned the ACT government's implementation of various strategies from the 2003 *Community housing in the ACT—future directions policy framework* and quoted this document as if it were government policy. The 2003 paper, from our point of view, does not represent a finalised government policy on community housing, and the government is yet to make a clear commitment on the direction it envisages for community housing.

The ACT government's May 2006 response to the community housing funding review was most unfortunate. The government argued that, yes, there should be an expansion in community housing but that the sector should do this without government assistance. This is a long way short of 1,000 homes by 2005. While the government expected community housing providers to increase their stock, the government warned that it would be cutting the level of funding it provides. There was an exception to this cut, however: if organisations were willing to merge they would be able to negotiate with the ACT government for additional funding. This change is also a long way from the pre-2004 commitment to diversity. The 2006-07 budget has put the community housing sector under great pressure following the imposition of a complex and expensive accreditation process, a hold on contract payments and an overall reduction in funding.

Let us take the issue of accreditation. In 2001 the government raised the idea of getting community housing providers accredited. In 2003 the ACT government committed to developing an accreditation process for the ACT in 2003-04 in conjunction with the Coalition of Community Housing Organisations ACT, CCHOACT, and the community housing sector. In 2004 the government went back to talking about the idea. In 2005, the idea itself seemed to be forgotten. Then in May 2006 the government said it would provide funding for three organisations to undertake an accreditation process in 2006-07 and a further three organisations in 2007-08.

One month later, when the 2006-07 budget came down, the government began saying all community housing providers must reach stage 1 of accreditation by 27 December and they will receive no funding to assist in this process. They also have to achieve this while operating on smaller budgets; plus, if they do not meet stage 1 accreditation by 27 December, they are unlikely to receive further funding.

Understandably, everyone who works or lives in the sector finds the whole process distressing, confusing and disempowering, with no real answer to obvious questions such as: why is the government continually changing its stance? What is the subtext of these change plans? How essential and useful is this form of accreditation anyway?

The government has most likely taken a blunt approach in 2006 because it does not think it has the funding to support these organisations and their work; but, instead of being up-front about the situation, working with the sector to deal with its problems, organisations believe they are being played off against each other and required to meet unachievable targets with diminished funding. Consequently, it looks as though they are being set up to fail, making the government's choice of whom and what to fund an easier one.

Barnardos and the Association for Postsecondary School Accommodation, APSSA, looked like giving up on their community housing programs, and Canberra Community Housing for Young People has concerns for its future altogether. Perhaps only Havelock, which has the largest number of community housing tenancies, and Community Housing Canberra, which has a bigger role in development and the provision of affordable housing than it does as a social housing provider, will survive.

Why then did the ACT government previously make a commitment to diversity in community housing services? It made that commitment because it recognised, in the government's 2003 paper, that it reflected the range of needs of individual households across the ACT community and that it reinforced one of the benefits of community housing: to provide for a wider range and choice of housing options reflecting differing needs and preferences of clients. Implied in that statement is a belief that some housing choice and opportunity should not be limited to those people who can afford to buy their own house. Of most concern is the fact that recent government decisions do not appear to address the problems faced by the sector.

It would seem that the ongoing viability of community housing is in doubt, as there are, in the context of current ACT funding models, too many community housing providers with too few houses. I can see two solutions to this problem: first, expand the number of houses so that housing providers can reach a sustainable level of tenancies; or, secondly, decrease the number of housing providers so that the remaining ones each have a sustainable level of tenancies—or perhaps a combination of both. Given the ACT government has an ongoing commitment to expand community housing, although not as much as 1,000 homes by 2005, a process that seeks to simply decrease the number of community housing providers appears short-sighted and unconstructive.

From SAAP to affordable housing: community housing fits in a spectrum. A Canberra-wide shortage of affordable housing for sale and private rent creates a greater demand for public and community housing. If there are other problems, there is greater demand for SAAP accommodation. The extent of the housing problem in Canberra can be seen in the SAAP bottleneck of recent years. The lack of access to affordable housing, lack of growth in ACT public housing and the corresponding slowdown in community housing sector expansion have created a bottleneck for people exiting SAAP services. The result is that the ACT has the longest average support periods in SAAP services in the country.

Some of the solutions to the affordability question might lie in expanding the top end of the community housing sector. In a housing market such as Canberra's, where there are very few tenancies in community housing, where the public housing waiting lists are interminable, the criteria have been made very stringent and the vacancy rate for private rental housing is low and prices are high, there is a growing group of people trapped in housing stress.

Community Housing Canberra has briefed us about projects in and outside Australia that offer rental accommodation at less than market rent for people on low to moderate incomes. I note that CHC asked for a land tax waiver on a property that it manages for a private home owner who explicitly wanted to make that property available to a family in need. This owner was prepared to accept a lower rental return on that basis. CHC carries the vacancy risk and manages the property.

Here is a model where some land tax concession could encourage more private property owners to work with community housing providers. While there would be some loss of revenue through the tax concession, if pursued on a wider scale it might result in lower demand for social housing, better social and economic outcomes for

tenants, improved viability for community housing providers and the social good that would be generated in the provision of the houses. Unfortunately, CHC's application for land tax exemption was refused. This really shows that we need to join the dots on social policy.

Access to safe, secure and affordable housing is both a human right and necessary for many other social and economic outcomes. This government once had a clear commitment to ensuring respect for that right. The last few years, however, have seen the government lose clarity in what it is hoping to achieve. Now we see the potential loss of small community housing providers that deliver social services to sometimes difficult and marginalised members of our community, a broader housing market that does not offer housing options to people on barely moderate incomes, public housing providing its own investment funds by cutting running costs, a homelessness strategy hamstrung by a lack of exit options and an angry community sector that has faced hostility from the government in return.

We should recognise that we will not get anywhere unless some sense of trust and partnership is rebuilt. This motion calls on the ACT government to take the first step and develop a policy for community housing in partnership with both the community housing sector and the affordable housing steering group. To quote from the commonwealth-state housing agreement:

Community Housing provides choice, it offers a higher level of tenant participation in management, and provides another avenue through which the diverse needs of individuals can be met.

If the ACT government is committed to the expansion of the community housing sector in the ACT, which I believe it is, it needs to deliver a policy and an action plan that reflect it. With regard to Mr Hargreaves's interjections, I am reflecting here on what we have been told by a number of representatives of the community housing sector. I advise you to seek them out yourselves. All in all, it is good that the government has a commitment to the community housing sector, as revealed in the amendment that has been circulated. It is a great pity that it is not making that commitment more real with action plans and targets.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (11.28): Before I go into the substantive part of the motion, I put on the record that I am a bit disappointed that Dr Foskey continues to perpetuate a series of untruths regarding the amount of commitment this government has to public and community housing. She talks about the lack of expansion in public housing. There is no recognition of \$30 million worth in the budget. There is no recognition of the dialogue that has gone on with the public, the public housing sector, the community housing sector and the private housing sector and the movements that we have had going forward.

I am concerned that Dr Foskey does not seem to acknowledge sufficiently that the community housing sector is, in effect, an inefficient system. It is full of people who should be praised to the nth for their commitment to their clientele. However, they function in an inefficient system—too many small players. They need to restructure. They themselves raised that issue in the ministerial forum. Dr Foskey talks about

action plans. This government is not about reorganising that sector; they have to do it themselves.

Furthermore, she says that there has been a slowdown in the community housing sector. I absolutely and totally reject that. She has two solutions. One is to have fewer providers in the system. Correct; she got that one right. The other one is to have more houses out there. Where is the notion of where we are going to pay for that? At \$350,000 a hit, where is the Greens' proposal to find three houses for \$1 million? It is notably absent. It is angering to see that it is notably absent. When the opposition speak, if that is their particular solution, I want to know where their funding source is as well.

Dr Foskey's motion states:

That the Assembly:

- (1) recognises the growing importance of community housing in the provision of ... social housing ... housing across Australia;

There is an implicit notion that the government does not support the community housing sector. I completely reject that notion that we do not support the sector. I acknowledge the role of community housing in the ACT. Contrary to the Queensland position, which would like to abolish it and put it all into the public housing sector, I have been vocal, in a national forum, in rejecting that notion. Any suggestion that we do not support the sector is not only wrong; it is poor research and it is just politics.

Community housing is a vital alternative to public housing services. It provides supportive tenancy management to people on low incomes in a way that encourages tenant participation in the management of their housing services. This sector deals with some very difficult and extremely disadvantaged clients and does so by providing not just housing but a range of support services to enable the clients to better manage their lives. Where was the credit that Dr Foskey gave to the partnership between Hartley Lifecare, TAS Housing and the government in the provision of some accommodation in Kambah, launched just the other day? Notably absent.

The government cannot support Dr Foskey's motion as it stands. We will support an amended version of the motion. I move the amendment circulated in my name, which has been circulated to the Greens and to Mrs Burke's office, the opposition spokesperson. I do not know whether she has seen it but it was circulated some time ago. The amendment that is on the table has been circulated to offices already. We did not want to spring anything on anybody. I move:

Omit all words after "That this Assembly", substitute:

"(1) recognises the importance of community housing in the provision of both social housing and affordable housing across Australia; and

(2) notes:

- (a) that the ACT Government's Affordable Housing Taskforce is due to make a final report in March 2007; and

(b) that the ACT Government has provided substantial support to the community housing sector.”.

The amendments are designed to show that we accept the importance of the community housing sector and that we are well advanced in developing policies for both affordable housing and the community sector.

The affordable housing task force are well advanced in this work. We are not going to ask them to start again to incorporate a sector that is undergoing its own change program. Note that, Dr Foskey: it is undergoing its own change management program; it is not being run by the government. We have no right to do that. We have a right to expect an excellent system. We do not have the right to march up to people and say, “You will.” We have not done that.

In 2004-05 the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services engaged SGS Economics and Planning to undertake a funding review of the community housing sector in the ACT. As part of this consultancy, SGS completed consultations with community housing organisations and produced an interim report as the basis of normal feedback from the sector. The final report was provided to the department in October 2005 and is available on the DHCS website www.dhcs.act.gov.au.

The department responded to this report in June 2006 and provided it to the community sector as a basis for a new three-year funding program. That response clearly articulated a commitment to maintain a strong community housing sector. The commitment is also clearly demonstrated by the funding provided for its expansion during the past few years. At its base, community housing receives \$1.06 million recurrent funding annually from the commonwealth-state housing agreement. In addition, it receives recurrent funding for a range of services such as Ainslie Village and retains rental revenue of over \$1½ million per annum.

In the 2002-03 budget the government announced that it would expand the supply of community housing through initiatives that included the provision of \$1.2 million over the following four years. At the same time, a further \$1.4 million was provided by the government to facilitate the transition of Ainslie Village from a supported housing model to mixed community supported housing. The first year of this transition process has almost been completed, with Havelock Housing Association winning an open tender process to provide tenancy and site management services for Ainslie Village in November 2005.

The government committed an additional \$1.4 million in 2002-03 to increase the access and choice for the ACT’s indigenous population. This funding was used to enhance indigenous community housing organisations like Billabong Aboriginal Corporation and Winnunga Nimmityjah’s housing liaison service which support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to access and sustain appropriate housing.

The 2002-03 budget provided for a transfer of \$3 million of capital funding from public housing to expand community housing by funding innovative housing projects. In 2003-04 the government provided an additional \$3 million of capital funding to

continue to expand the sector through innovative housing projects. These funds were used to build new properties and therefore provide a wide range of housing choices for tenants in the community housing sector. These included a 10-bedroom house for Abbeyfield Disability to accommodate clients with disabilities; four units suitable for housing aged people, for the Tamil Senior Citizens Association; five properties for Centacare as part of the LINC disability housing project; two properties with Havelock Housing Association and the AIDS Action Council to assist those living with HIV/AIDS; and properties with Havelock Housing Association and Anglicare Canberra and Goulburn for people transitioning from homelessness. In total, an extra 28 properties were injected into the community housing sector through this additional funding.

Mr Speaker, as you are aware, the government provided a \$33.2 million boost for public and community housing in December 2004. The government allocated commonwealth-state housing agreement funds held in the home loan portfolio towards the expansion of community housing in the territory. As a result, 21 properties were acquired for head-leasing to community housing providers, at a cost of \$7 million; and \$3.2 million was allocated to the provision of an indigenous boarding house network. Three properties were acquired for this project in 2005-06, with plans to add four more in 2006-07. A further \$3 million capital injection was provided for the community housing sector, topping up the development projects I mentioned earlier, bringing the capital injection allocation for community housing up to \$9 million over three years.

Let us put all of this together: \$9 million capital injection into the sector; \$7 million capital for head-lease properties; and \$3.2 million for an ATSI boarding house network. That is \$19.2 million in capital in head-lease properties over three years injected into the community housing sector.

The government's support for community housing is also evident in the provision of additional properties through the community organisation rental housing assistance program, CORHAP. Approximately 10 properties will be available each year through this program for growth in the community housing sector—not recession, growth! In view of the funding and growth in the sector that I have described, it can be clearly seen that the ACT government is not moving away from support for community housing. Separately, there are moves afoot to address the separate issue of affordable housing through the affordable housing task force.

The government copped a lot of stick for the number of reviews it has conducted. However, those reviews were necessary to lay some vital groundwork so that we can move forward. Neither I nor any other member of the government wants to conduct another summit or embark upon a further two years of detailed economic analysis and modelling. Now is the time to focus on a few strategic and key deliverables. I believe that is what is happening in the community housing sector. Various individuals may not be entirely happy with the new direction, but I am advised that, by and large, that direction is accepted and the sector is cooperating with the department to produce a more sustainable approach.

The government remains committed to a viable community housing sector and, accordingly, has implemented revised funding arrangements following the 2006-07

budget. This approach has been informed by the ACT community housing funding review and ensures that funding for community housing provision is consistent and transparent.

It is vitally important that all available resources are used most effectively in funding community housing. Consequently, the revised funding arrangements for community housing will require organisations to be efficient in executing their administrative functions. This may mean that some organisations are required to change the way they operate in order to maximise the funding available so that it provides as many services for tenants as possible, not having a 30 per cent administrative payment when the norm is about six. One of the organisations, which will remain nameless at the moment, kicked off this last year with an administrative costing in its budget of 30 per cent. That is 24 per cent missing at the sharp end of the services. The new funding arrangements for community housing have implemented a consistent benchmark payment for all tenancy management and tenancy support services across the sector regardless of the size of the organisations.

We do not want to stop what we are doing and start again simply because Dr Foskey thinks we should. Ultimately achieving greater efficiencies from organisations will produce better outcomes for their tenants. While it is true that the ACT government is seeking to elicit greater efficiencies from community housing organisations, this should not be misconstrued as a general lack of support for the sector. It is more accurate to view the department's shift towards greater administrative efficiency in community housing as a well-considered attempt to responsibly utilise those funds that are available.

Clearly the ACT government has maintained a strong level of support for community housing. We are asking all community housing providers to achieve accreditation within a 12-month period, which will ensure that all community housing services are provided in accordance with the national community housing standards. After all, how can we guarantee the quality of services to tenants of community housing if we do not have standards? Surely the tenants of community housing are entitled to receive quality tenancy management, to have their issues responded to in a timely manner, to have their properties maintained and repaired to a reasonable community standard. My guarantee, as the minister, to tenants is that government funds are well spent on community housing.

The end result is that the government believes it is on track already to provide affordable housing to the most disadvantaged members of our society through the community housing sector. The reforms under way will result in better housing services for those in need.

I hear grumblings across the chamber. You should be able to talk to these organisations. I do.

Mrs Burke: With a big stick in your hand.

MR HARGREAVES: Mrs Burke says I do this with a stick in my hand. What absolute codswallop is this!

When I moved around the sector I got the impression people were saying, “Thanks for the impetus and for the encouragement to move forward and restructure.” We have had a couple of smaller organisations restructure already. With the assistance of the department, they are providing better services already.

We have got some innovative projects going. SOUL, Poachling and TAS are three that are moving forward. We are having a chat with Havelock Housing Association. We have some problems with some of them, but the problems that we have are from the lobby groups, not from those providing services in the sector. When I had a conversation with Hartley Lifecare and TAS the other day out at Kambah, when we turned the sod to build a six-client piece of accommodation for adaptable housing, they were absolutely thrilled to be in the partnership they are in.

I ask the Assembly to reject the motion put forward by Dr Foskey and accept the amended motion put forward by me and circulated in my name.

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (11.43): The opposition will be supporting Dr Foskey’s motion and not the amendment. Dr Foskey’s motion recognises the importance, indeed the growing importance, of community housing in the provision of social housing and affordable housing across Australia. It notes the government’s affordable housing steering group is due to make a final report in March 2007, which is Mr Hargreaves’s second point, and the community concern that the government appears to be moving away from its general support for community housing.

It also calls on the government to develop a policy for housing in partnership with both the sector and the affordable housing steering group. We see nothing wrong with that. That is desirable. The motion calls on the government to produce an action plan for that policy and to incorporate that plan within the government’s next budget. The motion does not say that it is calling on the government to spend any extra money—it will need a hell of a lot of extra money—and that is sensible, due to the financial constraints this government has placed itself in through its own inability. Accordingly, it seems to be a sensible motion. The cost of providing and accessing housing in the ACT is escalating, and at an unsustainable rate. That is something the community will not be able to shoulder ad infinitum.

The opposition supports the continuity of measured growth in the housing sector. It is a vital alternative to the public housing stock available. Indeed, it comes from that sector. It is managed in such a way that it is thought by tenants that they have greater input into the management of their tenancy.

Ten years ago, we had about 200 properties. We have 285 now. There was a plan, which was started when I was still the minister, to aim towards 1,000 properties. There were very good reasons: because of the nature of community housing, the tenants feel that they have a greater input and greater management of their tenancy, and community housing usually, not always, tends to be looked after a lot better than normal public housing because tenants feel they have an ownership in it.

I cannot recall—and maybe times have changed—that it was particularly more expensive or otherwise than normal public housing. If anything, because of the greater ownership tenants felt, it seemed to be an area where you had the potential, if it was done properly, to have some savings. I know Mr Hargreaves has got some significant budgetary problems in his portfolio; effectively, about \$10 million has been taken out. I know that is a challenge. I also know there are a number of options you can take there. There is a booming housing market here. It is common practice in housing for some properties to be sold off so that you can reinvest in other properties.

Mr Hargreaves: We already do that.

MR STEFANIAK: It is good to see you doing that, Johnny. Now is a good time for that, as opposed to, say, 1996 when the then government had to find \$10 million that came from housing for the beastly black hole. That was our contribution. That was when properties were sold at a fraction of what you would get for them now. Times are better in terms of that option. Whilst the government faces a significant dilemma in terms of cuts to its housing budget, there is potential, when you look at it broadly, for it still to have a fair amount of latitude and a fair number of options available to work within its budget. Community housing is a very viable option.

I am surprised the impetus seems to have gone out of community housing. I am pleased to hear the minister quote 33 extra properties in the last 12 months. That is a positive sign. As Mrs Burke interjected and as Dr Foskey indicated, the sector is very nervous and is very concerned. Like a lot of sectors when they have or think they have a sword of Damocles hanging over them, they do not want to do the same thing for fear of retribution and fear that whatever they say might be misconstrued and matters will get worse for them. That is very much the case with this sector.

I am somewhat heartened by what the minister says about the fears over the last couple of years that the sector, because of the significant changes, might cease and we might see the demise of it. I note that the minister last year said no, that the government remains committed. I note that there was also \$1.06 million available from the commonwealth-state housing agreement for community housing use. I am pleased that today he indicates that the government is still committed to it.

However, there seem to have been a number of task forces and reports on affordable housing and on this particular area. There is a plethora of action set out in the findings of the housing task force in 2002. To the credit of this government, many of those findings were taken on board and moves have been made to see them implemented where the government feels it fiscally appropriate. Given the severe budgetary constraints the government is under, it seems difficult to achieve further growth in the housing sector within the scope of its social planning.

Community housing forms only a modest percentage of the overall numbers of properties in social housing. Maybe the minister is having trouble convincing the Treasurer to inject further funds, and I totally understand that. It is also quite possible that the minister is having to find efficiency savings. I have talked about that. You might see community housing as a component of that sector that would suffer the most there. The opposition would counsel you against that because, as I said earlier,

community housing, if done properly, should save you money; it should be a slightly cheaper option perhaps than a normal house, if it is done properly. You have scope there.

It is certainly a very effective form of housing in terms of people feeling ownership of their properties. It is a very effective form of transitional housing, too, for people. There are significant partnerships that the government can afford with various other groups to provide community housing. The government needs to explore that more perhaps than it is doing at present.

Dr Foskey has raised a very good point to debate here today. It is an important sector; it is a sector that can deliver very good social outcomes in this area. It is a sector where the government still, despite its budgetary constraints, has got the flexibility and options to ensure that it grows. Whilst I am heartened by what the minister says today—and it is time that he said that—there is still a very good and strong reason why Dr Foskey's motion should be preferred over his amendment. Accordingly, the opposition will be supporting Dr Foskey's motion.

MS MacDONALD (Brindabella) (11.51): In rising to speak to Dr Foskey's motion, I note her interest in this issue and her support for the affordable housing steering group, which, as is noted in the motion, is due to report to the government in March 2007.

As my colleague the Minister for Housing has stated, the government will be amending this motion, primarily because the government rejects the criticisms implicit in Dr Foskey's motion concerning its support of community-managed housing and because the government is seeking to address issues of housing affordability in our community in a number of ways and has done so consistently since being elected. It is not an easy problem to solve.

Mr Speaker, this government is working hard to address the need and disadvantage within our community whilst at the same time providing a framework for sustainable economic growth. The government recognises that housing is critically important to our overall economic and social wellbeing. It provides the basic foundation on which we build stable, healthy and productive lives linked to employment, education, health and other services.

Earlier this year, the Chief Minister announced the establishment of a high-level, across-government steering group to advise the government on initiatives to increase the supply of affordable housing in the ACT. The Chief Minister's Department is chairing the group, with contributions from agencies across government and input from relevant industry and community groups.

