



Debates

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Wednesday 2 April, 2008

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Wednesday 2 April, 2008

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.

Housing—affordability

MR SPEAKER: Members, this morning Mrs Burke lodged an MPI concerning housing affordability. Standing order 130 states:

That a matter on the notice paper must not be anticipated by a matter of public importance, an amendment or other less effective form of proceedings.

Private members business notice No 5 listed on today's notice paper lodged by Mr Seselja also concerns housing affordability in accordance with standing order 111. Mr Seselja wrote to the Clerk this morning and withdrew his notice. Accordingly, I have ruled that the MPI submitted by Mrs Burke is in order.

Rates (Fire and Emergency Services Levy Repeal) Amendment Bill 2008

Mr Mulcahy, pursuant to notice, presented the bill and its explanatory statement.

Title read by Clerk.

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (10.33): I move:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

MR MULCAHY: It gives me great pleasure to speak in favour of this bill and give the Assembly yet another opportunity to alleviate the tax burden on Canberra families. The government have previously shown their unwillingness to reduce taxes, but they now have another opportunity to amend their previous position. Yes, Mr Speaker, they now have another opportunity to provide some much needed tax relief to the people of Canberra.

In case there is any doubt, I hasten to note that tax reform and the provision of efficient and effective government services are not mutually exclusive goals. Providing government services should not require the rapid increases in taxation that we have seen in the ACT. Indeed we saw in the second appropriation bill that the government has been awash with more money than they have really known what to do with, and their provisions of additional services have been an addendum to their original budget plans. The fact that the second appropriation was introduced so soon after the original budget shows us that much of this spending was essentially an

afterthought. The government is awash with money, but it remains ravenous in its appetite for the wealth of others.

The financial reports for the ACT show us that there is ample scope for reducing the tax burden in the ACT. Unfortunately, I suspect that spending promises for the ACT election may derail any possibility of serious tax reform, but I hope that is not the case. Indeed, I think there are a lot of people who would hate to see the ACT election present the sickening display of pork-barrelling that we witnessed in the lead-up to the federal election last year.

In speaking on the bill that I introduced to repeal the utilities tax, I noted the stark contrast between the attitude of the Labor Party at a federal level with their ACT colleagues. In the federal sphere the Labor Party is making some considerable effort to reduce the size of government, but also to reduce the tax burden on Australian families. We will probably not know the extent of their plans until the next federal budget. However, if they are willing to act on the tough talk that they have made about their intentions to cut the size of government, and I hope that they are, then we may see some substantial financial reform occurring at the federal level. The ACT government could hardly be further away from this philosophy. Rather than looking for areas of reduction in government spending, they are continuing to tax and spend with complete impunity, with ACT residents paying for their egregious waste.

The government has now been in office for almost two full terms and has expanded substantially in size in that time. If we go to the area, for instance, of GST, the government has entirely squandered the opportunity afforded to them by the introduction of the GST. Rather than taking this as an opportunity to reduce the tax burden on ACT residents, which was the intent of that tax reform, they made only minimal repeals and then followed them up by substantially increasing existing taxes and charges and even introducing new ones. Even the reforms they are repealing have been dragged out over an extraordinary period of time, despite the moneys coming in properly from the commonwealth.

This action has been entirely against the spirit of the GST agreement, which was designed to allow the states an opportunity to reform their tax systems and to provide them with a guarantee of growth income to enable that to occur. Those who thought that the GST would engender serious tax reform at the state level did not count on the unshakable big government mentality of the ACT government.

I am glad to see that at the federal level the shadow Treasurer, Malcolm Turnbull, has announced that a full review of federal, state and territory taxation systems with a view to reducing the burden, complications and waste of taxation in Australia, is one of his objectives. There is certainly plenty of scope for such an inquiry as there are a great many problems with the tax system, especially within the ACT. I certainly hope that the ACT government will take heed of this inquiry and will seriously look at reducing the burden of taxation in the ACT. This bill presents an opportunity, as, of course, will be their forthcoming budget. However, their previous actions have failed to give me any confidence that they have an interest in the long-term action to reform our tax system. With an election coming up late this year, just about any kind of policy announcement is possible, and I would not be surprised to see the government

toss the ACT taxpayer a bone, or, rather, allow them to keep some of their own bones in this year's budget.

Whether or not we can look forward to any reduction in taxes, it is fairly clear that this government has a strong and philosophical commitment to big government that will permeate its long-term decisions on taxation and spending. The government is certainly in a position to provide substantial tax reform if they were so inclined. As I have said, they are currently awash with money, and between the enormous GST revenues that are coming in from the commonwealth and the government's own increases in taxation, they are receiving more revenue than ever before.

In the December quarter financial report, we saw that the trend of an intentional underestimation of tax revenues has continued with the actual tax take showing the excesses of the current tax regime in the ACT. This report revealed another \$57 million in allegedly unanticipated tax revenue this financial year, including \$23.1 million in commercial conveyance revenue, \$23.4 million in residential conveyance revenue and \$9.5 million in stamp duty on shares and securities.