The terms of reference for the affordable housing steering group are, firstly, to make recommendations to government on initiatives to increase the supply of affordable housing in the ACT; secondly, to identify and assess the factors that promote housing affordability that can be influenced by the ACT government; and, thirdly, in undertaking the above, to examine the effectiveness of initiatives to address housing affordability currently being undertaken in other jurisdictions, and their appropriateness in the ACT context, and liaise with relevant organisations and agencies in other jurisdictions examining housing affordability, including but not

limited to federal and state housing and planning ministers, industry groups and community organisations.

This government believes that housing is one of the threshold issues in our community. Safe, affordable and secure housing is fundamental to the wellbeing of individuals and communities. It is important that we identify all the available options to help deliver that for the people of Canberra. Recent data from the Real Estate Institute of Australia on home loan affordability confirms that housing in the ACT is the most affordable in the nation. Building approvals continue to grow and the ABS trend data indicates that approvals for September 2006 were 30.2 per cent above the average level of approvals over the past five years. That is the highest level of residential approvals recorded in the ACT since January 2003.

The significant increase in residential building approvals demonstrates that many Canberrans are making the most of that. The number of housing finance commitments for owner occupation in the ACT rose 2.8 per cent in September 2006. Nationally, the number of commitments fell 1.2 per cent. Housing finance commitments made by first home buyers constituted around 21 per cent of all housing finance commitments in September. That is in line with the longer-run monthly average of 19.8 per cent. The first home buyer share has almost doubled from the low point of around 10 per cent recorded in late 2003 during the housing boom.

That is particularly encouraging and follows further Real Estate Institute of Australia, or REIA, data which showed that the ACT was the only state or territory to record an improvement of 3.8 per cent in housing affordability in the 12 months to 30 June 2006. That was despite falls between the March and June quarters, resulting from the interest rate rise in May this year.

Mr Speaker, there is a positive side to the strong housing market and it should not be overlooked. Household wealth has increased considerably and that is reflected in general economic activity. Employment remains strong. The government, however, recognises that the strong growth in house prices over recent years has meant that some Canberrans have to defer the purchase of their first home. Lack of affordable housing choice is not an issue for this government alone. All governments across Australia face this issue. I know that the Chief Minister has asked that the affordable housing steering group make recommendations to government on initiatives that will increase the supply of affordable housing. It is hoped that they will also identify and assess the factors that affect housing affordability that the ACT government is able to influence.

This government is committed to achieving a long-term sustainable and affordable housing sector in the territory. The government's action in other areas of its social, economic and planning agenda is designed to have beneficial outcomes for housing affordability. It is pleasing to note that the work of the steering group continues to implement the government's vision for housing as expressed in the Canberra social plan. Housing for a future Canberra is a key priority of the Canberra social plan, which states:

Housing provides every person in the community with a basis for a stable, healthy and productive life. More than anything else, it provides a sense of belonging and identity.

This sentiment remains as valid today as when the plan was launched in 2004.

The plan articulates seven key goals, namely, to increase the supply of public and community housing in the territory; to ensure that the type, size and location of housing in the ACT meets the changing needs of the community; to improve access to quality, affordable and safe housing; to enhance the provision of specialist housing and support services; to improve the regulatory regimes to enable individual needs to be addressed; to strengthen the links between crisis accommodation services and long-term housing options; and to reduce homelessness. It also contains nine actions, all of which have progressed substantially since 2004.

The government recognises the very important, indeed critical, role of the community sector in both reducing homelessness and improving access to affordable housing and shelter for members of the community. I know that the Chief Minister met earlier this year with the president and the director of ACTCOSS and advised them that addressing the issue of affordable housing and, more particularly, developing key initiatives for implementation was a very high priority for the government.

The government welcomes the involvement of the community sector and industry stakeholders in the work of the affordable housing steering group. To this end, it has sought and received submissions from members of the public and the community and business sectors. I note that the Chief Minister's Department is also proactively engaging key stakeholders and has received 19 submissions. Discussions are currently occurring with 15 groups, including ACT Shelter, ACTCOSS and the HIA.

In fulfilling its role, the steering group will, of course, embrace a definition of affordable housing that is relevant to the ACT and one that recognises that, even in a comparatively affluent community such as ours, shortages of affordable and accessible housing can have a severe impact. In delivering on its terms of reference, the government expects the steering group to look critically at relevant economic and supply models and, further, to closely examine initiatives and solutions already operating in other jurisdictions. The emphasis will be very much on identifying feasible options and initiatives, rather than constantly seeking to redefine and scope the project.

There are many successful initiatives operating elsewhere that may be equally beneficial if applied here and it is important that we learn from the experiences of others. There is already a wealth of information about the nature of the problem and the market. In the recent budget, the government announced some reforms to the Land Development Agency and ACTPLA to help reduce the costs of bringing land to the market and it will continue to pursue those strategies. The government has clearly stated that it will increase the supply of land in 2006-07, and the Minister for Planning has called for expressions of interest from industry in undertaking innovative affordable housing developments at Dunlop and Franklin. That will ensure that more affordable housing options are available for Canberrans looking to purchase a new home.

Mr Speaker, the government is intent on making a real difference on this issue and on identifying further workable solutions that can be implemented as soon as possible to

give immediate relief. In doing so, it will develop appropriate targets, action and timelines and report to the Assembly on progress. The affordable housing steering group will provide advice to the government by the end of November 2006 and produce a final report by March 2007. The government looks forward to sharing the work with the Assembly and to making a genuine and positive difference to the lives of many Canberrans.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (12.01): In speaking to the amendment, I will also close the debate. I do appreciate the terms of the minister's amendment in that it recognises the importance of community housing in the provision of social and affordable housing across Australia and notes that the ACT government has provided substantial support to the community housing sector. I do note, though, that in recognising the importance of community housing in the ACT it is taking an historical, retrospective look at financial support to the community housing sector. There is no argument that that has, in fact, occurred.

I am disappointed that the minister did not address the actual points in my motion because there is, as I have said, concern that there is no actual policy for community housing and people would feel more secure if there were. Whilst, on the face of it, this amendment is an affirming one, if one looks deeper into it one will find that it does not actually take us much beyond where we are now.

I was sorry not to hear a response to the issue of community housing having the ability to work with the community in other ways and the role of waiving land tax or reducing land tax if that would make rents more affordable, as the community housing sector is perhaps a good sector from which that could be managed. I know of one household that bought a second house simply in order that they could provide it at a moderate rental to some people that they saw as in need. I would not be surprised if there were, in fact, that goodwill out there in our community, especially with our concerns about skill shortages and so on.

My motion was put forward in a constructive way, mostly as an historical view of what has happened in the sector, in order to try to distil where we are today. I will certainly be watching and talking to the sector over time because it is not something that is going to be easily rebuilt, but it is important that it be maintained. I do want it noted that there is not a financial aspect to my motion and that we are talking about frameworks, policies and an action plan. I am sure that everyone understands that financial constraint is required. It is more about a sense of direction than anything else.

Question put:

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

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 9

Noes 8

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

Question so resolved in the affirmative.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Emergencies Amendment Bill 2006

Debate resumed from 18 October 2006, on motion by **Mr Pratt**:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

MR CORBELL (Molonglo—Attorney-General, Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Planning) (12.08): Mr Speaker, the government will be opposing Mr Pratt's amendments to the Emergencies Act 2004. Mr Pratt presented this bill to the Assembly on 18 October this year. He wants to change the Emergencies Act 2004 and exempt provisions of the Financial Management Act 1996 in relation to gifts and donations to rural fire brigades and SES operational units. Mr Pratt wants this government to amend the Emergencies Act in such a way that money donated to rural fire brigades and SES units will not be considered as public money and that the Financial Management Act will not apply to money held or applied under his proposed arrangements.

Mr Speaker, members of the public who donate money to brigades and units of the RFS or SES have an expectation that it will be used for the purposes of the RFS or SES. The existing governance arrangements make it clear to the public that money is actually spent on the intended purpose. The Financial Management Act provides these governance arrangements.

There has been throughout this debate no suggestion by me or by the emergency services agency that there has been any improper use of funds or any misappropriation of funds but that does not mean, nor does it follow, that appropriate arrangements and procedures should not be in place to ensure that moneys provided to SES and RFS units are provided and managed consistent with the Financial Management Act.

The ESA is committed to ensuring that appropriate governance arrangements are in place in relation to donations. To this end, legal advice was sought by the previous commissioner in relation to the best way that donated moneys should be managed. After that advice was received, the current commissioner of the ESA met with the volunteer brigades association and other representatives of the RFS and the SES to discuss this issue with a view to developing a way forward that all involved could support.

Mr Speaker, it has to be remembered that when volunteers of the RFS or the SES receive a donation they are, to all intents and purposes, representing the emergency services agency and it is, of course, a government agency. Volunteers are representatives of their brigade or unit within the RFS or the SES which is part of the ESA, which is an agency of a government department and which is part of the government itself.

This is made clear even in the commissioner's guidelines on donations made under the Emergencies Act, which are supported by the volunteers. The existing commissioner's guidelines say quite clearly that donations to the emergency services, including brigades of the rural fire service and units of the state emergency service, are and must be taken to be donations to assist the functions of the ESA. I think that is a very important point, Mr Speaker. The existing guidelines, which the volunteer brigades association and others have indicated they are happy with, make it clear that donations to a brigade are donations to the relevant service and a donation, in effect, to the ESA.

The government recognises that volunteer brigades and units have a long and proud history in their communities and that they fulfil very valuable roles not only in assisting with emergencies but also in contributing to community spirit and cohesion. There is absolutely no intention to change or interfere with that. It is, however, important that we maintain appropriate arrangements for the governance of money that is donated to those brigades or units for their role as providers of emergency services, and the governance arrangements are those that are set out in the Financial Management Act.

Under the Financial Management Act, money can be classified into two categories: it is either public money that needs to be deposited into consolidated revenue or it is trust money donated for a specific purpose. The public, when giving to ESA volunteers, certainly do not intend that their donations go into consolidated revenue, nor has that at any stage been the government's intention. The appropriate way to handle donations is therefore for them to be managed in trusts. This gives the members of the public confidence that moneys they have donated will be used for the intended purpose—for that brigade or unit, by that brigade or unit, with the decisions being made by that brigade or unit.

This money is, and will continue to be, available for use by the specific unit or brigade that the money was donated to. It does not, and never will, go into consolidated revenue. But I have some important responsibilities as minister, and one of those is to ensure compliance with legislation. The legal advice that the government has received is clear: the Financial Management Act applies. The Financial Management Act should apply. There should not be circumstances where moneys given to government entities are not subject to the Financial Management Act. That is the issue that Mr Pratt needs to address in trying to convince this Assembly that his bill should be supported today.

This entity is legally recognised as part of a government agency and is given protections under the law because it is part of a government agency. For example, volunteers are protected through our OH&S arrangements. Volunteer brigades and units are protected in terms of legal action and are given representation, effectively, as territory employees. Volunteers are recognised as territory employees for a range of reasons in a range of circumstances. The government provides direct resources to brigades and units. Those assets are owned by the ACT government. These units and brigades, whilst volunteer in terms of their membership, are clearly an extension of the emergency services agency. They are part of the government. Other elements of government legislation also apply. For example, the Public Sector Management Act

applies in relation to acceptable standards of behaviour, workplace harassment and so on. These standards also apply in the volunteer setting.

Mr Speaker, for all of these reasons, I believe that we need to have a consistent approach. We can apply the requirements of the Financial Management Act whilst still ensuring that volunteer brigades are able to accept donations and manage those donated funds in ways which are for the purposes of their unit or brigade within the emergency services arrangements. That is all we are trying to do. There is no agenda to take money away. There is no agenda to diminish control. There is no agenda to undermine the relative autonomy that brigades and units enjoy in this manner. But there is a commitment to ensuring that the appropriate requirements of the Financial Management Act are met, and that is what we are seeking to do.

The government believes that this bill is a knee-jerk reaction by Mr Pratt, a grandstanding move to say, "I will fix the problem. I will just exempt the brigades and the units from the law." That is not a good piece of law-making. Since this issue has come to public attention, there has been a series of, I believe, very constructive discussions between the ESA and representatives of the volunteer brigades association and individual brigades and units. That has, I think, come quite some considerable way and I am hopeful that agreement will be reached quite soon on an appropriate model that will allow brigades the autonomy and flexibility they need in managing funds donated to them, but also ensure that the requirements of the Financial Management Act are met.

This is, at the end of the day, an administrative matter that can, I believe, be worked through sensibly and in a sober environment. The proposal put forward by Mr Pratt is not one that the government supports, because it simply says in a knee-jerk, absolutist way, "I will fix the problem by saying the law does not apply." I do not believe that is sensible or reasonable. The Financial Management Act is there for a reason—to ensure that all moneys managed by the government, whether they are public moneys or other moneys, are properly managed and that that is done in a consistent way and in a way that ensures that when the actions of agencies are audited these matters can be declared and recognised as being done in a way which is consistent with the legislative requirements set down by this place.

Mr Speaker, there has been a lot of energy put into this debate by some quarters, notably by Mr Pratt, but from my discussions with volunteers I know two things. First of all, I know that volunteers, as always, are frustrated with issues around bureaucracy. That is inherent, I think, in our volunteer ranks generally. My commitment to them has been to say, "This can be done in a way which eliminates or minimises the level of bureaucracy". Let's face it, even brigades themselves have bureaucracy around audit and so on. It is about minimising it, and I believe that can be done.

The second thing is that I know that the brigades and units want this issue resolved as quickly as possible. That has been my commitment to them, that we will work these issues through and that all options will be on the table as we work these issues through. This proposal really cuts across that discussion. The volunteer brigades association and the government have reached agreement that we will talk these issues through, that we will negotiate them and we will get an agreed outcome, and nothing will change until we get that agreed outcome.

Mr Pratt and others on the other side of the house are seeking to say, “We will not worry about that. We will not worry about the discussions and negotiations. We will just legislate to exempt the application of the law in certain circumstances.” That is just knee-jerk grandstanding. We have a good dialogue in place. We have a good share of information. The government has provided its legal advice to volunteers and they have come back with their own views on certain legal matters. These issues are being discussed and I think that agreement will be reached. Certainly, the most recent indications that I have had from both volunteers and the ESA have been very positive.

That is the way this matter should be addressed, through discussion and dialogue, not through the knee-jerk grandstanding position that Mr Pratt has put on the table. For all of those reasons, the government will not be supporting this bill today.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (12.21): Mr Speaker, those were fine words from the minister—“it is a knee-jerk response”; “it cuts across the discussion”; “his option is to change the law”. The Assembly changes the law all the time. That is what the Assembly is for. Where bad law is put forward or bad law is in operation, we come back to this place and rectify it. Some days you have to change the law. Mr Corbell, in his argument, summarised it rather neatly when he said, “The FMA is to ensure that all moneys managed by the government are properly managed.” He is absolutely right: the FMA is to manage government money.

Renee Leon, in a letter that she sent to the head of the VBA, actually said that the issue is how to deal with funds raised by volunteers. That is the nub of it. Is it government money? Is it appropriated by the government? No. Is it raised by the government through a fee or a charge? No. Is it a levy? No. It is money given by the community to volunteers to assist volunteers, to thank volunteers. Mr Corbell was there after 18 January 2003, as was I. He saw the stuff that came in—everything from doughnuts to watermelons, cases of beer and cash.

All donations are covered. Will volunteers now have to put the doughnuts, the watermelons, the other food and the beer into government control, into government trust accounts? This is ludicrous stuff. It is ludicrous stuff from a captured minister. He has put forward a weak case, relying on the lawyers having said so and therefore we have to do what the lawyers tell us. That is interesting because Ms Leon, in her response to the VBA, said, “I have attached a note that responds to the issues and the legal advice provided to the VBA.” She went on to say, “However, rather than getting stuck in duels between lawyers, I would like to propose a solution for volunteers to consider.” Their lawyers are saying, “You are wrong.” The government solicitor is saying, “We are right.” They are all going to stand on their digs.

That is wrong. It does not have to work like that because the community expectation is that this money will be spent by volunteers because it was given to volunteers. I suspect that members of the community do not see the volunteers as a legitimate arm of government, controlled by all the government laws and all the government bits and pieces that Mr Corbell cited. They see them as members of the community who give up their time to protect their community, and they should be considered as such.

Mr Corbell says that they are protected by OH&S laws and they are given legal protection—in effect, that they are public servants. If you want them to be public servants, pay them. It is a service we could not pay for. The hundreds of thousands of hours that are committed every year by rural fire service and state emergency service volunteers could not be paid for by any government. We have a weak case from Mr Corbell. It is weak because he is just relying on a legal argument in saying, “We got some advice that said we have got a problem that we have to fix.”

I have some more problems for Mr Corbell. It has been raised by me that, in fact, the ESA and the government have their own trust accounts and there might be money in those trust accounts that was given to the government for the use of volunteers. There was a “Big Kev’s” barbecue, an Aussie barbecue, at which I think something like \$25,000 was given to volunteers. Perhaps the minister will come back and tell the Assembly how much of that money actually got to volunteer units, or is it sitting in a trust account held by the ESA?

I understand that every now and then brigades get donations. One that comes to mind is the sum of \$800 that was paid to a particular brigade and had to be sent back to the organisation concerned by the ESA so that it could make out the cheque again. Why was that so, Mr Corbell? Some years ago, if my memory serves me right, BHP donated something like \$1,500 to every brigade in the country in acknowledgment of their service. Did the brigades ever receive that money, Mr Corbell? Perhaps you could go back to the bureaucrats and the lawyers who are directing you, telling you and pulling the strings here and ask them whether that money was paid accordingly to the volunteers, as intended. I would be interested in some answers there.

Mr Corbell says that they are government entities. Are volunteers and brigades government entities? Are they part of the government? No, they are not. They are not paid. They are volunteers. Yes, what they do comes under the auspices of the government and the government assists them in what they do, but in the end it is done in their time. I can assure you that whatever people contribute—the assistance, the sandwiches, the pies, the cakes, the doughnuts and the cash—is given to the volunteers as a thankyou from the people of the ACT and I can assure you that the people of the ACT do not want that money going into any account that is controlled by the government.

Mr Corbell says that he is working through it with the volunteers. That is true. Ms Leon is doing a good job. She is trying to address concerns. Mr Corbell said in his speech that these accounts will all be subject to annual audits so that they comply with the FMA. The accounts are audited already. How do we know that? I know it because my brigade’s accounts are audited and I am a volunteer. Ms Leon says in her letter back to the VBA, “The trust accounts would be subject to annual audit, but I understand that already occurs with the existing accounts.”

As to the notion that we have to audit the accounts so that we can make sure everything is hunky-dory, it is already being done. If the ESA does not already receive copies of the audits, I am sure that it would be really easy to pick up copies of the documents because, to give them credit, the ESA officers normally attend most of the AGMs. I am sure that they could pick up there a copy of the audit document, the

treasurer's report and the annual general meeting minutes. That would not be hard, minister.

Mr Corbell said that this bill is grandstanding and that it is a knee-jerk reaction. No, it is not. It was quick, it was decisive and it was appropriate. Mr Pratt is to be congratulated, because he went out and talked to quite a number of both RFS and ESA volunteers, commanders and captains and they said, "We want a quick answer and we do not want this to recur. We do not want the government to put their grubby paws into our accounts again and we want it to go away so that we can get on with what we volunteered for, which isn't to fight the government. It is to protect the community." The amount of time that this has taken up of the volunteer hierarchy is appalling when there is a simple, neat, elegant solution in front of the government, endorsed by the volunteer brigades association.

Again, in response to Ms Leon's letter to the head of the VBA, the VBA put up some questions or dot points. They put up seven dot points. This has only happened in the last couple of days, Mr Speaker. What does dot point No 1 of the VBA say? It says, "Why is the legislative change proposed by Mr Pratt not being pursued by the government? This would seem to be the best option still." It is what the VBA would like. It is what the volunteers want, it is what the brigades want and it is what the units want, but it is not what the government wants because the minister has been captured by a bureaucracy and they are not going to let him go.

Mr Corbell said initially that this matter would take some months to resolve and we might have an answer by the end of the fire season and that we are going to have a working party and a committee. A really simple, neat answer is to legislate to change it and acknowledge that the money is not government money. It is not, by the minister's own word, money managed by the government that should be subject to the FMA. It is not managed by the government. Either the minister is disingenuous in what he has been saying to the brigades and he actually intends to have these trust accounts managed by the ESA or he has shot his own argument in the foot because, as he said, the FMA applies to moneys managed by the government. Ms Leon says, "We want to make sure that we do not interfere with the way they spend their money. We just want to have it in accounts." So you have got this contradiction from the minister all the time.

The question is: why has this matter taken so long? Mr Pratt put this bill on the table almost a month ago. The minister has had a month to consult. The bill is a neat solution. It could go ahead today and this matter would be over. That would be a clear endorsement by the minister that the money is not government money, that the money is not subject to the FMA, and that we can go ahead and let the volunteers do what they want, unless, of course, the minister is saying that the volunteers are now government entities. That is not something the volunteers would take kindly to, it is not something that I believe volunteers believe they are and it is not something that I believe that the community believes volunteers are.

The minister said that he has got some legal advice. Perhaps the minister would like to table the legal advice. It is always nice to put your cards down.

Mr Corbell: The VBA already has it.

MR SMYTH: He says that the VBA already has it. Perhaps the minister would like to table the legal advice in the Assembly for members. I am sure the members who will vote on this bill would like to see the legal advice. Dr Foskey, do you have the legal advice? Perhaps you would like to see a copy of the government's legal advice. Perhaps that is a courtesy that the minister might like to extend today to those of us here who are interested in this matter.

Mr Speaker, it is an important issue and it is important that we differentiate between the volunteers who do not get paid for their services and the expectation of the community. I have done the bucket brigade. Members of my brigade, Geysers Creek, have gone down to the Hyperdome in their brigade uniform and held out buckets and people have given the money to the volunteers for the work they do. They do not say, "Here is a donation to help the government help you do what you are doing." I can assure you that they do not say that. I have been to the Tuggeranong markets, where my brigade regularly goes, and held out a bucket and people have very generously given to money us and we have raised a lot of money to enable us to pay for the mobile phones that we have had to buy and other equipment that the government does not provide. It is the community saying to us, "We support you in what you do."

The notion that the minister is compelled to follow this path is just an indication of a weak minister being captured by his departmental bureaucrats and legal advice and not having the courage to stand up and say, "Look, that is silly." The simple way to fix it so that it does not occur again is simply to put the accounts beyond the reach of the government. That is what they are there for. The doubt will remain with the proposed trust accounts.

The government's counter position is interesting, Mr Speaker. The government's counter position is that it will now set up individual trust accounts for each brigade into which the donations would be deposited by the brigade, with the signatories being volunteers who are already signatories to the brigade's own accounts. Isn't that what Mr Pratt is proposing? He is seeking to legislate for that because one of the concerns raised by the volunteer brigades association is about who will have the authority to change signatories. There are so many unanswered questions there. Who will be the signatories to these accounts? Who will set up the accounts? Who will actually have control over the accounts? What other provisions of the FMA will be provided for? Are the trust accounts to be with the ESA or with a recognised financial institution? What is the difference between our own accounts and trust accounts? Those are questions that need to be answered because what the government is proposing is still unclear.

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

Sitting suspended from 12.33 to 2.30 pm.

Questions without notice

Policing—fatal accident

MR STEFANIAK: My question is to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. Yesterday morning, Canberra suffered another fatal accident following a police pursuit in Woden. We, the opposition, extend our sympathies to the family of the victims and the police officers involved. Can you provide the Assembly with an outline of the events leading up to the accident?

MR CORBELL: I thank Mr Stefaniak for the question. This is a tragic incident, with the loss of an innocent citizen in this accident. The full cause and circumstances leading up to the accident will properly be determined through the coronial inquiry process. That is as it should be. I can only advise members what I have already advised the broader community through my comments in the various media outlets over the past 24 hours.

My understanding is that a pursuit was initiated on Callum Street, following police observation of a vehicle travelling at speed and in an erratic manner. Less than 30 seconds after that pursuit was initiated, the car that was being pursued collided with another vehicle after, apparently, running a red light. That has led, tragically, to the death of the elderly woman that has been reported in the paper.

That is my understanding of the events to date. That is what I have been advised by the police. The full particulars will be properly the matter of a coronial investigation.

MR STEFANIAK: Minister, what is the process that will be followed from here? When will you be able to advise the Assembly and the community on the details of what happened?

MR CORBELL: My understanding is that there are two particular processes in place. The first is the coroner. The Chief Coroner attended the scene yesterday and will be determining the processes which he and his colleague coroner, whoever is allocated this case, will undertake in relation to their inquiries. The report will be prepared for the coroner by the police. The second process is a police internal standards investigation, as is normal in these cases. That investigation will be overseen by the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman will need to tick off on that investigation.

The time frames for each of those are matters for the entities involved. The government is not in a position to set the time frames in relation to those matters. It would be very preferable if the coronial process were undertaken in as timely a manner as possible, given the public interest in this case. But that is entirely a matter for the Chief Coroner.

Griffith library

MR PRATT: My question is to the Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services. Minister, you said yesterday in relation to the report into ACT library services that not all of the recommendations had been accepted or totally considered yet. These recommendations include a charge of \$1 for half-hour internet access, a reduction in

services in group centre libraries, the potential sale of mobile library 2, a service fee on reservations, the loss of approximately 30 staff and the potential sale of the Griffith library site. When will you make a decision about the rest of the recommendations of the report that you tabled yesterday?

MR HARGREAVES: I thank Mr Pratt for the question. As I mentioned yesterday, we have taken a decision regarding the closure of Griffith library. Mr Pratt will note that in the executive summary it says that that closure should proceed as quickly as possible, and I have accepted that. In fact, it reaffirms the view that we have had for some time that we need to move quickly if we are to be equitable across town in terms of our global service delivery.

With respect to the ones Mr Pratt mentioned, the charge for community access to the internet in libraries I do not accept. It was a recommendation put to me but I do not accept that. I take the point that I think Mr Stefaniak, or it may have been Mr Stefaniak on behalf of Mrs Burke, made yesterday about the digital divide. It would be inconsistent with our approach to bridge the digital divide if we started charging people who do not have the means to pay for access to the internet and the education that must accompany that access. So I can rule that out right now.

With respect to the rest, some of those recommendations are consequential. For example, if we close the Griffith library the positions must be relocated. The recommendations are around how that would happen and I am quite happy to advise the Assembly that I have not considered those in absolute depth as yet. I want to take advice on that. I can assure the Assembly that, as with all the territory and municipal services changes, there will be no forced redundancies. If people wish to do these things, I am not going to stand in their way. If people want a job within the library service or within territory and municipal services, they will have one. I undertake to those folks, through this Assembly, as I have already done: there will be a job in the system for them.

I have to say to you that many of the other recommendations have to be considered in the total context of the library services across the town and I have not taken a decision. Some of them may very well require cabinet approval; I am not sure about that and I will need to consider that. Some of them will not; they can be done by me administratively, and I have to consider those too. I have not got to the position yet where a decision will be taken on that. I am mindful that we do not want to have any sense of insecurity around the system, so the decisions we take around that will be reasonably quick. But I do not want to do them just on the spur of the moment.

MR SPEAKER: Do you have a supplementary question, Mr Pratt?

MR PRATT: Yes, thank you. Minister, what was your target for savings for the library service referred to on page 3 of the report?

MR HARGREAVES: Page 3 of the report is, in fact, the table of contents.

Seniors card—reciprocity scheme

MR MULCAHY: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Disability and Community Services. Minister, has the government taken any action or been involved in any discussions with other jurisdictions in the last year to create a reciprocity scheme to allow ACT seniors cards to be utilised in all states?

MS GALLAGHER: Yes, we have. I cannot recall the exact details of those discussions, but there have been ongoing discussions around state and territory jurisdictions about how to recognise seniors cards across borders. It has been one where there has not been agreement or consistency in the past, but I know that there has been more work done over the past year. I am happy to provide details of those discussions if you are interested.

MR MULCAHY: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Will the ACT government consider taking the lead and call on all other Labor state and territory governments to finally take this relatively easy step in making travelling easier for elderly Canberrans when interstate?

MS GALLAGHER: My understanding is that that has been the ACT's position for some time, but calling on other jurisdictions to do things we can do—whether or not they agree to them is another thing. I understand that the department, and particularly the Office for Ageing, have been pursuing this. There have been numbers of discussions particularly with New South Wales, as it relates to us, to assist this and to try and get agreement around this area.

I understand from my discussions with seniors in the community, certainly through the ministerial advisory council on the ageing and other discussions I have had with seniors groups across the ACT, that this is a real issue for them. Certainly we will keep pursuing it. As I said, we can request but whether they agree is another thing.

Schools—infrastructure upgrades

MRS DUNNE: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Education and Training. Minister, the commonwealth recently opened a project involving \$150,000 worth of upgrades to airconditioning and ICT facilities at Giralang primary school funded through the investing in our schools program. This month the senator for the ACT inaugurated a \$143,000 multimedia resource unit at Kambah high school. Minister, what do you propose to do with these assets provided through the investing in our schools program when you close the schools as part of the *Towards 2020* program?

MR BARR: I thank Mrs Dunne for the question, the latter part of which is, of course, hypothetical, as we have yet to make any decisions in relation to the *Towards 2020* proposal. However, for the benefit of the Assembly, I am happy to outline what has been a joint approach between the ACT department and the commonwealth in relation to investing in our schools program funding. Following some consultation with the ACT department in relation to investments in schools that are proposed for closure as part of the 2020 proposals, the commonwealth has agreed to continue the funding for

assets that are movable, such as computers. My understanding is that investments that are fixed and based on a particular school site are being held over until the conclusion of the consultation process when decisions have been made.

Obviously, we welcome commonwealth government investment of money in public education in the ACT. We would like to see considerably more. I think it is a great pity that over the last decade the commonwealth government has not invested more money in public education in the ACT. So whilst we acknowledge that there are some difficulties at the moment in relation to investment in fixed assets, as opposed to particular assets that may be movable, we will at the conclusion of the consultation process, and once decisions have been taken, be able to ensure that the ACT does not miss out on any funding. Should there be projects that the commonwealth wishes to fund in ACT government schools, we will continue to welcome that investment.

MRS DUNNE: I ask a supplementary question. Minister, what approach are you taking to fixed assets that are already fixed in schools that may close? I give as examples the carpet provided by investing in our schools at Melrose primary, the cabling at Giralang primary and the cabling and upgrading of classrooms at Cook primary school. What arrangement have you come to with the commonwealth, and do you have to return that money to the commonwealth if it is fixed?

MR BARR: Again, my understanding is that once the commonwealth have funded those particular projects and that money is spent, we will not be able to undo the cabling, if you like. Those facilities, depending on the potential future use, may still be available for other organisations.

As I have indicated to the Assembly previously, the process, once a school is no longer required by the education department as an educational facility, is that the building, the infrastructure, would be transferred to the Department of Territory and Municipal Services as a surplus government asset. What happens to particular infrastructure beyond that point is a matter for that department.

Environment—carbon trading

MS MacDONALD: My question is to Mr Stanhope in his capacity as Chief Minister. Could the Chief Minister report to the Legislative Assembly on the progress which has been made by the national emissions trading task force set up by the states and territories in 2005 and detail the comprehensive discussion paper released by him, Chief Minister Martin and premiers in August of this year?

MR STANHOPE: I thank Ms MacDonald for the question—a very important and, indeed, timely one. Yesterday, I welcomed the Prime Minister's about-face, the backflip which the Prime Minister and the commonwealth have now done on carbon trading, encapsulated in the Prime Minister's announcement of a decision to appoint a task force on the issue of carbon emissions trading. I must say that that was a major shift, perhaps the most significant, dramatic and sudden shift in Liberal Party thinking and philosophy around climate change—indeed, any policy issue imaginable. Perhaps there will have been no greater backflip than the backflip we will see when the Prime Minister announces the withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq, which will be perhaps a backflip of greater significance than the backflip which the Prime

Minister, the commonwealth and the Liberal Party are engaging in on carbon trading and Kyoto.

Mr Mulcahy: I take a point of order, Mr Speaker. We can have a debate a debate on Iraq, but it is not relevant to the question.

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

MR STANHOPE: I do welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has now accepted that he was wrong on Kyoto and that he has now accepted that he was wrong on carbon trading. I have offered to refer to the Prime Minister and have invited the Prime Minister back into discussions with the states and territories on the possibility of a national emissions trading network. That, of course, was the subject of the discussion paper which the states and territories released in August of this year, released without any commonwealth involvement, despite at the last COAG meeting actually seeking the commonwealth's support and collaboration in relation to the issuing of that paper.

It does give us some indication of the suddenness of the seismic shift in commonwealth thinking that at the last COAG meeting premiers and chief ministers invited the commonwealth again, even at that late hour, to be associated with and party to the national emissions trading framework that had been developed by the states and territories in the absence of any commonwealth leadership on this issue. It was as recently as that, as recently as the last two to three months, that the commonwealth again rejected and refused to be associated with the work which the states and territories had done on a national emissions trading scheme, the very scheme which the Prime Minister now appoints a task force to develop and pursue.

The work has been done. It was an exhaustive 18-month development and consultation process that led to the development of that discussion paper and it would be, I think, welcomed by all states and by me, if I can speak for myself, and the Northern Territory for the commonwealth simply to engage now with the states and the territories in the further development and implementation of the national emissions scheme which we have already proposed or floated as a possibility for Australia.

The about-face of the Prime Minister on this issue, as I say, does give us now, I think, the potential to deal within this region and certainly with the world in relation to carbon trading. I think we all recognise that. We have all known it always intuitively, despite the stubborn position of opposition which the Liberal Party have taken to the issue, that really, if there is one single initiative that could be pursued by the world to deal with greenhouse gas emissions, it is the establishment of national and international emission trading regimes.

Nine years after the development of the Kyoto protocol we have this first thawing by the commonwealth government in relation to its total opposition to the prospect of ever engaging with Kyoto. We have this new notion of a new Kyoto. How about that for a weasel word or a euphemism for actually seeking to invite oneself back into the camp by creating or confecting the conviction that "we will not sign up to the Kyoto

protocol because we have too much egg on our face, but if you actually redraft it around the edges and call it ‘new Kyoto’ we will be able to engage”.

We now have the commonwealth minister for the environment, Ian Campbell, rushing off to Africa as an observer. This is the position in which we find ourselves now in our abject embarrassment. We have Ian Campbell, the minister for the environment, rushing off to Africa as an observer and sitting in the bleachers at the back of the room because he cannot debate the issue as we have not signed the protocol on the most important issue facing the world. (*Time expired.*)

MS MacDONALD: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Chief Minister, could you elaborate on the role that an emissions trading scheme, such as the one proposed by the state Labor premiers and chief ministers, would play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions?

MR STANHOPE: Thank you, Ms MacDonald, for the question.

Mrs Dunne: Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. On the basis that we do not know whether a carbon trading scheme will work, I think the Chief Minister is being asked to answer a hypothetical question.

MR SPEAKER: The Chief Minister was asked to elaborate on a matter that was decided by the heads of government. That is an appropriate supplementary question. Nice try!

MR STANHOPE: It is important that we ensure that we now get it right. Now that the commonwealth has done the backflip; now that the Prime Minister has owned up to his grievous policy failing and the failing of Australia to engage with the most important issue facing Australia, namely climate change—

Mr Smyth: Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Under standing order 118 (b) the member cannot debate the subject to which the question refers. He was asked about the scheme, not about what the Liberal Party at the federal level was up to.

MR SPEAKER: And he is sticking to the subject matter of the question.

MR STANHOPE: It is important that we now engage. It is important that we now accept and acknowledge that climate change is a reality; that we need to deal with it. It is easily and by far the most important and significant issue facing the world today. The future of the world essentially now rests in the hands of those prepared to make serious and sensible decisions around how to deal with greenhouse gas emissions.

There is no doubt that the primary response of communities, jurisdictions, states and nations around the world—and the world through its respective capacity to work together—is through the Kyoto protocol and through the development of coherent policies for dealing with climate change.

At this stage all of the evidence and experience points to the fundamental role of carbon trading and emissions trading, and deals with perhaps the myriad responses which science can develop to deal with carbon. How to reduce the level of emissions

is fundamental to that. As we reflect on this most important of all issues, I know what the people of Australia and the world think: we are at greater risk from climate change than we are from terrorists.

These are the two major issues on which John Howard and his legacy will show he has utterly failed the people of Australia. He refused to engage with Kyoto and climate change until this week. He made a grievous mistake, which certainly the Americans have now realised in the invasion of Iraq. He is now seeking to engage with climate change. At the same time, of course, he is trying to determine how to disengage from Iraq. The two great issues occupying the mind of our Prime Minister at the moment are how to get out of Iraq and how to get into Kyoto.

Mr Mulcahy: Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. You have already reminded the Chief Minister to stick to the relevance. We are not having a debate on Iraq. I am happy to have that debate. But I do not think that this is what we are about.

MR SPEAKER: I think the Chief Minister has entangled the pair of these items—one is the climate change issue. I think you should come back to the subject matter.

MR STANHOPE: I will conclude on this remark: it is refreshing to observe that the shadow Treasurer—we need to get our nomenclature correct here; we have had to relearn the respective roles of all opposition members over the course of recent times, and certainly this week—at least is willing to engage in a debate over carbon trading and emissions trading. This is a debate that no member of the Liberal Party in the last 10 years has been prepared to even consider as a possibility, let alone express a determination or willingness to debate. It is the first time—apart from the Prime Minister’s utterances this week—that we have heard a member of the Liberal Party in Australia say that he or she would like to debate carbon trading.

I welcome Mr Mulcahy’s backflip on the issue. We now await the backflip of all other Liberals. It is a welcome sign that a member of the Liberal Party in the ACT has now broken ranks and said that he is prepared to debate carbon trading. That is a fantastic advance. We now have members of the Liberal Party saying, “Let’s discuss carbon trading. Let’s debate it seriously as an option for the future.” (*Time expired.*)

Ambulance service—vehicles

MRS BURKE: My question through you, Mr Speaker, is to the minister for emergency services, Mr Corbell. At any time over the course of this past year has the ACT had to borrow any ambulances from Victoria because the ACT vehicles had outlasted their life and were becoming unreliable? If so, how many?

MR CORBELL: It is public knowledge that, for a brief period of time, due to the delay in the arrival of new, replacement ambulances, a number of ambulances were borrowed from Victoria. That was due to a delay in the new, replacement ambulances arriving. There were three ambulances. It occurred prior to my time as minister, but it was at the beginning of this year. All those ambulances have since been returned to Victoria as new, replacement ambulances are now on deck.

MRS BURKE: I do not recall the minister mentioning how many were borrowed.

Mr Hargreaves: Three.

MRS BURKE: Thank you. Why is it necessary for the ACT to continue to have to rely on the generosity of other states to cover the shortfall in emergency services vehicles under this government?

MR CORBELL: I do not know whether Mrs Burke heard my answer. We are not continuing to rely. There was a brief period of time where, due to the delay in the arrival of the new vehicles—delay by the manufacturer and outfitter—three vehicles were retired, with three temporary replacements brought into the territory. All those vehicles have since been returned to Victoria because our new, permanent vehicles have arrived.

I do not know that Mrs Burke would prefer otherwise, to be three ambulances short, but that would not be an acceptable outcome. I have adequately outlined the circumstances on this issue.

Ambulance service—vehicles

MR SESELJA: Mr Speaker, my question is to the minister for emergency services. Minister, ambulance officers have advised that single response unit, or SRU, vehicles are often deploying on urgent callout to serious emergencies. While members of these units are fully trained paramedics, their vehicles are not suitable for emergency casualty evacuation to hospital, so they have to wait for a fully crewed ambulance to respond to their patient. Why are you counting SRU vehicles as part of the seven fully crewed ambulances on standby per shift, given that they are not fully crewed ambulances?

MR CORBELL: I am not. In fact, shortly after I became minister the decision was taken that we would not continue with the normal practice of staffing single response units—the vehicles Mr Seselja refers to. That was in direct response to a request by ambulance officers and their union that, instead of having two officers each in a single response unit, those two officers be allocated to a stretcher vehicle so that the responding officers had the full capability of a stretcher ambulance. I agreed to that, as did ACT Ambulance management. That is why we now have seven stretcher ambulances on the road.

Single response units continue to be used where there is a shortfall in staffing and there is only half of a two-person crew available. Rather than have that person sit around and do nothing, we put them into a single response unit. But that is the exception, not the norm. The normal level of staffing is for seven stretcher ambulances.

MR SESELJA: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Minister, are there currently seven fully crewed ambulances on the road seven days a week, 24 hours a day?

MR CORBELL: The crewing levels are different in the very early hours of the morning between midnight and 6.00 am compared to other hours of the day, so I

cannot say that they are 24 hours a day. But in the busiest times of the day the standard level of crewing is for seven ambulances. I think they are slightly reduced between 12 midnight and 6.00 am.

Waste management

MR GENTLEMAN: My question is to the Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services. Could the minister report on what efforts the government has initiated to support sustainable waste management in the territory?

MR HARGREAVES: I thank Mr Gentleman for the question. I note his interest in sustainability issues.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR HARGREAVES: Where are my table tennis balls? Mr Speaker, opposition members may not be aware that the government's no waste strategy has three key objectives: the provision of high quality garbage collection and disposal services that are hygienic and cost effective; the provision of high quality recycling services that are easily accessible and cost effective and the promotion of sustainable waste reduction and recycling by encouraging new and innovative resource recovery industries.

In the 2005-06 financial year, 75 per cent of waste in the ACT was diverted from landfill. The amount of material recovered continues to rise, by four per cent on the previous year, or an extra 24,500 tonnes. In total, in 2005-06 the ACT recycled, reused and recovered more than 579,400 tonnes. As in the previous year, large quantities of waste from gardens, that is, 208,600 tonnes, and demolition sources of 221,800 tonnes were reprocessed to make quality new products. The Stanhope Labor government is providing great leadership in this area, and the Canberra community, the business community, as well as territory and federal government departments continue to make good use of recycling.

A critical element of the government's strategy is the no waste awards. The ACT no waste awards were originally developed in 2004 with the aim of celebrating the efforts of businesses, schools and community groups who were champions in the field of waste minimisation. The inaugural no waste awards presentation ceremony in 2004 was one of my first duties as the then Minister for Urban Services, and it was a truly memorable experience to see the dedication of so many in the community delivering tangible waste minimisation outcomes.

In this, the third year of the awards, it is clear that the efforts of those involved continue to improve, and this is significantly contributing to the culture change that is necessary to achieve the government's no waste objectives. The word is spreading and the competition for the awards gets stronger each year.

In 2004, ANU Green took out the gold award on the strength of the organisation's comprehensive efforts in responsible waste minimisation, while Canberra International Airport received the silver award and Shop Basics received the bronze. In the following year, 2005, Canberra International Airport went one better and took

out the gold award with their waste minimisation efforts during the further development of Brindabella Business Park. ACT Skip Hire received the silver award and the National Folk Festival received the bronze.

I am delighted to inform members that the 2006 no waste awards were again hotly contested, with nominations submitted from across Canberra's business, educational and academic communities, as well as both territory and federal departments. Mr Speaker, I seek leave to table a list of those awards.

Leave granted.

MR HARGREAVES: I table the following paper:

NoWaste award winners 2006.

While it is difficult to mention all the award winners here today, I would like to highlight the achievements of just a few. The Gordon Early Childhood Centre was highly commended in the no waste award for leadership in the community group and association category for effectively implementing actions to minimise the generation of waste within the organisation and raising awareness amongst our community's youngest members.

Capital Chilled Foods in the business category achieved a 60 per cent reduction in overall waste generation, recovering or recycling 99 per cent of its remaining waste. Capital Chilled Foods is a strong example of a business that has implemented actions deemed too hard or costly for other businesses and gained a financial benefit from doing so. Hawker primary school, the first school accredited under the ACT government's waste wise schools program, achieved a 50 per cent reduction in the amount of school waste.