Since I was elected to this Assembly almost four years ago, we have not got it right yet in terms of forecasting for revenue in this territory, and the errors have been significant, not small. There can no longer be any doubt this seems to be an intentional policy on either the part of the ACT government or the Treasury to try and maintain the enormous levels of taxation in the ACT and hope that they can be passed by an unsuspecting public. The fact is that each quarterly report has shown a higher and higher level of allegedly unanticipated tax revenue, with the Treasury being unwilling to adjust its estimation methodology to reflect the consistent underestimation of revenue. Clearly, the government's estimations of their own future revenues are heavily biased and in need of methodological reform.

For years the people of the ACT have been told that the tax increase proposed by the government was a necessary measure to fund its services. This nonsense, however, has now been utterly discredited by the government's own financial reports. I am not interested in what the average spending is in Tasmania or South Australia; what I am interested in and what the people of Canberra are interested in is reasonable tax levels to fund an appropriate level of services, not a situation justifying high tax by saying this is what they do in other states.

Mr Corbell: You are not interested in the facts.

MR MULCAHY: The facts are very evident, Mr Speaker. If Mr Corbell read the more detailed reports of the Grants Commission's analysis on the comparative situation of state finances, he would understand that they put in there a significant qualifier in terms of comparing things on a state-by-state basis, and they also highlight the ACT as being unique because of its role in provision of municipal services. They are the facts, and not the sanitised ones.

The people of the ACT have borne the burden of these increases in taxation to allow the government to build a war chest of revenue ready for the next election. Cynical as it is, I am quite sure that is what the plan is. The December quarter report shows a

revised forward estimate of \$196 million in surplus for this financial year, and for the first time ever the estimate of total taxation revenue for this financial year has now exceeded \$1 billion. This is a huge increase in taxation since the Stanhope government came to power.

If we go back and look at the 2001-02 financial year when the Stanhope government first took office, we see that the total tax burden in the ACT, including all regulatory fees and fines, was \$631 million. What this means is there has been an increase in taxation of 58.5 per cent in the time that the government has been in office. This is an increase of almost 8 per cent per annum, well ahead of growth in the economy and also well ahead of growth in wages and a burden, of course, for those famous working families that the ACT government and their federal colleagues so often trot out.

The fire and emergency services levy was introduced in the 2006-07 budget. In that budget, the government noted, and I quote:

With the exception of the Northern Territory, all other jurisdictions impose a fire levy as the primary source of funding for fire services.

What they did not say, of course, was that the revenue raised by the fire and emergency services levy goes straight into general revenue; it is not specifically earmarked for fire services. The fire and emergency services levy was an unnecessary imposition on taxpayers, which was justified by the government on the basis of its shoddy revenue estimates, figures which have now been shown to have been drastically underestimated.

The levy is imposed on all rateable properties in the ACT, adding to the already substantial costs of rates bills borne by property owners. Of course, these costs are also passed onto renters so that they, too, suffer from the imposition of the levy. For residential properties, the level is set at \$84 per annum with a 50 per cent rebate for pensioners eligible for rates rebates. For commercial properties, the levy is determined by using the unimproved value of land.

Mr Speaker, as with my proposal to repeal the utilities tax, the reform I am proposing is also a modest tax reform in terms of revenue impact. The fire and emergency services levy is forecast to generate \$21.683 million in revenue in this financial year, and this amount is slightly over 10 per cent of the budget surplus that the government is forecast to achieve with its continual increases in taxes and charges over the last few years. Even if the government were to repeal both this levy and the utilities tax, this would still be a modest tax reform, amounting to a loss of revenue of \$32.218 million, less than 20 per cent of the projected surplus for the year. While modest, such a reform would at least be some small start in reining in the ravenous tax regime of the ACT government.

It is pertinent to note that these taxes have been imposed by the government on the basis that they were allegedly needed to balance its budget. If this were really the case, then the government should now be looking to repeal its tax increases in line with its enormous war chest of revenue, and, with credit to the government, they can now boast the strongest balance sheet of any jurisdiction in the country. But that ought to also bring with it benefits to the people of Canberra by way of reductions in tax.

I note that the Treasurer has given some glimmer of hope to ACT residents that tax reform may finally be on the government's radar. After the release of the December quarter financial report, the Chief Minister told the *Canberra Times* that he may wind back some of the tax increases imposed by his government and that there was capacity to do so within the budget. He was quoted as saying that it is an option that we can realistically explore.

When the Treasurer has finished exploring, I would invite him to support this bill and take his first steps towards restoring sanity in the ACT tax system and relieving some of the massive burden that has been imposed by this government. Whilst this bill would provide some much needed relief to ACT families, it is important to note that this bill would not relieve ACT residents of the tax increases imposed on them in the 2006-07 budget. Nor, of course, would it make up for the massive 58.5 per cent increase in taxation that has occurred since the Stanhope government came to power. Instead, it would repeal only a small part of the tax increases introduced in the 2006-07 budget.