Mr Speaker, you will be pleased to learn that the ACT Legislative Assembly got a highly commended for achieving a 50 per cent reduction of waste to landfill and a doubling of the collection of recyclables.

The diversity of the organisations that have received awards is a reflection that waste minimisation is both the responsibility of, and can be successfully achieved by, all sectors of the community. This year the award applications have been even more competitive and it is significant that not only are all of the submissions showing true leadership in waste management, but that many are also moving towards overall sustainable practices.

The ACT was the first government in the world to set a no waste target and our no waste strategy has put us in a strong leadership position. This, combined with a strong community effort, has led to more than 75 per cent of our waste being recovered or recycled, further positioning us to be international leaders in waste minimisation.

However, despite our best efforts, total waste generation continues to increase each year. This is for a number of reasons, not the least being that the boom times that the government has created is causing growth in the city and made us richer. However, as we become richer, we consume more and there is more rubbish to dispose of.

MR SPEAKER: Do you have a supplementary question, Mr Gentleman?

MR GENTLEMAN: Yes, thank you. Minister, could you detail how these initiatives have contributed to achieving environmentally sustainable outcomes for the territory?

MR HARGREAVES: Yes, I can, thank you, Mr Gentleman. But before doing that I would like to indicate to the Assembly that the government is participating in some national programs aimed at reducing packaging and having manufacturers accept the responsibility for collecting such disposable items as old televisions. But that is for the long term. As for individuals, we need to become more discriminating in our purchases, avoiding heavily-packaged items, plastic bags and so on. But that is an even longer term project. In the meantime, a significant proportion of the waste that is still going to landfill could easily be recycled if more effort was made to separate material for recycling. But recycling is not enough.

This government is showing clear leadership in its commitment to sustainability and the no waste strategy continues to be an important part of this commitment. Delivering sustainable outcomes is becoming an increasingly important priority for us all in order to ensure a positive future.

Unlike opposition members, I would like to praise the public servants who make this work. I greatly appreciate the diligent work undertaken by those within the ACT NOWaste area. I would like to note here my appreciation of Mr Chris Horsey, the manager of ACT NOWaste, and the other officers in that area of the Department of Territory and Municipal Services for the fantastic work they have done on behalf of the ACT community.

In the 2005-06 financial year 75 per cent of waste in the ACT was diverted from landfill and the amount of material recovered continues to rise—four per cent on the previous year or an extra 24,500 tonnes. We continue to progressively reduce waste to landfill, with only 192,000 tonnes being deposited in landfill last year. We are ensuring valuable resources are not lost to landfill and we are developing more sustainable resource recycling patterns. The ongoing growth in recycling is increasing jobs generation and has long-term positive impacts on our economy.

Socially, our community is taking pride in the no waste initiatives and success and it is this type of success that assists us to build positive social capital in the ACT. We regularly have overseas delegations come to the ACT to see our achievements and learn about our no waste initiatives. Our landfill sites continue to provide green electricity for the Canberra community and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the process.

I might mention that we are currently tendering for a range of improved services at the Mugga Lane Resource Management Centre, including construction and demolition waste processing, mixed waste separation—

Mr Mulcahy: Is that part of the new strategy, or is that still coming?

MR HARGREAVES: Talking about waste separation, we had a good exercise in waste separation just the other day, didn't we, when Mr Stefaniak moved? He moved with lightning speed to do some waste minimisation within his own ranks and I congratulate the Leader of the Opposition on his waste minimisation approaches.

As I said, improved services at the Mugga Lane Resource Management Centre include construction and demolition waste processing, mixed waste separation, metals recycling and reusable services, which will result in more materials being diverted from landfill, furthering our current no waste success.

We are nearing the finalisation of a new state-of-the-art landfill cell at Mugga that is lined with a synthetic plastic liner ensuring the protection of ground water. I am told that this new cell will be operated using a leachate reingestion system, which simply means that the liquid that is produced in the landfill will be recirculated to break down and stabilise the waste faster and produce more green electricity in the coming years. We also continue to process over 190,000 tonnes of organic garden waste at our two processing sites, with most of this material being returned to the soil and again contributing to our sustainability objectives.

Under the government's current restructuring we have also created a new branch within my department of sustainability policy and programs. This will see the integration of energy, water, waste and climate change areas coming together to form a stronger, more coordinated and synergistic approach to address the more important issues of sustainability. This change will create partnerships in our ability to deliver programs to stakeholders within the community. For example, we will now be targeting schools under an integrated sustainability program addressing energy, water, waste and climate issues under the one program.

I think the Stanhope Labor government is not only leading the way in our community; it is leading the way in the country. I would like again to express my appreciation to the officers within the various departments who have contributed so much to that leadership.

Ambulance service—crews

MR SMYTH: My question is to the minister for emergency services, Mr Corbell. You were recently quoted as saying that the ACT ambulance service has seven ambulance crews fully operational around the clock. If this is the case, why, on Saturday, 4 November 2006, was it necessary for ambulance service management to hold back day-shift crews for the night shift and, even so, they still failed to have more than five fully manned ambulance crews available after midnight?

MR CORBELL: I am not familiar with the full details of that weekend, so I will need to seek some further advice. I will do that. If I am able to provide some information to Mr Smyth, it would be this: my understanding is that there are circumstances where the ambulance service, due to cancellations in rostered shifts, has a shortfall in staff. Regrettably, that occurs.

People ring in and say, “We are unable to perform the shift that we are rostered to perform.” That is, obviously, of concern. It means that it is difficult to always fill the full shift when people ring in and say, “We are unable to do the shift.” There may be very legitimate reasons why they are unable to do the shift, but it means that the shift roster falls short of the full complement. In those circumstances, I know that the ambulance service does everything possible to find last-minute replacements.

I am also very conscious of the workload that our paramedics and other members of the ambulance service are currently facing. There has been a significant increase in the workload. The government is considering that issue as we move into next year’s budget.

MR SMYTH: Minister, why do so many front-line ambulance crews now express concern and alarm that they are being forced to do so much overtime to maintain seven fully manned ambulance crews around the clock?

MR CORBELL: No-one is forced to do overtime. Our ambulance officers have a high level of commitment and professionalism to their job and the work that they do for our community. Obviously, when overtime is offered to them, they feel a high level of commitment to the work that they do and make themselves available for overtime. I am very appreciative of that. The increase in their workload is of concern to me. I have already said that publicly on the record. I am confident that these difficulties will receive close consideration as we head into next year’s budget process.

Schools—environmental sustainability

MS PORTER: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Education and Training. Can the minister please inform the Assembly of what the government is doing regarding environmental sustainability in ACT schools?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Porter for the question. There is no doubt that ecological sustainability is an important and topical issue. I am pleased to advise the Assembly that the ACT government is embracing ecological sustainability in our schools. We promote a whole-of-building approach to design in upgrading existing facilities and in building new facilities. This sustainable design approach is about making buildings more energy efficient, improving air quality and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This approach has been incorporated in our new and existing buildings where possible.

An example is the new Harrison school. It is being built with a green building approach. Emphasis is given to making the building energy efficient, improving quality, capturing and storing rainwater for recycling, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The design features addressing ecological sustainability at the Harrison school include natural ventilation in all buildings; night cooling and purging, by utilising differences in temperature; individual buildings containing their own gas-fired boiler; high thermal mass construction, to be used to maximise the heat bank characteristics of the buildings; optimisation of daylight to reduce the need for artificial light; rainwater collection to provide water reuse for toilet flushing, plant and garden bed irrigation

and for cleaning the paved area. Low-maintenance and environmentally friendly materials will be used in construction; and there will be a building management system to provide intelligent building controls for lighting, heating and ventilation.

This design builds on the success of the Amaroo school, which won an MBA national environment and efficiency building award. Amaroo school has solar hot water panels to supplement the in-slab heating and hot water systems; natural ventilation systems, again, to cool the school; roof-mounted photovoltaic cells to generate electricity; a wind turbine which also generates electricity, and water storage tanks to collect stormwater for recycling within the school.

The Birrigai outdoor school, which was completed in May this year, also addresses sustainability issues and makes use of solar power, low water use appliances and natural ventilation and lighting. The new West Belconnen school will also follow these design principles and be responsive to the demands of environmental sustainability.

There are also 13 government schools that are participating in the sustainable schools pilot program which has begun to coordinate each school's approach to environmental sustainability through the establishment of a school environmental management plan. This complements existing programs in schools such as energy smart schools, WasteWise, Waterwatch, WaterWise and Landcare.

It is not just new schools which boast these great initiatives. Campbell high school was the first school in the ACT to supply electricity from the sun to the local grid back in April 2001. Approximately 8,000 kilowatt hours of electricity are produced per year. I understand this is the equivalent of saving about eight tonnes of greenhouse gas and represents two per cent of the school's annual greenhouse gas emissions.

Farrer primary school has a separate and purpose-built environment centre which was built in 1999. The centre is the hub for science and environmental educational activities for all of the students across the school. As Mr Hargreaves indicated earlier today, Hawker primary school has recently been awarded a no waste award.

These are but a few of the projects that have been undertaken in our schools. There are, of course, many more examples. An ecologically sustainable approach is the responsible approach. The government would like to see it expanded into all our schools. That is why the government has invested a record \$90 million over the next four years to upgrade our schools. A major component of this in coming financial years will be to retrofit older schools to make them more ecologically sustainable.

The government will be taking advice from groups such as the Green Building Council of Australia, who are currently developing a green star education rating tool in order to fund projects within our schools to improve energy efficiency. This assists the environment and also helps to reduce the long-term running costs of our schools. It also assists us in educating our students on the importance of sustainability.

Supplementary answer to question without notice Arts funding

MR STANHOPE: Mr Speaker, I took a question from Mr Mulcahy yesterday in relation to a response to issues in relation to allocation of arts funding. I have provided a copy of that response to Mr Mulcahy.

Mr Mulcahy: You sent it to me as chairman of estimates.

MR STANHOPE: Is that the difficulty?

Mr Mulcahy: I am happy to take the job, but I—

MR STANHOPE: I present the following paper:

Arts funding—budget 2006-2007—copy of letter from the Minister for the Arts to Mr Mulcahy, undated—answer to question taken on notice from Mr Mulcahy on 14 November 2006.

Temporary Deputy Speaker Statement by Speaker

MR SPEAKER: Pursuant to standing order 8 I revoke the nomination of Mrs Burke as Temporary Deputy Speaker and thank her for her contribution to the chair, and nominate Mrs Dunne. I present the following warrant of revocation of nomination:

Emergencies Amendment Bill 2006

Debate resumed.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (3.18): Just to summarise and put this all in context again, what we have got is a weak minister who has been captured by his department. What we have got is a minister who is not able to say to people, “Let’s get our priorities straight. Let’s deliver something good for the volunteers here. Let’s make sure we have got the focus on what is real.” Instead, we have been presented with a weak case, hiding behind legal argument and doing it because the department and the lawyers said so, and what we have is an incredibly poor outcome for the volunteers.

What the volunteers told Mr Corbell and Ms Leon, the head of the department, is that the legislative change proposed by Mr Pratt is still the best option. That is what they want. What they are saying about this bill that Mr Pratt, without an entire department behind him like the minister has, was able to come up with in quick time and put on the table—and it has been there for a month—is, “Instead of opposing it, minister, accept what Mr Pratt is saying. Give us back our bank accounts, give us control of what we do, let us get on with the job of being volunteers and protecting the people of the ACT, and get out of our way.”

But, no, we have got a minister who is just running the script that the department has provided. He has not provided one constructive argument as to why this bill should not go ahead today. Indeed, he said, “The FMA is for moneys managed by the

government.” This is not government money and he acknowledged that. He said it is money that has been given to the volunteers to run the brigades, to do volunteer activity, as a thankyou from the community.

So what we have got is a minister who acknowledges that the money is not government money and will never be government money. He says, “We will not have our fingers in the tin to balance the books,” but he said that the FMA is about moneys managed by the government. This is not government money. That is why it is more than reasonable to say that the FMA does not apply to money donated by the community to the volunteers. If you stand out there with two buckets—one for donations for volunteers, one for donations for the government—I know which one will be full. There will not be a cent in the donations to the government bucket. And Mr Corbell knows that because I assume he has been out with his brigade; he has done the bucket brigade stuff too. He would have seen the thanks and praise that the people of Canberra regularly heap on the volunteers, the emergency services and the rural fire service.

But we have got a minister captured by his department, a minister who will not listen to the volunteers, a minister who is hell-bent on having a committee and more discussion and taking an entire fire season, if necessary, to resolve an issue that is very simple; an issue that can be resolved simply by passing Mr Pratt’s bill today and an issue that can be resolved for all time so that it will not rear its ugly head again. That is the problem. The head of the VBA, in response to Ms Leon’s email, said, “How do we make sure that this subject does not come up every couple of years; that way, if someone, for instance pollies, want to change it, it would need to be debated again.”

That is the problem for the volunteers. The volunteers in all of this want certainty as well. What they are not getting from their minister is certainty and what they are not getting from the department is certainty. What they do get is enormous support from their community as a thankyou for the hours that they put in, the efforts they make and the risks that they take to serve their community. This minister ought to get off the back of the volunteers and allow them to do their job—by passing this bill today.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (3.22): It is disappointing that the minister has not come forward today to perhaps embrace the opposition’s legislation, mainly so that we could bring to a quick resolution a problem that has created a fair amount of angst amongst our volunteers.

Of course, our volunteers are working overtime now to prepare for what is, on anybody’s measure, a pretty dangerous fire season. Some of our volunteers are saying that the fire season for 2006-07 is every bit as dangerous as was that of 2002-03 and they are very, very concerned. We have talked in this place often about the drought index that the ACT currently is struggling with, and the bushfire conditions seem to be highly dangerous.

Instead of our volunteers being able to focus their planning and their thoughts on and prepare their equipment and their work for this season to protect our community, their eyes are taken off the ball by a number of issues. The paramount issue, which is quite negatively impacting on them and certainly affecting their morale, is this issue about

the bushfire brigade and the SES unit bank accounts. The volunteers are not happy that the minister has said that he is forming a committee to look at what can be done to solve a unit and brigade accounts management issue against the Financial Management Act.

It is a legitimate question for the government to ask if there is a contradiction in the way that unit and brigade bank accounts have been traditionally managed against government solicitors' advice that the Financial Management Act presents a series of problems. That is fair enough; that is a legitimate question for the government to ask and that is a legitimate exercise for the department of JACS to have to examine on behalf of the minister. But what the volunteers are very unhappy about is that it has to require another committee to be formed for—in the minister's own words—the matter to be attended to and resolved at the end of the bushfire season. At least, that is what the minister said some three to four weeks ago. If he is now hastening that time line and moving to do something in the next couple of weeks, that will be an improvement on what is currently a poorly managed issue.

However, the volunteers are not well served. They are not feeling well supported on this issue. The volunteers are saying that the communities give them their trust, raise and donate funds for various units and brigades to use, either to equip them, to be used for training purposes or to be used for other operational purposes, and the communities do not want to see the funding transferred into trust funds. The brigades and the units certainly do not.

That is one of the options that we know JACS are considering because they have said that they think the only way around this issue in terms of the Financial Management Act hurdle that has now been put up is for these funds to be collected in trust fund accounts. The minister has said here today that that is an option that he is looking at. He has certainly given the undertaking that brigade and unit bank accounts would be put under the umbrella of trust fund account management arrangements and he has said that the signatories to those trust fund accounts would be the same signatories that exist now within the brigade and unit committees.

That is half comforting; but it still does not allow the brigades and the units the independence and the flexibility to manage those accounts as they need to. For example, if on a Saturday morning rivers brigade find that one of their pumps has broken down, will they have access to trust fund accounts for the \$100 or so to go to Bunnings and perhaps repair it on the day, or are they required to go through a number of bureaucratic hurdles and hoops to get signatures on a working day within working hours?

The question raised by the brigades and the units is this: if they have raised funds from their communities in good faith for expenditure for their own operational purposes, why can they be no longer be trusted to do that? Is this a grab by senior officers in emergency services to simply exercise, I suppose, some form of administrative power, perhaps well intentioned, to lock these funds away because they are frightened of being exposed? Do officers in the emergency services make these sorts of decisions as part of a backside-covering exercise because there just may be an outside chance that under the Financial Management Act problems may be found in the way that units are managing these accounts?

Let us not forget that for decades brigades and units have used these sorts of bank accounts; they have run these funds, they have spent these funds for the purpose of their own operations. It is a traditional volunteer-centric administrative exercise. If the government has found, on the advice of the government solicitors, that the Financial Management Act presents these sorts of technical problems, surely the answer is not to overturn what has traditionally been the way of managing these sorts of accounts but instead to legislate to firewall these brigades and units, their accounts and the management of those accounts. Surely that is the solution.

That is what the opposition have presented and provided here today with this legislation. We have put forward an instrument that will allow the minister to put in place legislation that allows the traditional management of these accounts to carry on. It certainly provides for the checks and balances needed in terms of auditor-general checks and balances; it allows those checks and balances to be exercised.

We have not been made aware—the minister has said this again today—of any concern that these accounts have been poorly managed. There has not been an epidemic of mismanagement of these accounts. Communities, brigades and units are not coming to the government or the opposition and saying, “Listen, these accounts have been poorly managed; the circumstances of 2003 were perhaps exploited to allow for silly expenditures.” We are not aware of that.

So, if those accounts have been well and truly managed in that way for a long time, why can that not continue? If there is a hurdle or one or two hurdles put in place by the Financial Management Act, why can we not legislate to allow the traditional management of these accounts to continue? The opposition say that you can, minister. We say, “You take this legislation and this will give you the opportunity to do just that and it will also allow you to do it quickly. It will allow you to move now. It will allow you to head off another five-month wait to resolve a fundamental issue that goes to the heart of volunteerism; a fundamental issue that is affecting the morale of our volunteers now when they ought to have their focus and their attentions on other, much more pressing, matters.”

It is quite disappointing that you, minister, do not seem to be able to grasp the nettle and take this instrument that the opposition are giving to you. We are giving it to you for the sake of our volunteers—not for our sake. This is not a party trick. And, while I am in that frame, I reject the minister’s claim this morning that this was some sort of knee-jerk grandstanding exercise. Minister, this is an initiative taken by the opposition on behalf of the volunteers.

The volunteers have seen our legislation. They have seen the frame and they have supported our draft legislation. I will again read out the sentence in a letter from the VBA to Renee Leon, Department of JACS, which Mr Smyth read out before lunchtime and which underlines the argument I am making here: “Why is the legislative change proposed by Pratt not being pursued by the government? This would seem to be the best option still.” That is what he says in his question, and in his statement to the Department of JACS. The VBA are asking the Department of JACS to get on with it, to resolve an issue that they are sick and tired of seeing, lingering and creating these sorts of morale problems.

Bushfire brigade captains are writing these things because they are not particularly happy with the way their volunteers feel about this. The captains want to remove a problem affecting morale and hindering their brigades and their SES units. That is why they are moving with some speed to try and get this resolved. I respect the fact that the volunteer brigades association are currently in talks with the Department of JACS and I know that they are looking at a proposed model put on the table, I think, over the weekend. Whilst we are demanding that the minister seize this legislation today and use it to resolve this problem quickly, we have to respect and acknowledge the fact that the VBA are currently in talks with JACS and those talks will go for the remainder of this week. We do not wish to interrupt that process, but, for God's sake, minister, if, when this current range of discussions between the VBA and the Department of JACS concludes—and we believe that will be some time in the next week or so—if the VBA and the JACS are still at a point of impasse on how to resolve this issue, come back and revisit this legislation. If you do not, I can promise you that if in February 2007 the SES and RFS brigades and units still have this problem we will bring this legislation back here and we will keep bringing it back until something is done.

As far as the opposition are concerned, we want to see this problem removed. We want to see the RFS and SES volunteers back on track, focusing on the concerns that this community has regarding bushfire season preparations. We again implore the government to pass and implement this legislation so that our brigades and units can feel at ease and be ready to move on to the tasks for which they have volunteered. It is an absolute shame that a minister with an office the size of his and with the resources that he has got available to him has been unable to take a leadership decision and move quickly enough to resolve this issue in the blink of an eyelid.

Why did we need a committee formed? Why does the minister say that we have to wait until the end of the bushfire season to resolve an issue that goes to the heart of morale and provides a negative impact on our units? With his staff and the resources that he has immediately available to him, why could the minister not have made a bold decision to solve this problem in a flash? He has failed to, which means he has failed our volunteers. He has allowed a morale problem to stay in place—a morale problem that affects the preparation of our volunteers for a very bad fire season.

MR CORBELL (Molonglo—Attorney-General, Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Planning) (3.37): Mr Temporary Deputy Speaker, I seek leave to make an explanation under standing order 47.

Leave granted.

MR CORBELL: Mr Smyth in his speech indicated that I said the Financial Management Act was for the management of government moneys. That is not what I said. In fact I said:

Under the Financial Management Act, money can be classified into two categories: it is either public money that needs to be deposited into consolidated revenue or it is trust money donated for a specific purpose.

I did not make the suggestion that Mr Smyth refers to.

Question put:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 7

Noes 9

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

Question so resolved in the negative.

Belconnen—40th anniversary

Debate resumed from 20 September 2006, on motion by **Ms Porter**:

That this Assembly notes the recent 40th anniversary of the establishment of Belconnen.

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (3.42): I think I was pretty well closing on the last occasion so I will just say a few more words. It was great to see the festivities over the weekend. Unfortunately, I had to miss out on the fun run and walk. I greatly enjoyed it last year, with Bluey the wonder dog, who needed the exercise more than I did, and my daughter and my son, who reckoned he got there in 30 minutes but I think he was about 50 or something. But it was good just wandering around the stalls in the afternoon and seeing everyone enjoying themselves thoroughly. It was a very good birthday party and I congratulate the government on their assistance in that.