In light of the government's failure to address this out-of-control tax system and the government's failure to take up this matter, it has again fallen to me to put a bill to the Assembly on this matter. I can only hope that the territory government and the Liberal opposition will show their support and vote to allow the people of the ACT some much needed tax relief.

This latest measure that I have brought in is one that will be welcomed by all households in this territory; it will be welcomed by the property sector, who have also expressed their dismay at this fire and emergency services levy and the impost it has represented on their members. Of course, it will be of benefit to the tenants who ultimately are wearing these charges as a result of their tenancy arrangements and their requirement to meet all the additional costs that are going to be passed on to property owners.

We have a situation in the ACT where we have never been in a better financial position to share the wealth of our community. The people of Canberra, whilst they have expectations of a high level in terms of the provision of services, also understand that there is a demand and need to conduct government with efficiency and with prudent financial management.

Earlier this morning I was talking about another area which has slipped under the radar with substantial losses in one of our leading tertiary institutions here in Canberra. We have seen earlier the waste that occurred with Rhodium. What the people of Canberra are looking for, in my view, is efficient, well-managed government where modest and reasonable levels of taxation can be maintained. It is not the job of government to accumulate wealth. The government is there to provide services and to raise taxes at a level appropriate to meet the demands from the community. The bill I am presenting here today presents an opportunity for the government to start winding back some of those charges and start sharing some of this massive surplus that has been created with the people who have paid for it.

At the end of the day, these moneys are the people's money; they are not the government's money. They are the funds provided by the people, many of whom are struggling to pay their way. We have got a raft of interest rate increases in Canberra. People are seeing those charges go up; credit card debt is high; there is a growth in the number of foreclosures on homes. Whilst we have prospered and performed in a much healthier fashion than other parts of Australia, it is very evident, if you look at some of the indicators, that there are many households now that are quite stretched financially. This would be an opportunity where we can extend some relief to those households. It also, of course, is another consideration for those who are investing in property.

This is an area, of course, where the government has a responsibility to try to encourage at least a competitive environment for the investment in the provision of housing for our community from the private sector. Mr Speaker, I conclude with those remarks and I commend this bill to the Assembly.

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

Schools—closures

MR SESELJA (Molonglo—Leader of the Opposition) (10.49): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes:

(a) that the *Towards 2020* program has failed to have an impact on the drift of students away from the ACT Government system; and

(b) the extensive disruption to local communities and the education system by the *Towards 2020* program;

(2) calls on the ACT Government to join the Canberra Liberals and school communities in supporting:

(a) the cancellation of school closures and restructures planned for December 2008 other than those associated with the opening of a new school in West Belconnen in 2009;

(b) the establishment of a school reinstatement fund to help re-open schools closed by the Stanhope Government in 2006 and 2007;

(c) a firm commitment to no further school closures until 2013; and

(d) the establishment of a Community Committee on the Future Direction of ACT Schools; and

(3) calls on the Minister for Education and Training to table all documents associated with the decisions to close schools made in 2006 including the relevant sections of the Functional Review of the ACT Budget.

It is a pleasure to move this motion on the *Towards 2020* program and to mention some of the alternative ideas that have been floating around. The first part of my motion deals with the impact of the drift of students away from the ACT government system and the extensive disruption to local communities in the education system caused by the *Towards 2020* program. It is worth going into some of the figures in relation to the drift.

The school census as at 20 February 2008 showed that between 2007 and 2008 the number of students in government schools declined by 310. That is a drop of 0.8 per cent. This compares with the overall 0.2 per cent increase in students from 2007, comprising 123 students overall, and it begs the question: what are the enrolment targets in relation to 2020?

From 2004 to 2008 government school numbers decreased by 1,564 students, or 3.9 per cent. This compares with an overall decline in student numbers of only 0.5 per cent from 2004 to 2008, or 347 students. In non-government schools there has been an increase of 1.7 per cent, or 433 students. That is just in the last year, between 2007 and 2008. This figure absorbs all the loss from the government sector and picks up extra demand.

It is clear that *Towards 2020* is being judged by parents and families, who are voting with their feet. This is an unfortunate outcome. It is unfortunate that the promise of the minister and the *Towards 2020* program to prevent the drift from the government sector to the non-government sector that has been going on for a number of years is not happening. We are seeing a continual drift to the non-government sector and we need to ask: why are we seeing this drift? Why are people in the ACT choosing to pay for something that they could otherwise get for free?

I am a great supporter of both sectors, the government sector and the non-government sector. Unlike the Labor Party, we believe that the non-government sector deserves to be supported and that it actually does contribute a great deal to the community. But I do not want to see and I do not think that those involved with the non-government sector would want to see a situation where the government sector becomes the sector that is the choice of people who cannot afford to send their kids to non-government schools. I do not think that would be a good outcome. Whilst the non-government sector adds a great deal to our community, I would not want to see a situation where the government sector is for those who cannot afford the non-government sector.

That is not the case at the moment—not yet—but as the drift continues and as more and more parents choose to take their kids from their local government school or not to send their child to their local school and instead choose to send their child to a Catholic school or an independent school, that drift will continue. While that drift continues, these concerns will become more and more real. If we look ahead five, 10 and 20 years and we see a majority of students in the non-government sector, that could well become an irreversible drift. The momentum that would be gathered as a result of such a shift would become very difficult to restrain.

We need to look at some of the reasons why this is happening. Recently I spoke with representatives of independent schools. It was an internal discussion and I do not want

to attribute what was said by individuals, but from my discussions with them and with parents who have made the decision, it is not for the obvious reasons. It is not what the former education minister implied when she suggested that it was about better marketing of government schools.

I do not think parents make those decisions for trivial reasons. I think all parents make the decision where to send their child to school based on what they see as the best interests of their child, of course taking into account their financial circumstances if they choose to send their child to a non-government school. I do not think they decide to send their child to a non-government school for status reasons or for trivial reasons, as has been suggested in the past, certainly by the previous education minister.

Some of the issues that are raised with me are around the support that is given to teachers. I will come to our community education forum in a little bit, but that was one of the themes that came through there very strongly. Look at the issue of violence in schools. Unfortunately, violence does exist in all schools from time to time, both government and non-government. There was feedback to us at that forum and there has been feedback to me at shopping centres that it is about teachers actually having the ability to deal with the problem students, to have the support that they need and to have the resources that they need to deal with them properly, so that they do not disrupt the class and so that there can be a better learning environment. That has been one of the concerns.

People talk broadly about the issue of discipline. I do not want to harp on about discipline too much, except to say that that is one of the areas of feedback that parents give me. But it is a broader issue and government schools vary, as do non-government schools, in their approach to these issues.

The other piece of feedback is the sense of community that is established in each of the schools. That is where the *Towards 2020* program, the school closures program, has really had a serious impact. One of the great things about some of our smaller government schools has been that very real and very genuine sense of community that is created in having the local school in the neighbourhood. When we move towards a model of having larger and larger government schools it does become increasingly difficult to maintain that sense of community. It does not mean that it is impossible, but it will become increasingly difficult. We know that in the transition program many communities have seen their school taken away and the heart ripped out of their community.

When we talk about what people are looking for when they send their children to non-government schools we come back to that sense of community. It does exist in many government schools, but the *Towards 2020* program, by closing some of these very effective school communities, will have a negative impact and will continue to have a negative impact on people's impressions. It is certainly our contention that the school closure program will not help stem the drift; rather, that we will see a continuing drift if the government does not get serious about some of these issues.

We saw the process in relation to school closures. Before the election we were told that there would be no school closures and then we saw the great betrayal that we

have talked about many times with 23 schools being closed. But the final slap that is happening at the moment is at Lyons. Of course, that will apply to other schools around the territory. That is the final slap on the way out. Before the election the government said, "We are not going to close any schools." After the election they said, "We will be closing 39 schools." They then decided to close 23.

On the way out they are going to make it as disruptive as possible, it would seem, for some of these school communities. Strong consideration was given by this government to Lyons children completing the school year in the school hall or being moved to Yarralumla early. The minister will say, "That is not our plan now." We know that the education department have said that that was their plan. The *Canberra Times* was told that that was part of their plan. If it is no longer the policy, that is a good thing, but that policy shift has only occurred because there was an ugly story for the government in the *Canberra Times* yesterday. We have seen the way that they have treated some of these communities. It is a concern and it will no doubt leave a bad taste in the mouths of many of these parents. In some sectors it will exacerbate the negative impression of this government's management of the public education system.

In many ways the 2020 documentation was a marketing document. The words "choice-diversity-opportunity" appear across the top of the pages. It really is a lot of sloganeering. What parents have really been asking for is an explanation. We know that it was in response to the Costello report, but we have never been told what was in the Costello report and why it justified such a massive upheaval. We will not know until the government actually release that report, and we know that they will not because there is no doubt that many of the revenue assumptions that were made in that report were wrong and, if they were to release it, it would cause them further embarrassment that they went down this destructive path.

They did it in a panic. They did not think it through. They did not take it to an election as a policy. They did it after saying that there would not be any school closures. They panicked and closed 23 schools. We are seeing the end result of that in Lyons. As a result of poor planning and mismanagement we are seeing the community of Lyons, and no doubt other schools, being affected in a negative way by these ill-thought-through school closures.

Recently we had our community education forum in Calwell. It was a very useful exercise. It brought together parents, teachers, students and representatives of the Australian Education Union, the Independent Education Union, the independent schools and non-government schools. It brought together a whole raft of interested members of the community in relation to our school system.

Mr Barr: How many were there, Zed?