It is a great vibrant community. It is changing, of course, with the new developments around Dunlop, the new mortgage belts out there, and there will be some further development coming along too in west Macgregor. It was a great community atmosphere in terms of the whole area too. We should continue to celebrate this day. For many years it really was not celebrated and so it is good to see in recent times these formal celebrations of the birthday of Belconnen, obviously one of our most important, if not the most important, areas in Canberra.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (3.44): Belconnen is this year celebrating its 40th year. I did touch on some of these issues in the adjournment debate on the day that Ms Porter moved this motion, for fear that we might not get back to this, so I am glad that we have because I want to pay tribute to the people of Belconnen—and Hall and Nicholls, but essentially the people of Belconnen, whom I represent and have been proud to represent these past nearly five years.

It is been a great honour to do so and it is been a great honour to live and serve in the Belconnen community for in excess of 20 years and to see the vitality and vibrancy of the Belconnen community when I drive home of an evening, especially at this time of the year because it is fete season. Fetes are a measure of what might be called social capital. The Liberal Party are fond of social capital, but I do not know about the Labor Party at the moment. There are signs up every week about fetes. Mr Temporary Deputy Speaker, if you are in Belconnen this weekend remember that between four and seven on Saturday Miles Franklin primary school is having its fete. The band is fine, the sausage sizzle is always great and it has always got a good chocolate wheel. This is one of the manifestations of community in Belconnen that has grown up over many years.

I said the other day that in many ways Belconnen has been a sort of cinderella town centre. I think it suffered from some fairly unfortunate brutalist architecture, but some of the more recent developments tend to soften that somewhat, and we do look forward to the government fulfilling its commitment to a Belconnen arts centre, which I think there is bipartisan support for.

When we look at the development of Belconnen over the years and the growth, from one suburb around Aranda in the days when my old local member Doug Anthony inaugurated Belconnen to today, all of this is tinged with a touch of sadness given the treatment meted out to Belconnen, as with other parts of the ACT, by the Stanhope government. It is rather ironic for Ms Porter to stand up here and say how wonderful it is that we serve Belconnen, when I feel that, although she tries very hard, she is not providing a service to the people of Belconnen.

The Labor Party's birthday presents to Belconnen are many. If those presents were Christmas presents and we had a traditional approach they would be characterised as coal in the bottom of a Christmas stocking. We have pay parking at Calvary hospital. There were a lot of things we could have done to make Calvary hospital better for the people of Belconnen and the region before we introduced pay parking. Of course, we now know that it is a completely failed system but it has been a complete embuggerance for the people who use the hospital. Before the government go in for pay parking it is incumbent upon them to provide sufficient parking for the people who work there and have to visit there. It is ironic that there are many places in Belconnen where you can park for free and buy a beer, but if you are sick or you have a member of the family who is dying you have to pay to park.

The other birthday present that the people of Belconnen have received from the Stanhope government is school closures: Cook primary school, Cook preschool, Giralang primary school, Giralang preschool, Flynn primary school, Flynn preschool, Mount Rogers primary school and preschool. Goodness knows what this government will do to Melba high school and Copland College. They are tinkering with the excellent programs at Charnwood primary school. What effect might that have if they turn Charnwood primary school into a P to 4 school? They are also tinkering with programs at Southern Cross primary school. We have to add to those the list of schools that have already been listed for closure, along with Ginninderra district high, Holt primary school and preschool and Higgins primary school and preschool.

The social capital of the electorate that I represent is centred on preschools and primary schools. Preschools are where people often get their first experience of community involvement and participating in organisations. Parents associations, parents and friends associations and parents and citizens associations are often the stepping-off point for people to become involved in the wider community, and often in politics.

But what this government is going to do is gut my electorate and the schools in my electorate and grind down years of built-up social capital in schools like Giralang, Flynn and Cook. This government is going to tell those people that their efforts are not worth it—and those people, with that experience, will be very, very unlikely, when they go to new schools, to participate as fully and as actively as they did in the school that they built up, often with the sweat of their own brow, sweating over sausage sizzles or fixing up the gardens and all of those sorts of things. They will not be prepared to do this and we will lose half a generation of people actively involved in their school community because they will not want to take it on again.

I would like to pay tribute to the people of Belconnen and I would like to wish all the residents of Belconnen, past and present, congratulations on their 40th birthday. But I also want to encourage them to not be downhearted when they are treated so badly by the Stanhope government and to not flinch in their opposition to the Stanhope government and its muddle-headed policies—the wrong policies on hospital pay parking, the wrong policies on school closures, and the added bonus from the Stanhope government for people in my electorate of rises in rates, taxes and charges this year of 36 per cent, 39 per cent, 31 per cent, suburb on suburb. Some of the poorest people in this town are being given a birthday present by the Stanhope government of more taxes and charges. So I say happy birthday to Belconnen, but I am not entirely sure what the Stanhope government would say to the people of Belconnen.

MR STANHOPE (Ginninderra—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Business and Economic Development, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Minister for the Arts) (3.51): As a representative of the people of Belconnen in this place for some years now, it is a great pleasure and, of course, a privilege for me to stand and support a motion to celebrate the 40th birthday of Belconnen. There was a very successful celebration over the last weekend through a festival organised by the people of Belconnen, led by the Belconnen Community Service and the Belconnen Community Council, and a range of other very committed Belconnen residents and Canberrans.

I am a long-time resident of Belconnen. I moved to Belconnen in 1974, 32 years ago, so I have lived there essentially all my adult life. My children, whilst not born in the electorate, were brought home to the electorate, attended school and got their first jobs there. Two of them attended university in Belconnen at the University of Canberra. It remains my home and at this stage it is where my wife and I intend to end our days. I note with pleasure that Hall is within my electorate and I intend to be buried in its cemetery. Such is my lifetime commitment, not just to Canberra but, indeed, to Belconnen and to the electorate.

The festival was very successful and I congratulate all those who were associated with it. I made the point in a short address I gave at the festival that it was very important as we celebrated 40 years of community through the establishment of Belconnen that we acknowledge that the electorate of Ginninderra derived its name from a creek which flows through Belconnen. The creek was first identified by the early settlers of Belconnen as “Ginin-ginin-derry Creek”, a word which was explained, deciphered or interpreted by Europeans at the time who had a grasp and some understanding of the Ngunnawal language as meaning “sparkling water” or “rippling water”—a reference to the effect of the sun on the moving waters of Ginin-ginin-derry Creek.

As we celebrate those 40 years it is pertinent and very relevant that we acknowledge and recognise that the indigenous residents of the ACT, those with a continuing connection to the land, are, of course, celebrating 26,000 years of connection to not just Belconnen but, indeed, the whole of the ACT. We need to keep in mind that historic perspective and acknowledgement of that prior ownership of 26,000 years as we celebrate the 40 years that the community, suburbs or township of Belconnen have been established.

Belconnen, which is home now to just over 80,000 persons, is a strong and increasingly vibrant community with much to celebrate. This government certainly wishes to continue to work with the people of Belconnen in ensuring that they will always have things to celebrate. There is much work, development, progress, regeneration and renewal, which is vital to any continuing, viable community activity being undertaken around Belconnen. At the age of 40 some of the infrastructure is ageing, and we acknowledge that. We see it in the complete refurbishment which is currently under way at the Jamison Centre. I visited the Jamison Centre yesterday and the work is now well advanced. New shops have opened within the centre. Jamison, which was the first suburban shopping centre to be developed in Belconnen, is itself being redeveloped, and this is a sign of the maturing or ageing of Belconnen as a whole.

The government recognises and acknowledges this in relation to the massive injection of funds into education which is at the heart of the government’s commitment to the renewal of public education in the Australian Capital Territory. Belconnen will receive the major portion of the \$190 million which is being invested through our last budget in the renewal of the educational infrastructure of our schools throughout the ACT. That is a massive injection of funds for education. It is a massive contribution to public education through this last budget. There is an investment of \$190 million through a single budget into public schools within the territory.

If one were to extrapolate on a pro rata basis that \$190 million provided in a single ACT budget to, say, the budget of New South Wales, one would find that the figure would translate to probably a couple of billion dollars. I notice that the Premier of New South Wales recently made a great splash of a \$120 million investment by the New South Wales government in school maintenance renewal for the whole of the state of New South Wales. This is essentially the same amount—excluding, of course, the significant investment in the Ginninderra district high school in Harrison—that this government is making through the \$90 million direct capital aid upgrade and the \$20 million IT upgrade of schools in the territory.

Just compare that. The New South Wales government is priding itself on its \$120 million investment in maintenance upgrades across the entire state, and we have matched it. Our \$190 million investment through this last budget would equate in New South Wales—I do not have the sums—to well in excess of a billion dollars. That is the order of the investment which this government is making in education, and most particularly in Belconnen. We have a brand-new K to 10 \$45 million school in the heart of the electorate meeting the needs of the residents of Belconnen, and indeed the whole of the ACT.

It is all right for the Liberals. Of course, we know their history in relation to schools. I do not want to get sidetracked here—I will do that perhaps during the next debate—but really it is the height of hypocrisy for Mrs Dunne in particular to come in here and waffle on about abandonment by this government of public education when the policies we are pursuing are word for word the policies her current leader pursued and supported when previously in government. We are doing what the previous government said it would do but could not do, which it did not have the political will or the stamina or the commitment to pursue or undertake or achieve. We are doing it. We are doing it for the sake of public education and we are doing it for the future of the education of our children. We are committed to the education of our children. We have a commitment to public education which we will not walk away from and we will ensure the maintenance of very high standards. In fact, we will improve the standards of education through our commitment, through this proposal, to public education in the territory.

I regret to some extent that I have been diverted from essentially what is a celebration to respond to the very carping and ungracious comments which Mrs Dunne—

Mrs Dunne: They have little to celebrate, courtesy of you.

MR STANHOPE: I imagine that Mrs Dunne is not invited to many celebrations or birthday parties. The expression or term “party pooper” applies to people such as Mrs Dunne—those who are invited to parties and then essentially—

Mr Gentleman: Probably going to Richard’s farewell.

MR STANHOPE: Yes, she will be a bundle of fun at Richard’s farewell. But the expression “party pooper” is personified in the most ungracious and carping remarks which Mrs Dunne has just felt the need to make in a motion designed to celebrate a wonderful community. To the extent that one takes the opportunity to do this during debate on a motion which notes the celebration of a great achievement—namely, the achievement that is the community of Belconnen—it is a reflection really of the level and sincerity of that person’s commitment to what it is that is being celebrated: a fantastic community, the community of Belconnen.

The last thing the people of Belconnen want in a motion designed to celebrate their achievements and their existence is the sort of party-pooing criticism that we have just heard from Mrs Dunne. So, Mrs Dunne, as a significant resident and a leader of the people at Belconnen, you have let them down today in your incredibly ungracious contribution to this debate.

MR BERRY (Ginninderra) (4.00): On occasion politicians join in full song about the area that they represent. One such occasion is the 40th birthday of Belconnen. I see Belconnen as a large part of a very important city to me, the city of Canberra. Its development, of course, parallels development in all other places in this great city.

I think it is important to acknowledge, though, that the community in Belconnen have gathered together on a number of occasions to stand up for their rights on some issues. A recent issue, of course, is the schools debate, which has been referred to by the Chief Minister and Mrs Dunne. That is an important feature of a city or part of a city developing a heart of its own, and it gives some stress to us as representatives on how we deal with a community organised, as it is, around political issues such as schools. I do not want to talk too much about that issue, merely, though, to draw attention to the fact that the community in Belconnen is well established and is becoming more and more organised by the year, as are other communities in Canberra as this great city grows and matures.

When I came here in 1972, I was approaching 40. It is a few years since then and I am approaching another age. I will be 65 next year. Part of being in a community is watching the people of the community develop and join with each other, as with all other people in this city, as their children are born and move to other parts of the city or even to other parts of Australia. The strength of our great city has matured as it has developed its heart and history.

I came here as a youngish, hairy-chested firefighter. I was first stationed at the Ainslie fire station. We went into the government house that is now my house, which was stretched to accommodate my growing family. One of the first duties I had at the Ainslie fire station was what they used to call an out duty, and I was sent to Belconnen fire station. When I arrived there, there was this brand spanking new building with a brand spanking new fire engine in it. All that was in the Belconnen town centre was the fire station. I could not believe that I was in a city where there was this huge paddock, beyond which you could not see anything except the fire station. There were some works going on around the place.

I was very proud to be part of the fire service. I was able to assist the community in many ways, join with the community on some things and, regrettably, share the tragedies of the community as time went by. Those things will always remain with me, but those years, too, were part of an enjoyable period of growing with the community. I was an activist union official. Many of my members lived in Belconnen and other suburbs.

It has been a matter of interest for me to go to a suburb that was effectively a greenfields suburb that really at first did not have much charm about it, and now to see the changing traffic past my house as the city matures. More and more grandparents walk past with their children. When I first moved there you never saw grandparents walking by. It was mostly young people with babies on bicycles and those sorts of things. My and my wife's offspring have been educated and essentially reared in Belconnen, so it has been an important part of the life of my family.

That aside, though, it is extremely important, I think, as a human being to be part of a larger community, in some ways segmented down to a region of your own and a home of your own. I live in Holt and it has a soft spot in my heart because I have been there for so long. I have been in Belconnen ever since I came here and it occupies an important part of my and my family's life.

As I said earlier, it is extremely important to belong to this large community of the ACT. It has been a matter of great pride to me that I have been elected by the people of Belconnen several times to represent them. I trust that I have been able to do that in a way that pleases those who gave me their support. I have also been a representative, though, of suburbs in the far south in the first electoral system in the ACT. It was, I have to say, no more or less of a joy to me to talk to people from Tuggeranong than it has been to converse with people in Belconnen about their issues.

It does not matter much to me where people come from in the ACT. If they have issues that they want to raise, I am happy to deal with them. So in that sense I do not see Belconnen to be that separate. But I think it is important when discussing these issues just to acknowledge the way that people come together. This most recent celebration has been an important part of not only the development of Belconnen but also the development of Canberra as a great city.

It has been a matter of great pride to me to be part of that relatively short history and to share my engagement with the community since 1972 with so many people who have contributed to the development of our great city. Happy birthday, Belconnen!

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (4.08), in reply: Firstly, I would like to thank all members for contributing to the debate on the 40th birthday of Belconnen. It seems quite a while ago since we reflected in this place on Belconnen's beginnings and its development to where it is now. We noted the upcoming festival, and, as members have said, the festival was held on Saturday.

Unfortunately, I missed seeing the Chief Minister cut the large birthday cake. I was representing him at the function at that time and I arrived later. However, there was still plenty of activity, with many community groups and artists and performers providing people with lively entertainment, scrumptious foods and lots of fun. My five-year-old step-granddaughter, Caitlin, was part of a group called Peacock Studio that performed a Middle-Eastern dance. Later I attended the Macgregor primary school fete where Caitlin will go to school next year. There was a lot of fun, food and entertainment at the fete.

As the Chief Minister has already said, thanks must obviously go to all those who worked so hard to put the festival together, particularly the Belconnen Regional Community Service, and everyone who spent many, many hours preparing for the event and working voluntarily on the day. Thanks also to the businesses that support the festival every year through financial or in-kind support. The ACT government is proud to continue its financial support of the festival through the grants process.

The ACT government also presented a 40th birthday gift to Belconnen in the form of a major public artwork for Lake Ginninderra. The artwork, *Running Lights*, by

Thylacine Art Projects is near the lake in John Knight Memorial Park and was recently unveiled by the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister's media release at the time gives an expressive word picture:

... brings light, sound and movement to the lake and at night will be spectacular against the black water, its perforated metal columns throwing rays of light to sparkle on the surface of the water.

The media release continues:

... Thylacine had created a very modern work that nevertheless connected 21st century Belconnen to its 20,000-year history. The name, Running Lights, was a response to the Ngunnawal word for the creek that fed the lake—Ginin-ginin-derry, meaning “sparkling” or “throwing out little rays of light”.

“This is the first major public artwork to be commissioned by the Government for Belconnen and will be a great asset to the mature commercial and cultural precinct that is developing on the shores of Lake Ginninderra,” Mr Stanhope said.

Belconnen residents and the arts community in particular are looking forward to the day when the planned arts centre is established on the lakeshore. At the November community forum of the Belconnen Community Council, community input will be sought on design ideas and concepts for a mural marking the 40th anniversary of Belconnen. The mural is expected to be completed by March 2007 and will be painted on the front of the Belconnen Community Centre by four prominent Belconnen artists—Phil Nizette, Nasser Palangi, Duncan Smith and Kurt Laurenson.

Tomorrow evening the west Belconnen community health committee will hold the formation meeting for its board of governance. It will be this board that will guide the establishment of this centre in the very near future—another example of the community spirit and energy that exist in Belconnen.

The new Kippax Library and the refurbishment of the Belconnen Library have been welcomed by the community. Also exciting is the commitment by the Stanhope government to establish a modern, first-class P to 10 campus on the site of the old Ginninderra district high school. This government's support of and commitment to first-class education for our community's young people are considerable. Sadly, members opposite seem not to agree.

I thought Mrs Dunne's gratuitous remarks about me as a local member in the adjournment debate on 20 September, when she was supposedly addressing Belconnen's 40th birthday, were both unhelpful and incorrect. They certainly were not in the spirit of debate. So I was pleased that she was seemingly able to resist being negative today. Unfortunately, that was not the case. She again spent her time taking cheap shots at the government in general and at me in particular. Well, Mrs Dunne, I know you are having a hard time at the moment, but I know that I have a fine record of achievement in my electorate since I was elected two years ago. It is not about blowing one's own trumpet. It is about the community, Mrs Dunne.

I would particularly like to mention the history of Belconnen on display at the festival. I pay tribute to those people who have been collecting the memorabilia and information about Belconnen's history and presenting them to the community. The display was an opportunity for people not only to learn about that history but also to contribute by presenting their recollections of their own involvement and their own connection to the region over time.

We live in a fast moving and ever changing world and I fear that we sometimes neglect to recall our oral history and collect and treasure memorabilia. This will be to the detriment of our community, and certainly to the detriment of our children and our grandchildren. So much of the information we share today is electronic and ephemeral. Even the good old photo album of the family is disappearing. I hope members will take this opportunity, while they reflect on this very significant anniversary of this part of our city, to remind themselves how important it is to capture and record our memories. Happy birthday, Belconnen!

Motion agreed to.

Schools—closures

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (4.14): I move:

That this Assembly:

- (1) notes that the current proposal called Towards 2020 proposes significant changes to the structure of ACT government schooling as well as the closure of 39 schools;
- (2) recognises that there is a steady decline in the number of students enrolling in ACT government schools and that this decline cannot be accounted for simply by demographic shifts;
- (3) further:
 - (a) recognises that the proportion of students enrolling in non-government schools is increasing; and
 - (b) notes that one of the stated reasons for the Towards 2020 proposal is to address the drift of students from government to non-government schools;
- (4) notes that the Government admits that it does not know the real reasons for this drift;
- (5) calls on the ACT Government to undertake a comprehensive study of the reasons for the drift of students from government to non-government schools; and
- (6) requires that the Minister for Education and Training report the results of the study to the Legislative Assembly by the first sitting day of March 2007.

This is an important motion relating to the funding of education and educational facilities in the ACT. The ACT has a proud record in education. When we compare ourselves with other states and territories in Australia, we do remarkably well.

Much of the public debate in the last six months or so has centred on the provision of educational facilities. Much of that debate, as we all know, has centred on the current government's desire to close 39 schools to add to the school that they closed last year. While that is an important matter of public policy, it is not something that I propose to concentrate on today because there are other aspects of the *Towards 2020* proposal that have been somewhat overshadowed in the debate about whether or not we should close 39 schools to add to the school that the government has already closed and make it a nice round 40, and I have raised them in the past.

The proposals by the minister that may eventuate in the imposition of new structures in ACT schooling are untested to a large extent in Australia. Certainly we have not tested the opinion of the people of the ACT in this regard. The consultation documents, which are published by a whole lot of people other than the ACT government, attest to that. There is very little reference in many of the submissions that have come in on *Towards 2020* about some of the radical restructurings, the redesign of education proposed in here. But I do not particularly want to dwell on that either.

One of the underpinning principles that Mr Barr spoke about at length in this place in the budget context and in his press conference to announce *Towards 2020* was that there was a significant decline in the number of children attending government schools. There are two reasons for that. One is a problem of demographics. In a sense we cannot do much about that, although I have made a significant contribution to reversing the demographic decline in the age cohort five to 19. I hope that others will do their part as well. Mr Seselja is making a significant contribution.

One of those is simply that the big bulge that we used to have in that school age group is now getting older and that cohort is getting smaller. There is a smaller school age population than there was 10 or 20 years ago. There is no denying that that is a fact of life. Without significant immigration of people with school age children, we will not address that because, even if we have our children, they will not be school age children for some years to come.

The other aspect of this issue is the drift away from a reliance on government schooling. An increasing proportion of people are choosing to send their children to non-government schools. Members of the opposition have been raising this for a number of years. Mr Pratt, when he was the shadow minister for education, raised it consistently with his opposite numbers, Mr Corbell and Ms Gallagher. I have raised it with Ms Gallagher. Consistently Mr Corbell and Ms Gallagher said that it was not really a problem; there was nothing very much they could do about it and they were not really concerned about it. To the credit of this minister, he has recognised that it is a problem. He is the first minister in the Stanhope government to recognise it as such, and he should be congratulated on that.

He has seen that it is a problem that if we continue this decline, especially in the high schools, the ACT government will become a minority provider of high schools. This is a matter of considerable concern to me and to the community. I was actually criticised by the Chief Minister last year for saying this, but what will happen if we continue the current trend of discouraging or not encouraging people to send their children to government high schools is that we will soon be in a situation where only the poor and the attractively badly behaved will remain in the government high school system, to the detriment of education for all in the ACT.

There will not be competition between the sectors. There will come a point where the government high school system becomes so marginal that there will be not just a one percentage point a year departure but a radical departure, especially from the government high school system. We ask ourselves why this is. I have my own pet theories, Mr Barr has his own theories, and I know that Mulcahy has his own theories on this. Most members in this place have a theory about why people choose the non-government sector over the government sector. Some of us choose it because they would like their children to have a religious education, based either on a particular religious persuasion or a general Christian education.

In the past I have sent my children to Catholic schools, although not exclusively for that reason. There are other reasons. There are a lot of people who choose to send their children to Catholic schools, not because they are Catholic and they want their child to have a Catholic education, but because they see that it provides something different, something better and something that they will choose to pay for.

Cost is an interesting element in this debate. As I have said, there has been considerable discussion, this year in particular, about the decline in government school enrolments to the benefit of non-government schools. They are leaving the government schools and going to the non-government schools. The last published ABS figures show a 20-year gradation that reveals that in the period 1984 to 2004, non-government schools increased from 32 per cent of total enrolments to 41 per cent of total enrolments. At the same time, of course, the reciprocal decline was that in 1984, 68 per cent of children attended ACT government schools. In 2004 it was a mere 59 per cent. We have seen stagnation in the 2005-06 figures in terms of proportions, but we are still, as we know, seeing fewer people attending school.

We have to ask ourselves why a parent who chooses to send their child to a parochial, low fee paying school is making a significant outlay for something that could be provided around the corner by the ACT government for much less. This is the question that was asked by Chris Uhlmann in one of his pieces about education when he was writing for the *Canberra Times*. On Monday, 5 June, just before the budget, he wrote, "To put this in brutal economic terms, you have to worry about a free product that is losing market share to one that is quite expensive."

We have to ask ourselves: if we do have such a fantastic education system—and the statistics show that that is the case—why do we have this decline in enrolments? Why are people prepared to pay one or two or three or, at the top end, tens of thousands of dollars every year to send their children to a non-government school when we as a community should be providing a service of comparable value? Why is it that the

people of the ACT do not value this free product and are prepared, at considerable expense, to find a better product?

In market terms, if your product is not selling you can do a couple of things. You can find out why and then you can fix the product, or you can take it off the shelf. I think what Mr Barr and this government have decided to do is take the product off the shelf. They have not decided to find out why the product is selling. They are wringing their hands, saying, “We have 18,000 empty places and we do not know why, but we are going to invest \$90 million, plus 20 for IT, plus 65 for write-off of capital.” Those are significant investments in a straitened budget, and this minister does not know why.

We have heard this over and over again. It is most enlightening. The exchanges between Mr Barr and me, and Dr Foskey, Mr Smyth and Ms MacDonald, to some extent, in the estimates committee hearings showed that this minister and his department do not know the answer. I am not being overly critically of this minister because he is new and he is relying on the advice of his department, but he and his department do not know the answer, and they have never bothered to systematically find out.

They told us that when people leave the school system, they are asked why they are leaving, but there were significant admissions that not everybody is asked the question. Sometimes it is done in the parent satisfaction survey. Sometimes it is done in a different survey. That information is often held in the school; sometimes it is held in the department. To this day, as far as I can tell, the request by Dr Foskey—it is a shame that she is ill and cannot be here today to speak—during the estimates process that information as to why people are leaving the government schooling system or leaving one school for another be collated has not been provided.

We have a situation where this minister and this government want to spend money. I have been critical of the spending of this money, and I stand by my criticism. They may be putting good money after bad because they do not know the reasons why people are leaving. Until we know the reasons why people are leaving, we do not know whether the \$90 million plus 20 is actually going to be effectively spent.

I do not oppose spending money, but I think that it is incumbent upon all of us as policy makers and custodians of the money of the people of the ACT to ensure that it is wisely spent. I am not satisfied, and I do not think that there are many people in the community who are satisfied that this money is being wisely spent. The reason for that is that the minister and his department and this government do not know why people are leaving the government system. They do not know the reason for the drift, and that is why I have moved this motion today.

This is not a condemnatory motion. This is a motion that is, in fact, so logical, straightforward and integral to good policy making that this minister should embrace it. I cannot recall the number of times that the Chief Minister has stood here on various occasions and said that the government is not going to be rushed into doing particular things; it will make policy decisions in an evidence-based way.

Here is the challenge for the Stanhope government and for Minister Barr: find the evidence. Tell us. Find out why people do not send their children to government

schools. This was one of the things that came out of the debate about west Belconnen. Minister Gallagher at the time said, “Look, all these people drive past west Belconnen high and they go to St Francis Xavier.” The people in the room said, “Why don’t you find out why they drive past? Can we address it?” This government’s solution to people driving past west Belconnen high school was to pull it down and build a bauble in its place.

No-one could say that west Belconnen high school did not need investment in its infrastructure. It had been let run down. I had the tour of the school. Lots of the parents told me that it was not really all that bad, but I saw it. I saw it warts and all, and it was a school that had been sadly neglected. That might be one of the reasons why people drove past west Belconnen high school and took their children to St Francis Xavier. We do not know. The minister at that stage would not find out why the 9,000-odd households in west Belconnen were not sending their children to that school and why they were choosing, for example, St Francis Xavier high school instead. They would not find out.

The challenge for this minister today is to accept this motion, to find out why people are driving past our government schools, especially our government high schools, the area that I am most concerned about, and then to spend the \$90 million wisely.

MR BARR (Molonglo—Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation and Minister for Industrial Relations) (4.30): I have circulated an amendment which I will now formally move. I move:

Omit all words following “Assembly”, substitute:

- (1) recognises that the Government’s *Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools* proposal includes the largest investment in the ACT’s public school system since self-government;
- (2) notes that the proposal includes \$67 million for the establishment of new schools in West Belconnen and Gungahlin, and \$1 million for a feasibility study for a joint secondary college and CIT campus in Gungahlin;
- (3) commends the Government on the \$90 million capital upgrade package that forms part of the wider Towards 2020 investment;
- (4) notes that the Government is backing its \$90 million capital investment with an extra \$3 million per annum from 2008/09 to keep our schools properly maintained;
- (5) supports the use of part of the Government’s record investment on ensuring our school buildings are more energy efficient and environmentally sustainable;
- (6) notes that there has been a decline in the ACT school-age population that necessitates change to ACT government schooling;
- (7) expresses concern over the increasing Commonwealth funding gap between public and private schools; and

- (8) notes that without change and significant investment, the government school system faces the real danger of becoming the residual education option for ACT children and parents.

Mr Speaker, before I speak to the amendment, I would like to say that Mrs Dunne has, perhaps for the first time, formally acknowledged that there is more to the *Towards 2020* proposals than simply the closure of some schools in the territory. It is pleasing to see an acknowledgment from the opposition about the demographic change that is occurring in our city and the need for the government to undertake some structural change to our education system.

I note that Mrs Dunne did talk at some length about market forces and about the quality of the public education product. I would say in response to that that the government's investment is not seeking to take the product off the shelf, but it is seeking to improve the quality of the product and we do need to make investments, and significant investments, at this time to improve the quality. As Mrs Dunne has identified, there are a number of school buildings within our education system that need significant investment and that investment has not been forthcoming from both sides of politics going back to when the ACT was granted self-government.

I think it is a fair point to make to say that we did inherit from the commonwealth an asset base that the ratepayers of the ACT had no capacity to maintain. That was clearly the case. The commonwealth gave us self-government in the first place because they were no longer prepared to foot the bill for the mass of infrastructure that was provided. It is worth noting, of course, that a lot of that infrastructure that was delivered in a hurry in the 1960s and 1970s was not of a particularly good quality. You need only to look at the condition of some of our schools that were built during that period to see where corners were cut.

Even with the deeper pockets of the commonwealth, the facilities that were provided at that time were not crash-hot and 30 or 40 years later, let me tell you, they have not stood the test of time and they require significant investment. That is why the government has, as part of the *Towards 2020* proposal, sought to invest record amounts in our schools, to ensure that our facilities are up to date and up to scratch. We need that investment; there is no doubting that. I have gone round the education system over the six months or so I have been minister, visiting 90-odd schools in that period, and there is no doubt that there is a crying need for investment in school infrastructure.

Mrs Dunne says that she is not sure whether the money is being well spent. I would highlight Curtin primary, where rain comes in through the roof and where there is a huge puddle in the middle of the canteen area. I think it is pretty clear that we need to spend some money there. There are countless other examples of that sort of investment in school infrastructure being needed. The government, through this first round of investment which is looking at, I think, 223 projects over 72 different schools, is seeking to invest to correct some of those issues.

I am afraid that it has got to the stage in some schools that some of the issues that we are having to address now are what would be perhaps considered routine maintenance.

Nonetheless, and this is the bigger challenge that we face in our system, we are operating education off nearly 180 sites across the ACT, educating, as Mrs Dunne has indicated, about 60 per cent of the school population. The private sector is educating the other 40 per cent off 44 sites. That gives an idea of the imbalance, if you like, in terms of the infrastructure that we are maintaining.

As I indicated in question time today, we are seeking to use some of the \$90 million to invest in better equipping our schools for environmental challenges that we are going to face over the coming years. It is indeed our intention that, where possible, schools should seek to reduce their environmental footprint and also their running costs through sustainable design principles. We will seek to take the lead in our community on ensuring the sustainability of our schools. We can already see some of these initiatives in action at schools across the territory.

As I have indicated, one of the reasons that the government is committed to a \$90 million upgrade program is that it wants to ensure the environmental and financial sustainability of our school buildings. Mrs Dunne has indicated that she believes that improving facilities in our schools is throwing good money after bad. Is she implying that we should sit back and make no change and allow our public education system to become the residual system for those who cannot afford private education? I am not prepared, and neither is any one of my colleagues on this side of the chamber, to give up on public education in the territory.

There is a danger that without change our public education system will continue to slide into minority status. That is why the government took the difficult and clearly unpopular decision to take the 2020 proposals to the community for consultation. It is because our city has undergone demographic change that suburbs that used to be the nappy valleys are now the home of young adults entering higher education and training or employment and that in other suburbs there is more demand for aged care facilities than for primary schools.

Anyone who has lived in Canberra for any time would know that our population is ageing and that there are different demands for services across the city. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of the ACT population of primary school age decreased by about 2,600 people, or about eight per cent, from June 1996 to June 2005. Over the same period there has been a five per cent decrease in the population of high school or college age people in the ACT.

Mrs Dunne: Do you know why?

MR BARR: This is to do with demographics, Mrs Dunne. Yes, there are fewer children being born and our net immigration has not been particularly high over that period. Of course, there are regional variations within the city and the greatest increases have occurred in areas of Gungahlin and in north-west Belconnen—for example, in the suburb of Dunlop—while there have been significant decreases in the school age population in the north Tuggeranong area, for example. As I indicated, there has been about a 1,500 decrease in the high school and college age population in that last decade. There has been growth in Gungahlin and the Lanyon Valley, but decreases in north Tuggeranong and Weston Creek.

It is true that demographic changes are not the only reason for declines in enrolments in our government schools. That is a factor not just in the ACT, but across all jurisdictions in Australia. We do acknowledge that the reasons for changing enrolment patterns are very complex, but we cannot ignore demographic changes either and the demographic changes are significant as they impact on long-term planning for the ACT education system. The system has been very successful, but the government does have a responsibility to ensure that the system meets the needs of the community as it is and will be, not as it was.

It is for that reason that the *Towards 2020* package provides the largest capital funding injection for education since self-government. We want to ensure that our schools give students the opportunities that they deserve, both now and into the future, and we want those opportunities to be available in government schools. As I have indicated, there are many reasons for the drift in enrolments to the non-government sector, but it is a national phenomenon. Between 2000 and 2005, the national average increase in non-government enrolments was around 10.3 per cent. I understand that in the ACT over that period the increase was slightly less at 10.2 per cent. The greatest increase, 19 per cent, was seen in Western Australia.

All the national research indicates that parents value aspects such as religious instruction, school uniforms and the perception that non-government schools offer a particular type of peer group and disciplinary environment. But, interestingly, total ACT enrolment figures appear to indicate a correlation between increased federal government funding to non-government schools and the drift in enrolments to that sector. In the 10 years from 1986 to 1996, total non-government enrolments in the ACT increased by 1,203 students. In contrast, in the 10 years to 2006 from the demise of the commonwealth's new schools policy in 1996, non-government school enrolments increased by 3,200 students.

Every year the gap in federal funding widens. In the financial year 2001-02, the federal government provided nearly \$30 million to ACT government schools, compared to the \$73.85 million provided to non-government schools in the territory. In this financial year the federal government is budgeting to spend \$43.75 million on ACT government schools and \$115.9 million on the non-government sector. This funding gap has increased from \$43.8 million in 2001-02 to \$72.2 million in 2006-07, an increase of about 64 per cent in the last five years. Is it any surprise that families are taking the cue from the federal government and moving to where the money is going?

Other factors affecting enrolments in the ACT include the increase in the number of non-government schools and expansion of the year groups offered by established non-government schools. Significantly, I think we must also acknowledge that the ACT has a particular social profile—a high proportion of public servants and academics, and many families with two parents working in professional positions. That means that Canberra families are more likely to have the financial resources and information to exercise educational choices.

Importantly also, the ACT's small geographic size means that parents can and do exercise choice in where they send their children to school and it is often other than

their local school, whether that be government or non-government. We cannot discount the perception that, because something costs money, it therefore offers a better product; that is, that something that is free is only for those who do not have the money to pay.

Mr Speaker, this government is committed to public education. We want to address this move towards private education in our city and we do want to ensure that our education dollar goes where our education dollar is needed. We are not prepared to give up on public education. We do believe in education choice, but we want to ensure that when families exercise their choice ACT government schools present a real and quality option for all students. I commend my amendment to the Assembly.

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (4.42): Mr Speaker, I asked for the opportunity to speak today on this matter because, frankly, I think that at last we are getting to the real issue here involved with education. Whilst, I understand, the minister is an economic rationalist, he might want to do a few night classes in marketing, because that is the element of the equation that I think is missing in ACT public education. Whilst Mrs Dunne's background is not really in that field, I thought she delivered in rather eloquent terms the core issues which that have not been addressed, other than on the morning of the budget debate, and which are central to the problems besetting the ACT government and its performance in public education.

I want first to take the opportunity to acknowledge the fine work of teachers in both government and non-government schools in the ACT. Their job is vital to the development of future generations and their hard work deserves to be commended. My experience in education is anecdotal. My late father was a teacher. I grew up in a household where things related to education were often talked about and we had a lot of interaction with people in that field. I have been in both a Catholic school and a private school, and my children have been in the public system in the ACT and in non-government Catholic schools. I have had that level of exposure to the system and I have had to make decisions, in concert with my wife, based on my experience and on life experience.

This motion is important because, as Mrs Dunne has pointed out, it goes to the fundamental flaws of the government's *Towards 2020* plan. She cited Chris Uhlmann's remark in the *Canberra Times* in June that when a free product is losing market share to a really expensive one there is reason to worry. Mr Barr is, I think, knowledgeable on economic issues, which puts him in a unique position across the other side of the chamber since Mr Quinlan's departure, and I am sure that if he applied the challenge and task at hand here to other areas of society he would realise that people who continue to resist the expressions from the marketplace generally experience a long period of decline.

It does not matter if you are manufacturing cars, it does not matter if you are running a corner shop and it does not matter if you are running a political party or virtually anything else; if you are not in touch with the needs of the electorate or if you are not in touch with the needs of your customers—in this case the customers are the parents who are making the decision as to where to send their children in the first instance—then there is a good chance that you will lose their confidence. The minister said that at last Mrs Dunne is recognising demographic issues, but I do not think he read very

carefully what was in her original motion, which she has brought back in a further amendment, that is, that she says that the decline in the number of students enrolling in ACT government schools cannot be accounted for simply by demographic shifts. She went on to say in her motion that the proportion of students enrolling in non-government schools is increasing.

If we were contracting here, being like some parts of Europe after the wars where the numbers started to shrink, you would say that there is no way that we are going to be able to sustain this level of demand. Where this whole issue all falls apart is with the number of people who are desperately trying to get into the non-government schools. I would express great scepticism with the view that people are doing it because they want a religious education. Sure, there are people who want a religious education, but I have two children in the Catholic system, or one about to go in and one already in, and I have two other children who have been through the system within the Catholic framework, so I have seen a lot of the parents and attended lots of events and I would like to tell you that they are there because they are looking for a Catholic education, but I am afraid that there are many other factors that are driving the decision in the main.

The argument was also advanced that people think that if they are paying more for something it must be better. Again, that really does not stack up with the Catholic system. It used to amaze me when I would get a bill for the school fees for my boys at St Anthony's in Wanniasa. I thought the school fees were not much better than a couple of good meals at the local club. People used to baulk and scream about paying that level of fees, but no-one will tell me that they thought they were paying all this extra money and they were getting this superior product because it was very expensive. It was not expensive. It was a very small fee take. I still think that the fees that are payable for education, compared to what people have to pay for DVDs, flat screen TVs, luxury cars and all the other household items, are in the main a cheap shout.

The argument is pretty thin that they are paying all this money out because they think they are getting some exotic product. I suspect that the concerns—and I am relying on anecdotal evidence, just as I am suggesting the government is—probably strike at the broad quality of the product they are enjoying. Parents in this town in the main are from double-income households, which means that the morning is probably, if it is anything like my home, a fairly hectic time when you have got the issue of people getting to work and also getting kids to school.

According to the February 2006 ABS data, in the order of 48 per cent of high school students in the ACT were enrolled in non-government schools. The inconvenience that that may represent for families in this city in travelling across Canberra to get their kids to school or to ensure that they make the appropriate transport connections is a factor that would suggest to you that they are willing to inconvenience themselves considerably because they believe there is something superior about the product or, conversely, that they have some grave misgivings about the quality of the public school product.

I do not want to condemn all public schools and say that they are no good, that the only way you can get a decent education is to go to a Catholic school, a private school

or one of the other denominational schools, but it concerns me when you have well over a third of the primary school students at private schools and you have this drift away from the public sector and you just ignore those signs and try to dismiss them as demographic factors.

I would have vastly more confidence in the whole basis of this education policy that is being presented by the new minister if I thought it was based on strong, persuasive research whereby we had identified the reasons that people are taking their kids out of schools. It may not be any one single factor, but it could well be a host of factors, and we would need to rank those. But in this whole debate I have not seen one example of anything tangible being presented that suggests to me a depth of knowledge on what are the factors.

I went to three of the school meetings. I found each one more or less a rerun. I heard nothing at any of them that I had not heard previously. I know that Mrs Dunne was far more diligent. Frankly, I never heard the minister address the issue which I raised at the budget breakfast and which is essential to why he is facing these problems in public education.

No-one will convince me that the way to build growth is to keep closing down options of accessibility and availability. There may be old schools and there might be demographic arguments that you cannot make some of them viable. That is something that could be argued in this place. But we are yet to see evidence that the government has actually identified the core problem, and I do not understand that.

We have had a lot of debate about consultation. I am probably in a minority of one in this place in that, whilst I understand the statutory obligations on consultation, I am not sure, in my book, that that is the main issue. We have had this long process. People have their own views and you can talk to lots of people, but that does not necessarily mean that you get to the heart of the problem. But if we had reliable, accurate research undertaken by credible parties, peer-review examined and presented to this place, I think that we could all look with a greater level of confidence and certainty going forward to the basis on which the budget of the ACT government as it relates to education and this whole 2020 program is being formulated.

I have not been a major player in the debate here. This has been Mrs Dunne's area and that of others, but I have heard nothing through all those debates that has given me any level of confidence that we have really got our finger on the pulse in terms of what is causing the loss of confidence in the public school system. I have had my own experiences. I have cited examples here which could be dismissed as just one person's observation. I have said what I think about shared classes. I was attacked by Ms Gallagher in my maiden speech. I understand that I am in the history books, along with Chamberlain, as the only person who has ever been attacked in giving their first speech in the parliament.

Mrs Dunne: Disraeli.

MR MULCAHY: Disraeli, was it? There you go. I have not even got my history accurate on that issue, Mrs Dunne. I made that concern known then and I remain concerned about the fact that shoving groups of classes together, putting up partitions

and then finding out that you have 57 people in a room and joining them time and time again, may well impact on the quality of education. I know that people say that it does not matter if you put in 100 of them, that their first class as a child in the post-war era had 96, but I do think these issues need to be tackled and they go to customer satisfaction as far as parents are concerned. (*Time expired.*)

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (4.52): I rise in support of Mr Barr's amendment to Mrs Dunne's motion. I am concerned that Mrs Dunne and her colleagues continue to criticise the capital improvement program initiated by this government. She may think that investing in our public schools is throwing good money after bad, but the minister has outlined clearly this afternoon the need to do so.

Mrs Dunne is quick to make unfounded and scathing remarks about people's commitment to their electorate but seemingly slow to support the hardworking commitment of this government to improving the schools in her electorate. I am proud of the government's investment in schools in Ginninderra and I call on Mrs Dunne to explain to the parents of Aranda primary school why they should not have their school upgraded, or Belconnen high or Charnwood primary.

We all know about the grief that Mrs Dunne has been causing parents at Charnwood primary. Why does Mrs Dunne believe that upgrading Copland college or Evatt, Florey or Fraser primary schools will be throwing good money after bad? What is her fundamental opposition to Hawker college, Kaleen primary, Kaleen high, Melba high or Lake Ginninderra getting much-needed capital works? Mrs Dunne should go to Latham, Macgregor, perhaps Macquarie, Miles Franklin, Southern Cross and Weetangera primary schools and explain to the parents what she particularly dislikes about their schools and why their school facilities should not live up to the promise of the children that attend them.

I think that Mrs Dunne should listen to those in her electorate. I have received representations from parents at my mobile offices on numbers of occasions, people who know about the capital investment that this government is going to put into their schools, people who are eagerly awaiting it, people who know that it is needed and applaud this government's decision. Mrs Dunne needs to be open with the community and explain whether she shares her federal counterpart's bias against public schools or whether she is just playing politics. These upgrades are not just about making schools look better, although I think we would all agree that that is important. These upgrades are going to assist in making our schools more sustainable.