MR SESELJA: We have the interjection from Mr Barr. I said the numbers publicly. I think it was about 30. It was a good cross-representation. There is absolutely no spin in that. I am happy to put on the table those who were there. It was a very honest discussion, and that is rare. The Australian Education Union is not necessarily the Liberal Party's best friend. But we did see Clive Haggart coming out and praising the forum. He could see that it was a constructive attempt to engage with the community

and to look for solutions, not just to the issues of school-based violence but broader issues in our education system. It will certainly inform our policy going forward.

If you look at the list of things that came out of the forum, some things have been done or are being done and some need to be done. It is a long and complex list. It includes: counselling in schools; continuing education for teachers and staff; more pastoral care; class sizes; more effective apprenticeships; home relationships; physical security aspects at schools; retention of teachers; family support; more effective sport and recreation; youth mental health programs; youth mental health facilities; full-service schools; a code of conduct for school visitors; and the transfer of documents between education systems. A number of different issues came through.

Mr Barr: The one that we released last week with the full endorsement of the AEU.

MR SESELJA: The minister dismisses it. The minister was embarrassed into action. It is always embarrassing when a minister, on the day of an opposition forum, has to make an announcement. He is a little bit embarrassed that we are running a forum that does get good community support. He has to put out his own press release. We know that he only brought the police to his safe schools forums very late in the piece. It was such an effective tool that only after negative coverage in the *Canberra Times* did he actually bring the police in and make some announcements and try and drive the process forward.

It was only when the opposition had our own forum that we started to hear something from the minister on the issue. He was embarrassed into action. We are happy to continue to have forums such as this. There were some very good things to come out of it. One of the criticisms was that the teacher professional development fund which was established in the 1999-2001 EBA with \$1 million for professional development has not grown at all since then. Effectively, it has gone backwards every year because there has been no indexation. That was one of the criticisms that were put. We can do better in supporting our teachers.

The issues that relate to school-based violence are also applicable to other aspects of the education system. How do we support our teachers so that they can actually be teachers and not babysitters? How do we retain our strong school communities? Certainly the *Towards 2020* program and the great betrayal of the education system does nothing to inspire confidence in the government education system. The continuing drift to the non-government sector should be of concern to this government. It should actually be looking at the real reasons for this drift and looking to do something about it.

Simply building bigger schools is not the answer. That is not the answer. It is simplistic to think that. Look at some of the non-government schools and some of the facilities that are associated with them. There is a cross-section. Many of the smaller, low-fee schools that have very basic facilities are drawing strong enrolments. It is about much more than facilities and much more than bricks and mortar. I commend the motion to the Assembly. (*Time expired.*)

MR BARR (Molonglo—Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Planning, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation, Minister for Industrial Relations) (11.04):

It will come as no surprise that the government will not be supporting the Leader of the Opposition's motion today. Shortly I will circulate an amendment to the motion. But I think it is worth going back to the fundamental tenets of the government's policy around school renewal: that there were a range of factors that were confronting the ACT education system, most particularly a decline in the school age population in the ACT.

Since 2005 we have witnessed a 45 per cent increase in the number of people over 65 in the ACT and an eight per cent decrease in the school age population. That plays out in different degrees around the city. In the Gungahlin area there is very strong growth, hence the need for the government to invest in new public education infrastructure in Gungahlin. We recently opened a new school at Harrison, and the Gungahlin Secondary College is scheduled for opening in 2010. So there is a need to invest in new education infrastructure where there is clear demand. But other parts of the city are undergoing a significant demographic change that required a response from government.

Secondly, and a fact that Mr Seselja has talked about extensively during his contribution, is a drift away from public education. If you look at the long-run history of the drift from the public system to the private system going back over 30 years you notice that that drift accelerates when the Liberals are in power federally. When there is a federal Labor government the drift begins to slow and then eventually there is a move back to the public system.

It would be fair to indicate that over a 30-year period the level of commonwealth government investment in public education has been a significant driver of enrolments. But that is not to say that the state and territory governments do not also have significant policy responsibility. This government has increased its investment in public education by more than 30 per cent since coming to office. That is a real and significant increase in funding—

Mr Seselja: What is that in real terms?

MR BARR: Well, a significant increase, Mr Seselja. You go back and look at inflation year on year. Even you and your colleagues would have to accept that there has been a real increase in funding to ACT public schools over that period. It is important to note that that investment has been targeted in a range of key areas, most particularly, in the second appropriation last year, to provide a \$14.6 million package to improve pastoral care and student welfare in our public high schools. There was \$3.3 million targeted at Indigenous education.

These are important areas of investment. They are only made possible by the difficult decisions the government took in 2006. This is the fundamental issue that we are dealing with. Is it quantity or quality in education that we are looking for? When you look across our system we have 44 non-government schools that are educating just over 40 per cent of the student population. The remaining 60 per cent are being educated across just short of 90 public schools.

Prior to the changes, we were spreading our resources thinly across such a large number of schools, schools that could not offer viable education programs because

they did not have enough resources. It is simply not possible in a primary school of 60 students to have a dedicated PE teacher or a dedicated arts teacher. You have a small staff, four or five teachers in a school of that size, who are expected to offer an entire school curriculum. It is just not possible. So the government took the difficult decision to rationalise resources to prioritise quality. When we look at the survey data for why parents are moving away from the public system the number one factor is quality.

Coming in at No 2 is the reputation of the school, and then also featuring for one in four was the quality of school facilities. That school movement survey data has been public for nearly a year now. The government has responded to that data by prioritising quality. Our \$350 million investment in infrastructure, matched by a range of new recurrent initiatives in pastoral care and Indigenous education, in PE, in arts and in music are all aimed at improving the quality of our public education system. That has to be a feature of where our debate in education should be heading. It is about quality.

That is why I have put forward a paper to establish a school standards authority to raise the quality of education across the ACT. That is why the government is participating in the national testing regime that will commence in May of this year. That is why the government is investing additional resources in early intervention and early childhood education.

This government funded an increase in free preschool hours from 10 to 12, and as a result of that we have seen a significant increase in enrolments in preschools in the ACT. If you want to look for a sign of where targeted government investment will turn around the enrolment drift away from public schools, I point to preschools. There has been an 11 per cent increase in public sector preschool enrolments in the last two years. We were going backwards in 2004 and 2005, we held steady in 2006, and in 2007 and 2008 we have seen an 11 per cent increase in enrolments in public preschools.

We have established a new curriculum framework that incorporates the preschool year. We have amalgamated preschools into our primary school structure. That provides greater professional support for our preschool teachers. We value early childhood education. We are investing in additional resources for early childhood schools. That is a crucial investment in the future of our public education system. Linking preschools to primary schools was a very important strategic move to ensure that we have education continuity and greater professional support for preschool teachers. If you want to look at an area where this government will be driving a further reform agenda in partnership with the new federal government, it is early childhood education. It is crucial to the future of our public education system.

What I find interesting in the opposition's motion is, for the first time, some support for the new P-10 school in west Belconnen. So it is interesting that, having made the blanket statement that all school closures should stop, Mr Seselja has now in this motion for the first time agreed that the west Belconnen school that will form out of the Holt and Higgins primary schools on the former Ginninderra district site now has the support of the opposition. I welcome that three years later.

Mr Seselja: It doesn't.

MR BARR: So it does not have the support of the opposition? You are just not opposing it? Here we go—flip-flop! Between 10.30 and now the opposition has changed its position on the west Belconnen school.

It is crucial that we continue this important infrastructure renewal, but it is important also that we prioritise from it because nothing is more important in our public education system than quality. The government's objective is to ensure that our public system is competitive with the non-government sector. There has been a range of debate around how we can address the drift. Some advocates of public education are suggesting that there be no further growth in non-government schools. No further growth in non-government schools is what is proposed to the government.

It is interesting to note that the vast majority of the drift that occurred between 2007 and 2008 is as a result of two expansions in the non-government sector. Radford College opened its early childhood programs. They now have 44 students in kindergarten, 44 in year 1, 44 in year 2 and 48 in year 3. I understand that more than half of those students were previously in public schools.

You then look at the growth of the Burgmann School and its year 11 and 12 program. More than 100 of the 150 students who were in public education last year have now moved into Burgmann's program in Gungahlin. The expansion of two independent schools has largely accounted for two-thirds to three-quarters of the drift away from public education this year. It is also interesting to note that in this year's figures the Catholic systemic system also lost 0.4 per cent of their enrolments. We have seen a drift away from public and the Catholic system towards independent schools, largely as a result of increased capacity in the independent sector.

The key thing is to ensure that the public education system can compete effectively. That means providing the necessary resources and investment into our public education system. We know the position of the Liberals on this, and that is to throw good money after bad. For the opposition to suggest that they have anything at all to offer the public education system is a joke. Public education communities know that. They know that the government had to make difficult decisions in 2006, with the associated trauma that went with that. But for the Liberal Party to suggest, two years into a four-year program, that we should put a halt to all of that—belying the fact that the school-age population is continuing to decline and belying the fact that families and students have moved on and are now well settled into their new schools—and throw precious education resources back into reopening empty buildings where there is not a student population to support them is very, very poor public policy. It is very poor on equity grounds as well.