In question time earlier today the minister highlighted some achievements in developing sustainable programs in our schools. I think it is important in the context of this debate to revisit some of these achievements. I do believe they deserve emphasis. The new school to be constructed in Harrison will include design features such as natural ventilation in all buildings; night cooling and purging by utilising differences in temperature; individual buildings containing their own gas-fired boiler; the use of high thermal mass construction to maximise the heat bank characteristic of the buildings; optimisation of daylight to reduce the need for artificial light; rainwater collection stored in large underground water storage tanks to provide water for reuse for toilet flushing, plant and garden bed irrigation, and cleaning paved areas; the use of low maintenance environmentally friendly materials in construction; and a building

management system to provide intelligent building controls for lighting, heating and ventilation.

The design of Harrison builds on the success of the award-winning Amaroo school. The new west Belconnen school in my electorate of Ginninderra will also follow these design principles and be responsive to the demands of environmental sustainability. But it is not just new schools that can benefit from better and more sustainable design. In April 2001, Campbell high school was the first school in the ACT to supply electricity from the sun to a local grid. Approximately 8,000 kilowatts of electricity have been produced per year. That is equivalent to saving 8,000 kilograms of greenhouse gas, representing two per cent of the school's—

Mrs Dunne: I take a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The motion today is about *Towards 2020* and addressing the drift of children from the government sector to the non-government sector. Saving greenhouse gases at Amaroo school or any other school in the ACT is hardly the point on this matter. I would ask you to ask Ms Porter to address the terms of the motion.

Mr Barr: On the point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker: we are also debating the amendment and I would draw your attention to paragraph (5) of the amendment.

MR DEPUTY SPEAKER: I will not accept that point of order right now, but I am sure that Ms Porter will start to get a little bit closer to the amendment that we are now looking at.

MS PORTER: Mr Deputy Speaker, as the minister said, I am addressing paragraph (5) of the amendment.

MR DEPUTY SPEAKER: I am sure it is a matter of proportion, Ms Porter. Carry on.

MS PORTER: Thank you. These systems not only reduce the consumption of fossil fuel energy and CO₂ emissions, as well as operational costs for the school, but also add to the students' learning, with special focus on environmental awareness. The key is not only to teach good environmental practice, but also to put it into action and allow students to understand the way their schools help make a difference. Sometimes quite a small capital investment in our existing schools can reap large recurrent savings and, of course, new construction in schools will, as a matter of course, take environmental sustainability into consideration.

I am convinced that this government has made a case for the need for change in our education system. Our population is ageing, as speakers before me have said, and that will bring new challenges in our community. I am also convinced that the government's \$90 million investment in our schools through capital upgrades will ensure better learning environments and more efficient buildings in the future. I commend Mr Barr's amendment to the Assembly.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (4.59): Mr Deputy Speaker, if you look at the amendment put forward by the minister all you have is an ignoring of the entire issue that Mrs Dunne has raised. Normally ministers at least attempt to address the question. But what we have is a proposal from the government, *Towards 2020*, that is simply based

on a lack of knowledge. That is what Mrs Dunne seeks to point out: if you had the evidence as to why there is a drift from the government to the non-government sector in the ACT, you would put it on the table. But the government has not done the work.

We quizzed the minister during the estimates process and asked, “Have you done exit surveys, have you spoken to parents, have you done anything at all to try and find out why people are leaving the government system in droves?” And the answer was no. They basically just have not done it. We discovered, as we probed, that individual schools do exit surveys as to why people leave. But had this information ever been collated? No, it had not, because the government were not interested.

This minister has been sold a pup. Let us face it: he is the third education minister. Mr Corbell as an education minister was more interested in planning, so nothing happened in education for the first year of the Stanhope government. Then we had Ms Gallagher. I can remember talking to Ms Gallagher at the estimates hearing and we said, “Are you the minister for all schools?” and she said, “No, I am the minister for government schools.” So there was a clear statement of this government’s intention. This minister will go down in history as the minister for closing schools. That will be his sole achievement. And by doing that he is dismantling one of the ACT’s greatest assets.

At a lunch the other day, Dawson Ruhl, who is the CEO of Marymead, got up and said that, for every dollar we spend on educating young people before the age of five, we save \$17 in later life. Yet this is a government that is going to shut 20 preschools. It is not shutting them on the basis of knowledge. We have said: “Please wait until February and get the initial cut of the census, and you will know what is going to happen; you will have an idea, a fair dinkum idea based on fact not on rumour.” But, no, it is hell-bent in its arrogant way on shutting schools because it has come to the decision that 39 schools have to go.

You only have to look through the eight points that the minister has put forward in his amendment to know that there is no thought, process or plan behind this. And that is all that Mrs Dunne is asking for in her motion: do the work before you do the damage. But the Stanhope government is going to do the damage because of its financial ineptitude and mismanagement of the budget. It is now trying to balance something, and school children, their future and our communities are simply balancing items for a government of ineptitude and mismanagement. This is a government that has got its priorities so wrong that it is spending half a million dollars on statues of Al Grassby, who was not even a Canberra member of parliament.

Mrs Dunne: I think it was \$70,000.

MR SMYTH: Okay, so it is only \$70,000—it is not half a million—but I think all the refurb over there is about half a million dollars. But it does not matter; they have got their priorities wrong. The government’s priorities are wrong and the community know it—arboretums, prisons and statues to Al Grassby but shutting 39 schools—and all when the government are running around this country with a program to entice people to come to Canberra: “Come to Canberra because we have got a new prison. Come to Canberra because we are going to have 6,500 dead trees on the top of a hill. Come to Canberra because we are shutting 39 schools. That is a good reason to come

to Canberra: 39 schools. Check the suburb you are buying in when you move to Canberra; if it has a school today it might not have it tomorrow.”

Let us go to the eight points in the minister’s amendment. Here is his answer. “Let us just ignore the problem. I am the third minister. Minister 1 ignored it; minister 2 ignored it. I am minister 3 and probably will not be minister for education when the election comes, so it does not matter; I can get away with this.” Paragraph (1) of the amendment says that the Assembly:

recognises that the Government’s *Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools* proposal includes the largest investment in the ACT’s public school system since self-government ...

So I ask the question: why do we need the largest investment in the ACT’s public school system since self-government? It is because it has been ignored for the last five years. There is a hole in the roof of Curtin primary school and water puddles in the middle of the quadrangle because of it. What did you do about that last year, the year before that and the year before that? What about the OH&S and safety concerns that this government purport to have but they have not fixed the roof? It is like the convention centre. There are holes in its roof, too, and five years later the government still have not fixed them. The reason they have now got to put in what they claim to be the largest investment in the ACT public school system since self-government is that they have ignored it for five years. No wonder people are leaving in droves. Paragraph (2) says:

notes that the proposal includes \$67 million for the establishment of new schools in West Belconnen and Gungahlin, and \$1 million for a feasibility study for a joint secondary college and CIT campus in Gungahlin ...

They are spending \$67 million for a new school. Why not spend the \$67 million on renovating all the schools in Belconnen and bringing them all up to standard and keeping them open? After all, they are only saving two per cent of the budget. That is what the target is: two per cent of the education budget—total devastation to so many communities across the territory to save two per cent. As for the \$1 million for a feasibility study for a joint secondary college and CIT campus in Gungahlin, it is not a feasibility study at all. This came up in estimates as well, Mr Deputy Speaker, and you will remember that it is for planning, siting and development—doing the plan. I am sure you could get a better quote for a feasibility study for less than \$1 million. Then we have them slapping themselves on the back: paragraph (3) says:

commends the government on the \$90 million ... upgrade package that forms part of the wider *Towards 2020* investment ...

Well, that is just catch-up. It seriously is just catch-up because, like his two previous colleagues, as education minister, this minister is responsible for ignoring education in the ACT. Paragraph (4) says:

notes that the Government is backing its \$90 million capital investment with an extra \$3 million per annum ... to keep our schools properly maintained ...

That is because for the last five years you have not maintained them; it is just catch-up. Then we have paragraph (5), which is my favourite:

supports the use of part of the Government's record investment on ensuring our school buildings are more energy efficient and environmentally sustainable ...

That is code for "knock them down". Knock them down and they do not produce any greenhouse gas. It is like Sir Humphrey's perfect hospital: a school system with no students. The minister for education says they are not going to sell the land and he pretends he does not have any money to maintain the schools because he does not know how many he is going to shut. So it is the Sir Humphrey model: let us have empty schools in the ACT because they are more environmentally sustainable, and we do not want students in them. Paragraph (6) says:

notes that there has been a decline in the ACT school-age population that necessitates change to ACT government schooling ...

Well, just wait until February and get the census data and you will have the long-term projection. You will have some solid data. I know you do not trust the federal government, but the ABS has got a pretty good reputation in this. But, no, you cannot wait. You have made the decision. You just have to do this.

Paragraph (7) is the classic "everything is John Howard's fault". You have been in government for five years, but the rundown of the ACT school system is John Howard's fault. You quote some figures that say that more money goes to the non-government sector. Well, where is the grants money? You get money from the grants commission for the provision of services, and in that is money for education. You say:

expresses concern over the increasing Commonwealth funding gap between public and private schools ...

You are trying to say that because the federal government has given more money, extra money, additional money, to those kids in those bastard private schools, everybody is going, "Hell, we had better jump ship and go to a private school." Let us look at the funding gap. Let us look at the party of equity. Only 17 per cent of the money that they spend goes on kids in non-government schools. It is an 83 per cent gap on your funding. That is equity? Andrew Barr thinks an 83 per cent gap is equitable. Paragraph (8) says:

notes that without change and significant investment, the government school system faces the real danger of becoming the residual option for ACT children and parents.

You ought to go back to the estimates *Hansard*—I think it was last year—where Katy Gallagher said, "It is about choice. If they want to go there, that is okay." It is about cost-shifting. You have run the system down for five years and you throw your hands up and pretend that you are dismayed. You say: "Oh, my gosh, parents and students are leaving the system in droves. But gee, if they go to the non-government sector, we do not have to pay for them as much, because we only give them 17 per cent."

Where was the concern in 2001? It did not exist. In 2002 it did not exist. In 2003 it did not exist. In 2004 it did not exist. In 2005 it did not exist. But in 2006, because you are under pressure, because you have blown your budget through your ineptitude and your financial mismanagement, suddenly the school system, teachers, students, parents, the community, the ACT at large and its reputation around this country suffer because you, minister, are going to close 39 schools. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (5.09), in reply: I predicted at lunchtime today that the minister would come in here and take the motion, which in many ways is a pretty inoffensive motion, and amend it—gut it and put it in his own words—because this is one of the things that you can do when you are in a majority government. I think most of the speakers, and Mr Barr and Ms Porter in particular, really got off the point about this. This is not about the school closures. This is not about any of the other things in *Towards 2020*. This is about the stated reason why this minister and this government said that they needed *Towards 2020*—not the substance of 2020 but the impetus for *Towards 2020*. What we have in Mr Barr's amendment is absolute and complete silence on that matter. We asked, "Why are children leaving the government schools and going to non-government schools?" This minister gave some of his reasons why he thought that was the case. They might be the reasons, but we do not know.

We have an opportunity here for us, as a community, to go forward and find out why people choose that path. Part of that would be to find out whether people could be coaxed back. But this minister, like his predecessor, is not prepared to find out. He has got to the stage of saying, "Not listening, not listening." He will not even address in his amendment the substantive issue of the motion. There is nothing in this amendment that reflects what is in the substantive motion.

The motion that I moved calls for one simple action: that the government undertake a comprehensive study of the reasons for the drift of students from government to non-government schools and report back to the Assembly. It is not rocket science. It does take survey. It does take some care to make sure that you are doing your research correctly. But then we would know and we would have some idea of making some assessments of whether the people who have left the government system or never been in the government system are coaxable into the government system, whether it is good policy to coax them into the government system, what the reasons are for this shift, and how we frame our policy objectives to meet the needs of the people and respond to what they have told us.

This minister does not know what the people in the ACT want in their schooling and he is not prepared to find out. This is an abrogation of government policy making of the highest order. The government are prepared to spend money and they do not know why. Most of what Mr Barr has put in his amendment is uncontroversial and for the most part reasonably acceptable. I do not have a real problem with it, and it would not be a problem if Mr Barr were prepared to add most of those sentiments to the original motion—but he wants to delete the original motion and take away the principal driving force.

This debate is not about school closures, although Mr Barr and Ms Porter wanted to talk about school closures. This is not a debate about school closures; it is a debate about why children are leaving the government system or never even contemplating going there—and this minister has completely overlooked it. You could tell by the tenor of his speech. He was in here today, saying, “Here come the Liberals and they are going to talk about schools so they are going to bag the government system and they are going to praise the non-government system.” Nothing could be further from the case.

We had the outrageous statement by Ms Porter about my personal bias in favour of the government school system. I will put it on the record, Mr Speaker, that in the last 20 years of schooling in the Dunne household my children have attended the following schools: St Monica’s primary school, Merici College, Marist College, Miles Franklin primary school, Lyons primary school, Narrabundah College and Copland College. We can do numbers in the Liberal Party: four beats three every time. The Dunne household has made a significant contribution—

Mr Barr: Well, you would know that better than most, Mrs Dunne.

MRS DUNNE: I thought you would like that one. The Dunne household has made a significant contribution to and participated in government schooling, and no-one in this place can say that I have a bias against government schooling. I contribute to government schooling this day and every day by sending my children to government schools. If Ms Porter wants to make snide remarks, she had better get her facts straight. Most of what Mr Barr has said in here is reasonable. Some of it is a bit—

Mr Barr: Damned with faint praise again, Mrs Dunne.

MRS DUNNE: No, some of it is quite good. Mr Smyth made the point that you are investing \$45 million in a replacement west Belconnen school. But, as people in Charnwood, Kippax, McKellar and places like that said to me when we were talking about these issues last year, \$45 million would go a long way to addressing maintenance problems in schools in Belconnen. The people said they would like to see the money spent a different way. You could spend the money more effectively if you knew the reasons for doing it. The people of west Belconnen do not necessarily want you or require you to build a bright, shiny new school and knock down the one that was already there. They want you to do it when you are informed, when you know what they want and what they need.

I really loved it this week: suddenly the Labor Party has become so green. How many questions on notice did we have that mentioned the word “sustainability”? I think probably there would be six so far, and at least four of them were about global warming in some way. So what we actually have here today is a new reason—a new and previously unstated reason—why we need to spend \$90 million to make our schools greener. That has never been stated before; this is a new reason.

Let us look at the end of the minister’s amendment. It did not look at the real issues that we have talked about in this debate. After the government’s self-congratulatory pat on the back, at the end of the amendment is the “John Howard made me do it”

paragraph, which is what we always expect. It does not matter who moves the motion on that side, there is always the paragraph that says, “The nasty federal government has got in the way and caused problems for us.”

If Mr Barr wanted to redraft his amendment to insert some of his points into the original motion, we could support much of what he has said. But the amendment in its present form guts the original motion. You turn your back on a proposal to improve your public policy making. You turn your back on research to find out why you would spend money and where you would spend money so that you would have an evidence base for why you would spend money. That is what the Chief Minister likes: an evidence base. We cannot support this amendment in its present form, but if Mr Barr wants to come back and insert some of his points in the original motion and undertake to do the research asked for in the original motion, I would be happy to accept most of those.

I move the amendment circulated in my name to Mr Barr’s amendment:

Omit paragraphs (7) and (8), substitute:

- (7) notes the need to understand why there is a steady decline in the proportion of school-aged children attending government schools;
- (8) calls on the ACT Government to increase its understanding of the declining proportion of school-aged children attending government schools; and
- (9) calls on the ACT Government to ensure that the expenditure of the \$90 million capital upgrade is based on sound research and understanding of need.

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (5.18): I support Mrs Dunne’s amendment. As I said earlier, the real issue here is the decline in the proportion of school-age children attending government schools. It is a fallacious argument to suggest, “Well, the population of young people is declining and everybody is in the same boat.” That is not the case. We did one piece of research prior to this debate. Schools have asked that I not cite them, and I understand that. But one particular non-government school indicated to my office that they had a waiting list of over 100 children, the majority being younger children. It is a testament both to their success as an educational institution, and frankly, in all likelihood, to satisfaction amongst the public with various aspects of the government system.

I know with one of my own children I had to almost walk over hot coals—an expression I have used several times recently—to get her into St Clare’s, which is a fine school and growing in strength. The school is an excellent one but it was a challenge to get in there, and it is still a challenge to get into that school and many of the other non-government schools, because parents are saying that they want to get their kids into the non-government system because of a lack of satisfaction with what is on offer.

I came across somebody only the other evening at a function. I had not met this gentleman before but he said, “I am trying to get my kids into St Eddie’s.” He said he did not want any more of his children to go through the government school near

where he lives. He had one child there whom he was still trying to get into the non-government system. It was a decision based on desperation to get out of the government system. He was not motivated by any particular religious interest. He initially decided to go to the government school. It was not because of financial capacity, either, because he could not afford to go to a private school or he only moved across because he was paying more for the product. But he had had first-hand experience of the non-government system, was extremely unhappy and did not want to put the rest of his children through that process.

Whilst these assessments may not be scientific, they clearly send the message to me as an elected representative that there is a degree of dissatisfaction amongst many people in Canberra that is driving them into the non-government schools or to the private schools. I have no problem with that; if that is what people want to choose, that is terrific. But I think it is very wrong. I campaigned on this in 2004: there has to be a good public system available offering a level of education, a standard of facility and arrangements within the curricula, the disciplines that apply in those institutions and the commitments from their teaching staff that are directly competitive with the private sector and the non-government schools.

I do not accept that people who want to go down that road should expect to get second-rate performance or to be told that they really have to scrimp and save just to get out of it because they worry about the quality of their children's education. I heard Ms Gallagher when she was in the job talk about how we have the greatest system in on planet; I think Singapore was the only place that is supposed to be any better. If that is so much the case, it begs the question as to why the government is struggling to maintain its market share in the area of education provision.

Until the minister gets serious about this and starts doing the definitive research and approaches it in a transparent way, the concerns that are being expressed by Mrs Dunne, Mr Smyth and me in relation to the education system will continue to be raised because they are fundamental to any significant reforms or outlays that the territory government wants to embark on.

We have one critical point of the jigsaw here. We are being told what is happening but no-one is giving us persuasive evidence as to the cause. If you have got a business and you are losing customers, your solution is not to shut down the place, get rid of stock and throw people out. Education is a service where there is competition, choice and very high expectations, because most of us treat our children's education as one of the most important things we can commit to. It therefore rests on the government to convince us that they are doing the best possible job.

I am not saying that there is deliberate intent not to, but I think you have to take stock of yourselves and ask, "Why do we have this problem?" If you hide behind shifting demographics, tell me why they are queuing up in droves to get into the Catholic system and the private school system in Canberra. Something does not add up here, and I think it falls on the minister to get to the bottom of that and convince this Assembly that he has a logical basis for the policies that he has been presenting since he was made a minister.

MR BARR (Molonglo—Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation and Minister for Industrial Relations) (5.24): I want to respond to Mrs Dunne's amendment and to some of the issues that have been raised. I think we do need to look at the different sectors within the ACT education system. It is only fair to observe that enrolments are down across all sectors. I point to the increase in enrolments in secondary colleges, for example, as evidence of where the government seeks to invest and to provide some innovative education product. For example, I highlight the ANU secondary college as a new innovation that, from all the available evidence—that is, enrolments in the program, the interest that we are seeing from students who are moving out of private schools into government secondary colleges—where we provide some innovation, where we provide high-quality product, we are reversing that enrolment decline.

There is evidence that certainly the drift has slowed. The most recent census figures—that is, August—showed that the drift that was running at over one per cent a year from the public system into the private system has slowed to less than one per cent, which is the first sign in a long time of a slowing in the decline away from government schools. Of course, we expected that the opposition would, in relation to the points that were discussed on maintenance, seek to pick up on a particular example I gave in relation to Curtin. My understanding of that particular issue is that, whilst there have been several attempts to fix the hole in the roof that is letting the water in, maintenance budgets have not always stretched to provide a full solution to the problem. I understand it goes back over a considerable period, and may in fact even go back to the time when those opposite were in government. And it is not the only example, obviously, across our school system where maintenance budgets have not been sufficient. I think it goes right back to self-government. I think we are kidding ourselves if we think that, with the asset base that we inherited from the commonwealth in 1989 and the level of funding, governments of both persuasions over 17 years have had the capacity to maintain all of the infrastructure in this territory. They have not, and I do not think there is any doubt of that.

But, that said, we then put forward a proposal to increase the maintenance in our schools by 25 per cent—we put forward \$90 million to provide additional capital upgrades—and we are criticised for it because it is spending good money after bad. Mrs Dunne then goes forward and says, “You should not build new schools. You should not spend \$45 million on a state-of-the-art school in west Belconnen because you could spend that money on little upgrades around all the other schools.” She tells us that in her consultations parents from other schools have asked, “Well what about us? We are missing out. Why is the government spending \$45 million on one school and not spreading the money around?”

Well, we are building a new school and we are putting in \$90 million—we are doubling the \$45 million—to address just those issues. I have written to every school board, school P&C and school principal seeking ideas for projects that they would like funded from that capital upgrade money. Because we have a school-based management system, school boards will bring forward proposals. They do that as part of the regular capital works program. That is about \$11.5 million a year. We are supplementing that program—that will be about \$45 million over the next four years—with the additional \$90 million to address these issues.

Certainly the letters I have been receiving back have some fantastic proposals for how we can improve the quality of our schools, and that is what the government is going to do. I can predict now that those opposite will continue to oppose every project. They will say, "It is terrible; the government should not be spending money." I certainly know that we on this side of the house believe that these investments are important and that a huge amount of money is required to bring some of the schools that were built on the cheap by the commonwealth in the sixties and seventies up to an acceptable standard in the 21st century. Not only do we need to improve the school infrastructure; we also need to provide additional resources for information technology. That is clearly the case and that is why the government is seeking to make this investment. I do acknowledge that Mrs Dunne said that she would agree with most of what I have put forward here.

Mr Mulcahy: Do you think computers will solve your problems?