Another fundamental issue that we need to address in terms of our public education system is how we share the resources that are available. Under the former model, some schools and some students got twice as much public money devoted to their education as other students elsewhere in the system. So if you believe in equity, if you believe in targeting resources to where they are most needed, then you simply could not justify spending \$19,000 per student on education at Tharwa primary against a

system wide average of around \$8,500 to \$10,000, depending on the school. They are some of the issues that we had to confront. I now formally move:

Omit all words after “Assembly”, substitute:

“notes:

- (1) the support of the Assembly for the *Towards 2020* school renewal program.
- (2) that between 2001 and 2004 the Stanhope Government:
 - (a) exceeded the \$27 million commitment for ‘behind the gate’ expenditure in education with an additional \$37 million in new money provided;
 - (b) increased funding to non-government schools by more than 20 per cent;
 - (c) funded pay increases and improved conditions for teachers to ensure ACT public schools continue to attract and retain the best teachers;
 - (d) refurbished old schools, built a new school in Gungahlin and funded feasibility studies for new school infrastructure at Harrison;
 - (e) invested over \$1 million in interactive whiteboards leading to a 570 per cent increase in the number of these educational aids in ACT public schools;
 - (f) provided \$2 million for curriculum renewal to ensure all students and teachers could access up to date and relevant curriculum;
 - (g) increased funding for school building maintenance;
 - (h) invested \$11 million for improved information technology capacity for all schools through targeted programs;
 - (i) increased pre-school funding by \$900,000 over three years;
 - (j) invested \$48.7 million to reduce class sizes to an average of just 21 for all ACT public school students from kindergarten to year 3;
 - (k) committed \$1.7 million to Individual Student Pathway Plans to better assist students’ transition from secondary education to further study or work;
 - (l) funded youth workers in every government high school;
 - (m) provided funding of \$1.8 million over 4 years for the Career Transition Support Service to support both government and non-government schools provide guidance to students in critical school to work transition decisions;
 - (n) developed healthy student programs and provided \$900,000 to improve the health and fitness of school students across government and non-government schools;
 - (o) provided more than \$500,000 in funding for health coordinators in government colleges to provide information and support on health issues,

drug education, alcohol and tobacco use, domestic violence, sexuality and relationships with their peers;

(p) committed \$1.6 million to support learning and retention of Indigenous students in government schools;

(q) provided \$860,000 for Indigenous early childhood support to increase participation by Indigenous students;

(r) provided an additional \$300,000 into Jumby Mulla, an Indigenous managed family support service in northern Canberra;

(s) expanded the Koori Preschool Program;

(t) funded a new mentoring and leadership program for Indigenous students in years 11 and 12;

(u) provided targeted assistance for year 4 Indigenous students to meet national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy;

(v) increased funding for students with disabilities by \$4.4 million to ensure that the educational needs of students who have a disability are supported; and

(w) continued to open Learning Support Units and Autism Support Units to meet additional demand;

(3) that since 2004 the Stanhope Government has built on these achievements and:

(a) has increased funding to education by more than 30 per cent since being elected in 2001;

(b) is investing over \$350 million in building new public schools where they are most needed and in upgrading every other ACT public school;

(c) is investing \$20 million to ensure state of the art IT in classrooms;

(d) is investing \$14.6 million to provide pastoral care support in every high school;

(e) is investing \$3.3 million to improve Indigenous education outcomes;

(f) is investing more than \$1.2 million to revitalise physical education;

(g) is increasing investment in languages and the arts;

(h) has increased pre-school hours to 12 hours per week;

(i) has amalgamated all ACT pre-schools and public schools to deliver on the Government's commitment to early childhood education and giving young Canberrans the best start in life;

- (j) established in partnership with the Australian National University (ANU) the ANU Secondary College and expanded its course offering in 2008 to include biology and Japanese;
 - (k) has expanded Australian School-Based Apprentices to enable students to gain educational and work experience within the ACT Public Service;
 - (l) has invested more than \$16 million in 2005-2006 in Vocational Education and Training;
 - (m) has led the nation in establishing Accelerated Apprenticeship programs in chef training, hairdressing and panel beating through the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT);
 - (n) has funded the establishment of the CIT's Vocational College delivering education options and pathways to people of all ages, offering essential skills and job training for around 3,000 youth, mature-age and migrant students each year;
 - (o) has funded the CIT to allow it to achieve 2,698 program enrolments in apprenticeship or traineeship programs in 2007, an increase of 8 per cent compared to 2006;
 - (p) has funded CIT to allow it to partner with both large and small local and national employers to enable around 1,675 employers to employ CIT apprentices and trainees during 2007;
 - (q) has funded CIT to allow it to enrol 106 Australian School-Based Apprentices in 2007, a 23 per cent increase on the previous year; and
 - (r) has appointed Professor Stephen Parker as Vice Chancellor to the University of Canberra to reform and rebuild this institution in the wake of 11 years of under-investment in tertiary education by the previous Liberal Government;
- (4) that recently the Stanhope Government has developed new policy in the areas of:
- (a) national testing;
 - (b) early childhood education;
 - (c) ICT in schools;
 - (d) DETSafe Schools P-12 program;
 - (e) countering bullying, harassment and violence in ACT public schools;
 - (f) restorative justice programs;
 - (g) countering racism in ACT public schools;

(h) acceptable use of information technology (IT);

(i) complaints resolution;

(j) visitors in schools framework;

(k) unwelcome visitors to schools handbook;

(l) physical education in schools;

(m) keeping children safe in cyberspace; and

(n) a Schools Standards Authority;

(5) that a recent report by the Australian Council for Educational Research found that regardless of their socio-economic background, ACT students are performing better academically than their peers around the rest of Australia;

(6) that despite continued public criticism of ACT public schools by the Liberal Opposition, the ACT Government's Public Schools—So much more to offer campaign is successfully promoting the world-class education offered by ACT public schools; and

(7) that the ACT Liberals have released no substantial education policy since the beginning of December 2007.”.