MR BARR: I do not suggest that computers in isolation, Mr Mulcahy, will solve the problems, but I do believe that we have the possibility in our city-state to ensure that every school in this territory has high-quality broadband access. That is something that we can do in the ACT that will be more of a challenge for the Western Australian education minister or the Queensland minister or the New South Wales minister—to be able to have optical fibre broadband with the sort of bandwidth that we will need in the next decade and to have that available in the ACT. That is something that we will seek to do. That is why we are investing this money. That is why we have invested money in Smartport. That is why we have invested money in the latest technology. Why should students in the government system miss out? Those opposite appear to be arguing that that investment is good money after bad; that we should not be making it. You need only ask the school communities. It is interesting that in question time—

Mrs Dunne: Ask the Giralang community. They got their money from the feds. Ask the Giralang community. Didn't they get their money from the feds because you weren't prepared to do it?

MR BARR: It is interesting, isn't it, that Mrs Dunne is saying that money invested by the commonwealth government in technology in schools is a good investment, but if the ACT government do it we do not know why we are doing it and it is good money after bad. Is that really what you are saying? Is it your position that only the commonwealth government knows how to invest money in schools? It certainly does; in the last decade the commonwealth government has invested a considerable amount of money in private schools. As I indicated in question time, I welcome all the commonwealth investment in public schools. I just wish there was more of it. It would be terrific if there were more commonwealth money invested in our schools.

I am sure those opposite would join with me in welcoming increased commonwealth investment in ACT government schools. You would have no qualms at all about doing that, would you? Absolutely none, Mr Seselja, would you? No problems at all. Will we come around with the joint media release then that the Assembly, everyone, calls on the commonwealth government to invest more money in ACT government schools? I welcome the support of the opposition. I think that is something that we should do. We will go around to each of your offices and see if you are prepared to

sign on to call on the commonwealth government to invest more money in ACT public education. I will look forward to your responses to that.

Mr Seselja: How about you do your job?

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mr Seselja! And stop provoking them, please, minister. Direct your comments through the chair.

MR BARR: Yes, Mr Speaker. I acknowledge your wise counsel.

On the subject of investment in public education, though, it is worth while noting that this additional money will allow a new hall to be built at Chapman primary, something that Chapman primary has been after for quite some time. There is a new gymnasium at Melrose high. There is a series of major investments: \$2.5 million for an upgrade of Campbell high school.

Mrs Dunne has identified that a particular area of concern is around high schools. It is important that we invest in improving the infrastructure in our high schools. We are looking at improving the science facilities at Lyneham high. I went back to my old school, Lyneham. We were taken on a tour of the science labs, and it was a little bit of a time tunnel for me. They were showing signs of 17 years of wear and tear, but they were the same facilities that were in operation when I was a student at Lyneham high in the late eighties, so I was very pleased.

MR SPEAKER: We are talking to Mrs Dunne's amendment, you know.

MR BARR: We are, of course, Mr Speaker.

Improving the quality of our public education system is very important in terms of addressing the decline in enrolments in our public schools, and it is important that the government continue this investment package. I know that those opposite will oppose it and will continue to oppose it all the way through. Nonetheless, the government will not be deterred from its major investment in public education—and it is significant. It means new schools, it means new facilities and it means \$20 million over four years for information technology. I cannot stress enough the importance of that investment in ensuring that students in ACT government schools have access to the highest quality infrastructure.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (5.34): Mr Speaker, this debate is really a sad tragedy of a government—

Mr Barr: Of Shakespearean proportions, is it, Mrs Dunne?

MRS DUNNE: Of Shakespearean proportions? No, it is a pathetic little tragedy, really, of a government—a minister and his colleagues—which does not want to look at the issue. The issue is a simple one. It is one of doing the research to find out why—apart from the demographics, which we all acknowledge—people are choosing non-government schools over government schools. All we have had of Mr Barr's goings on before was pretty much a set piece thing. He had prepared, or had prepared

for him by the department, a set piece speech and he came in and gave it almost as if he had not read the motion that was originally moved.

The motion that was originally moved and my amendment to Mr Barr's amendment, which will certainly get up, are there so that we as a community can understand what is happening in our schooling system. Every person in this town is interested in education because they have just finished themselves, they have children in the system or they have grandchildren in the system, and they want it to be the best. We have had all of the fallacious arguments that the Labor Party likes to throw up so that it can pull them down. There is always the fallacious argument that the opposition does not want to spend the money. It is not that we do not want to spend the money. It is that we want to spend it wisely and this minister does not know whether he is spending it wisely. If he does not know whether he is spending it wisely, he may be sending good money after bad.

Mr Barr has said that the \$90 million of capital injection is to address the drift to the non-government school system. I do not know whether, by building a new assembly hall at Chapman primary school, the children in Weston Creek are going to be more likely to attend a government school over a non-government school, and neither does this minister. He does not know whether spending the money at Chapman primary school is a good investment or not. Ms Porter is sitting there saying, "What about all the schools in my electorate?" I do not know and she does not know whether what they propose to spend the money on will actually address the problem. That is why I say they run the risk of putting good money after bad. We do not say, "Do not spend the money." We say, "Inform yourself first."

The motion moved by me was a simple motion that this minister could have embraced—he might have won some kudos in the community for doing so—by actually going out and understanding how the community is operating, why people are choosing non-government schools and why there are waiting lists at non-government schools and there are other schools which are quite empty. Some of those reasons are important and imponderable. This minister gave some reasons that he had thought and some of them would not cost very much money to address. Some of it is about infrastructure. We have admitted that the infrastructure has been run down. Some of it needs a complete refurbishment. Some of it needs maintenance.

What we have here is the minister saying that he is going to invest some of that \$90 million to address the drift to non-government schools on fixing a roof. That is maintenance money. That is one example. Another example is that he is going to build car parks at Campbell high school so that people can drive to school. He is environmentally concerned about the fabric of the infrastructure and the thermal mass at Harrison school and the west Belconnen school, but at the same time the people of the inner north will have to drive to school and he will build more car parks so that they can.

Is that a good investment? Are car parks at Campbell high school a means of stemming the drift to non-government schools? By building car parks at Campbell high school, will people go to Campbell high school rather than Daramalan? He does not know. I do not know. No one in this room knows. But he is prepared to spend money without the evidence. Mr Mulcahy has basically said it all. We have got a

product in the market which is not attracting the share that we would expect of the market.

Government members interjecting—

MRS DUNNE: Mr Gentleman interjected, “We are investing.” We have not worked out whether we should be investing in plant, remachining or whatever is required to make that product better. It might be packaging. We do not know, because this minister will not do a survey. This minister said that people go to non-government schools for a whole lot of reasons. They might want a religious education. Government schools are not going to provide a religious education, fair enough, but they might like uniforms.

We know this minister’s view about uniforms because he has boasted about it, but some parents do choose to send their children to a non-government school because they like a uniform. Some children like a uniform. This minister obviously did not when he went to school. But we do not know. If the answer for a substantial number of people is that they want a uniform for their children, perhaps spending \$90 million on infrastructure is not the answer. We do not know the answer and his minister does not know it.

The minister has moved an amendment today that cannot be supported because it guts the original intent of the motion. It says things which, for the most part, are unexceptionable, but they should have been added to the original motion. That may have given it a bipartisan flavour. The other reason that Mr Barr’s amendment cannot be supported is a serious educational reason. This minister has today lost his apostrophe licence. It has been removed and it will not be given back until he shows that he can use it properly.

Question put:

That **Mrs Dunne’s** amendment to **Mr Barr’s** proposed amendment 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		Ms Gallagher	Ms Porter
Mr Seselja		Mr Gentleman	Mr Stanhope

Question so resolved in the negative.

Amendment agreed to.

Question put:

That **Mr Barr’s** amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 8

Noes 6

Mr Barr	Mr Hargreaves	Mrs Burke	Mr Smyth
Mr Berry	Ms MacDonald	Mrs Dunne	Mr Stefaniak
Ms Gallagher	Ms Porter	Mr Mulcahy	
Mr Gentleman	Mr Stanhope	Mr Seselja	

Question so resolved in the affirmative.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Adjournment

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

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

TRAHCS

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (5.47): Last evening I had the honour to present 125 graduates with certificates at the annual TRAHCS graduation ceremony at the Southern Cross Club. As some in this place may know, back in the early 1990s I was one of a group of people in the community sector who saw the need to establish a community-based registered training organisation specialising in the provision of nationally accredited training for the provision human services in the ACT. That organisation was formed in 1994 and is known as TRAHCS, Training for Health and Community Services.

From the formation of TRAHCS until my election to the Assembly I held the position of chair of TRAHCS and I have attended many similar graduation ceremonies in that capacity and since in my elected capacity. It was indeed a great honour for me to be invited to do so as the chair of the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People and I wish to thank the TRAHCS board of governance for that opportunity.

TRAHCS has come a very long way since those early days when the first executive officer, Beth Brun skill, had her office in the corridor of a former classroom of the old North Curtin primary school, sharing with me the space that was home to Volunteering ACT at the time. My office was the former cloakroom. Since its inception, many hundreds of students have graduated from courses conducted by TRAHCS and TRAHCS is now recognised as a leader in its field, having received many industry awards and having its graduates recognised as outstanding practitioners in their chosen fields.

But organisations such as TRAHCS do not survive unless they continue to be relevant and serve the changing needs of the industry and TRAHCS continues to work with

industry to identify needs and then develop innovative courses and flexible delivery methods to fill those needs. TRAHCS conducts courses in family day care, aged care, disability services, workplace training and assessment, health services, drug and alcohol services, community meditation and youth work, to mention only some. This year TRAHCS has increased the scope of its courses even further to include certificate III and IV in telephone counselling, certificate IV in lifestyle and leisure, certificate IV in business and diploma of business.

I pay tribute to Sharon Carter Figueiredo and her outstanding team of trainers and the committed TRAHCS board of governance for their work as they continue to develop and deliver these innovative programs and also for the supportive role they have played in assisting the graduates in reaching such significant milestones in their careers.

Whilst it is important to recognise the wonderful contribution of the TRAHCS team, the reason for last night's celebration was to celebrate the achievements of those graduating. Those graduating would not necessarily have had the luxury of being able to spend the majority of their time learning at an institution like a university or a CIT. They would have been working full time in paid positions while also studying at the same time, in many cases filling roles as family carers. English is not the first language of all those graduating and for some their previous experience of formal learning had been many years ago and perhaps very limited.

I would also like to thank the family members who assisted the graduates during their studies. As we all know, trying to balance a busy life of work and family responsibilities, overlaid by study, is a big ask and having the support of one's family does ease the burden just a little.

Mr Speaker, the largest growing sector of our work force is that of personal care and, with our ageing population, the need for such services will only increase. It is estimated that one in every three people over the age of 65 will receive a personal service, and for those over 75 the number is two out of three. It is only through innovative work of organisations such as TRAHCS that we will have the trained staff necessary to provide these services into the future and all of us in this place certainly have a vested interest in ensuring such staff are available to us.

Korea Day celebrations

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (5.51): Mr Speaker, I want to pay tribute to our local Korean community, which had the annual Korea Day celebrations in Glebe Park on Saturday a week ago. Quite a few people also came up from Sydney. Mr Hargreaves attended, as did Senator Humphries, Mr Smyth and I. I think that was probably it from the local Assembly, but it was a very good ceremony and a very good day was had by all.

Australia and Korea have friendly relations which go back, effectively, to the Korean war, when 77 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force was the first allied unit to encounter the invading North Koreans. Having been in Seoul last year for the wedding of my stepdaughter and son-in-law—my son-in-law, Hwan Saung Lee, is actually Korean—I had the pleasure of going through a number of places, including

their war memorial, and there is a wonderful section there relating to the 16 allied countries which formed part of the United Nations forces that went to the aid of South Korea. The Australian commitment was very significant. After the United States, followed by the British, it was probably the third largest and most effective contribution made there. Since then we have been allies and trading partners. South Korea is one of the Asian tigers and its people are very friendly. Not many people there speak English, but you can make yourself understood.

An excellent ceremony and festivity was conducted by the local Korean community. I now have, through family connections, an even more important reason to be associated with the community and in that regard it was a pleasure for me to turn up. My congratulations go to all the members of the Korean community in Canberra for putting on the festival. It was certainly enjoyed by all who attended.

Environment—climate change

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (5.53): Mr Speaker, over the past week Kenya has been hosting the second meeting of parties to the Kyoto protocol on climate change. As Australia has not yet ratified the protocol, it is in the embarrassing position of being there only as an observer. It is shameful that Australia is only an observer at the UN conference, but more devastating are the real costs of not signing the Kyoto protocol.

The support of the people of the ACT for combating climate change was evidenced by the fact that 3,000 people turned out for the walk against warming held last week. I would also like to commend the ACT government on its ongoing commitment to tackling climate change and I will be working hard to ensure that it continues to uphold that track record. However, until Australia as a nation acknowledges the all-encompassing nature of the threat, our response will fall short.

Two reports issued in the last few weeks have made climate change a hot topic round the world. The first of these was the UN report which showed that greenhouse gas emissions of the major industrialised countries continue to increase and the second was a study by an adviser to the UK government, Sir Nicholas Stern, which found that climate change is the greatest market failure the world has ever seen.

Mr Mulcahy: Have you read that one?

MR GENTLEMAN: The central message from the report is a simple one: it will cost far less to cut emissions now than to adapt to the consequences later. The review calculated that the dangers of climate change would be equivalent to at least 20 per cent of GDP each year. I am sure that Mr Mulcahy is interested in that. By contrast, the cost of action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the worst impact of climate change can be limited to around one per cent of global GDP every year, just one per cent. The review found that all countries will be affected by climate change, but the poorest countries will suffer the earliest and most severely. Therefore, it is essential that climate change be fully integrated into development policy and there is a greater obligation for the wealthier countries to cut back on CO₂ emissions.

Mr Mulcahy: Do you want to get those trucks off the road?

MR GENTLEMAN: Some of them are using good greenhouse gas emission fuels. There is a greater obligation for wealthy countries to cut back on those emissions. The review outlined three main national and international policy changes in order to move to a low carbon global economy. The first is to adopt a system of carbon pricing through taxation, emissions trading or regulation so that people are confronted with the full social costs of their actions. Under the trading system, industrial polluters could buy and sell emission quotas. Carbon trading is justified in the end as economies could continue to grow strongly.

If there is no action to control emissions, the damage would amount to \$85 per tonne of CO₂. However, under carbon trading, emissions could be cut to \$25 per tonne. The economic advantages of that are very attractive, given the prediction that markets for low carbon energy products are likely to be worth at least \$500 billion per year by 2050.

The second policy challenge is in regard to technological development which produces low carbon and high efficiency products. The report suggests that energy research and development should be at least doubled and support for the development of low carbon technologies should increase up to fivefold. The third is centred on the education of individuals and governments on what contribution they can make to climate change. Further, the report highlights that detrimental effects of deforestation, which contributes more to global emissions each year than the transport sector.

Howard must ratify Kyoto and claim a seat at the table in Nairobi where the 165 countries that have ratified Kyoto are making practical reforms to the economic mechanisms which will drive reductions in emission for many years. It is widely accepted that emissions trading will help Australia's economy to meet the challenge of climate change and allow Australia to participate in a booming international clean energy market which is worth \$US30 billion in 2006. Howard's lack of action in the last 10 years on climate change has meant that Australia's greenhouse emissions rose from 21.5 per cent between 1990 and 2004 and Australia still has the highest per capita greenhouse emissions in the world.

In conclusion, climate change can no longer be regarded as an unfounded doomsday exaggeration by scientists. It is a serious global threat and it demands an urgent global response. Even if we act now, climate change will still have profound implications for virtually all aspects of human wellbeing, including jobs, health, food, resources and peace within and among nations.

Environment—climate change Australian War Memorial

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (5.58): Mr Gentleman's comments cannot go unnoted. I think that it has been quite interesting to see the sudden greening of the Stanhope Labor government over this last week. I have been thinking of the struggles that I had as the chairman of the planning and environment committee to get up in this place an inquiry into renewable energy. The words of the then minister for energy, the now retired Mr Quinlan, were that it was a naff motion and he would not take any proposals that came forward to the energy ministers conference because he could not

be bothered. So we have actually had a change from things being criticised and described as being naff to having a born again greenie in the form of Mr Gentleman on the back bench.

The important thing today is that Saturday was Armistice Day and the 88th anniversary of the ending of the First World War. I am speaking today because one of the things that I contemplated on Saturday at the war memorial was what it is about Armistice Day, and Anzac Day even more so, that is so attractive to Australians that people never tire of going year after year to the war memorial to mark these important days.

When I got up on Saturday morning my young son said that he did want to go to the war memorial with me, that that was something that he looked forward to, and he sat fairly still for the duration of a very moving ceremony. I do not know why it is that he wants to participate in the ritual of going to the war memorial on these occasions, stand around and wait for the memorial to open, go and visit some of the displays and really take part in that sort of commemoration.

I had two moving experiences on that day. One was the splendid memorial address given by the Hon Brendan Nelson, the Minister for Defence. I was quite struck by the stirring exposition that he gave on the Australian character, as reflected in the exploits of Australians at war, particularly in the First World War, and also by his thoughtful reflections on the values that make us a nation. For the past four or five years there has been debate in Australia about values and it always sounds slightly corny and is always slightly cringe-making. I tend to shy away from discussions about values for those reasons. But it seemed that on a day like Armistice Day you could actually have that discussion in a way where people really paid attention to it because it was reflecting upon our history in a way that we had never been able to have in the context of an education debate.

The other moving experience was that when we went into the memorial we decided, seeing it was the second-last day of the exhibition, that we would go down to the Australians in France memorial. My son and I walked through and, as we were standing reading a display, an elderly couple came up and stood beside us. There was a uniform on display there and the elderly gentleman looked at it and said, "Yes, this is it." His wife turned to me and said, "This is my husband's father's uniform." So we had an elderly gentleman and his wife, a middle-aged lady, and her young son, three generations, linked by this uniform and that had an impact on my young son and me. It was quite emotional and it was a privilege for me to be able to say to these people, "Would you like me to take your photograph in front of this heirloom, this relic?" One of the things that Ms Porter talked about today was about preserving our past.

Also, the enthusiasm of the memorial staff showed through when they realised that this gentleman was there and appreciated his connection to the collection and to the exhibition. I think it is an element of what is important about Australians and it is a reflection of our history, which we do not reflect upon enough because we do not reflect on history at all. I think that what our children learn from these occasions is important and there should be more of that learning both in the home and in the schools.

**Fraser electorate—Liberal Party candidate
WorkChoices legislation**

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (6.03): Mr Speaker, I would like to make a brief statement to highlight and applaud the recent announcement made by the ACT Liberal Party that Troy Williams will be their candidate for the seat of Fraser in the 2007 federal election. Mr Williams brings with his nomination an impressive and positive track record in the community and in business. He is currently the executive director of the Australian Institute of Building and has held a host of chief executive and senior management positions across a range of organisations.

Furthermore, Mr Williams is in the Australian Army Reserve and has been very involved in a wide range of community-focused activities, such as Apex and Neighbourhood Watch. Politically, he is deeply concerned about issues that affect families and businesses in the federal electorate of Fraser, including the quality of education provision, the conditions of employment for people in work and the ongoing stewardship of the environment, a topic of great discussion today.

The selection of Mr Williams as the Liberal candidate for the federal seat of Fraser is also a reflection of the high calibre of candidates that the Liberal Party is now attracting in the ACT. He was voted ahead of two other very strong and qualified candidates, one a local teacher and Australian medallist at the Commonwealth Games, and the other a certified practising accountant who runs her own business. This only reinforces the real world experience and broad range of individual backgrounds that the Liberal Party attracts. Unlike the Labor Party, the Liberal Party draws from people who have varied and in-depth experience, which in turn allows them to offer fresh perspectives on policy issues and keeps Liberal Party policies in tune with what the community wants.

Mr Williams is in the gallery and I acknowledge he is here today. Mr Williams's candidacy will offer the constituents of Fraser a genuine alternative to the current type of representation that they experience, that of a virtual part-time member who arguably spends more time fulfilling his party affiliated duties and absenting himself from the electorate rather than talking to the people of Fraser, gauging their concerns on issues and then assertively representing their interests in parliament. I know that to be an issue that many on the opposite side of the Assembly share with me in terms of his apparent lack of interest in sticking about Canberra and dealing with the mundane matters that he might have to deal with as a federal member. I know from my dealings with Mr Williams that he is excited about the prospect of challenging the incumbent in Fraser. Given the strength of the federal coalition and their impressive track record over the last 10 years in government, I am confident that he will perform admirably in what many view as a dead red seat.

Mr Speaker, I am sure you did not take much joy out of it but, in light of the High Court's affirmation yesterday of the federal government's WorkChoices legislation, I wish to comment briefly, as I have previously, on the wastefulness of the ACT government in participating in the states' action, given that under the constitution the new laws would apply in the ACT regardless. The sum of \$95,000 was absolutely wasted on a futile exercise.

The court's affirmation of the new legislation only provides further indication of the difficulty that Labor will have in convincing the people of Australia that it is the right party to lead Australia in these trying times. We have seen the lowest levels of unemployment in our history. We have seen reductions in industrial action, the likes of which we have not known for decades. We have seen the lowest levels of inflation achieved, in contrast to the era of the Keating government. Basically, we have seen a situation where our economy is growing in leaps and bounds.

All of this, of course, has happened in the 10 years of the Howard government and all of it has happened in a period when we were told, "There will be gloom and doom. As soon as you bring in the WorkChoices legislation, we will all be out of work, there will be industrial chaos, and we will look like some broken down Latin-American dictatorship." That has not happened.

Labor is now in a desperate position. They have lost the court case. It was a waste of taxpayers' money in the first place. That \$95,000 could have been used to fix a few of the roads round this town. Of course, they have now got to try to convince the people of Australia that they really are in trouble. Mr Gentleman told us that the barbecues were going to go. We are still having them at my place. All these things that we were told would go wrong have not gone wrong.

Finally on that issue, I have to say that there are rules applying to candidates in terms of signage and where they should be applied. Apparently the union movement is exempt. It is violently and blatantly breaching the laws in Canberra related to the postage of the "your rights at work" signs and every complaint has been ignored by this territory government.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.09 pm.