I ask for the amendment to be circulated. This amendment outlines, firstly, the Assembly's commitment to continue the support of the 2020 renewal process. We are two years in. You cannot turn around a 30-year drift away from public education in two years, particularly when you are only halfway through an investment program. I am asking for the Assembly's continued support for this program.

I would also like to take the opportunity to highlight all of the areas that the government has targeted in terms of increased education investment since coming to power in 2001. We have a very detailed list that members can have a look at, but I would like to highlight most particularly in recent times the \$20 million investment in information communications technology; the \$14.6 million investment in pastoral care; the \$3.3 million into Indigenous education and the \$1.2 million to revitalise PE in schools, in partnership with the Children's Physical Activity Foundation that I launched yesterday. Again I thank the John James Memorial Foundation for their sponsorship of that foundation, and I thank Olympian Adam Pine for agreeing to be spokesperson and chair of the foundation board, which is terrific for physical education in our schools.

I would also like to highlight the range of new areas of policy and direction in education policy, not least of which are: national testing; early childhood education; ICT in schools; safe schools; countering bullying, harassment and violence; restorative justice programs; countering racism; acceptable use of IT; complaints resolution; a framework for visitors to schools; policies around unwelcome visitors;

new support for physical education in schools; keeping children safe in cyber space; and the establishment of a school standards authority.

We note also that a recent report of the Australian Council of Education Research found that, regardless of their socioeconomic background, ACT students are performing better academically than their peers in the rest of Australia. Despite the constant harping and criticism from those opposite, this government will continue to promote public education. “Public education, so much more to offer”, our campaign to continue to support and promote public education in the ACT, will get the message out that what is offered in our public system is world class. I do not think anyone is disputing that world-class public education is available in the ACT. We need to continue to put quality first to continue to raise the standards in public education.

I note that since he has become opposition spokesperson on education, short of reheating my safe schools task force, a task force that had been meeting monthly in conjunction with ACT Policing—

Members interjecting—

MR BARR: The Leader of the Opposition is 12 months behind the game. He has paid no attention to the questions his colleagues were asking. He has even missed that.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (11.20): First of all, I want to thank Mr Seselja for bringing this matter up yet again. It has not gone to rest yet, and in an election year I imagine that the government’s own focus groups have indicated that this is an issue that still resonates around our communities. I also want to thank the minister for giving us more detail than I believe he has ever before given on this matter. That might reflect the fact that, again, the focus groups have identified that this is going to be a significant issue at this election.

It does concern me that the government thinks that some more glossy pamphlets are going to solve the problem. People need more than to be told that public education is good; they need it demonstrated. I refer to the speech I gave yesterday which detailed, with statistics, a number of cases where schools have turned around educational outcomes for their most disadvantaged pupils. This is what people need. They do not need another glossy pamphlet. We are a much more sophisticated electorate than that.

The *Towards 2020* program was driven by a review that appeared to be based entirely on financial targets. We should remember that the ACT department of education had begun a more thoughtful program of renewal which incorporated a plan for real community engagement. Called “Education 2010”, it was a plan that articulated some of the challenges facing the ACT government system and the likely responses of participants and stakeholders.

Unfortunately, the goodwill and collaborative process that such an approach could engender have been forfeited through the introduction of the hastily devised *Towards 2020* program. The results have included the destruction of a number of communities through the abrupt shutting down or the slow suffocation of their schools; the arbitrary and highly contestable way in which the costs and performance of the various schools

were assessed; and the lack of respect that was shown for the communities and individuals concerned.

I know that the ACT government argued that it consulted and that it changed its plans on the basis of the consultation and made the hard decisions that no-one else would make. However, the Greens have had three major concerns with both the process and the outcome which time has confirmed. First, there was no convincing educational basis for the decisions made or any analysis of the challenges facing public education which we are told the plan was designed to address. Second, the impact on communities was not properly considered. Finally, the impetus for this dramatic action was a secret report based, it would seem, on a simplistic process of benchmarking costs—purely a business case, we assume, which ignored social and environmental aspects.

What we need from education policy in the ACT and in the education debate is a focus on the real issues and challenges that face us as a community. It concerns me still that the process was overseen by a new minister. I expect that he is now better informed on education; I wonder if he would so unhesitatingly put forward such an educationally unsound proposal if he was asked to do so now.

I recall that in answer to a question on notice the minister for education denied that social and economic status and the educational attainment of families were key indicators of a student's educational outcomes. That was a denial of one of the most basic tenets in education policy. I note also that the ACT government chose to become extremely offended when it was pointed out that the socioeconomic profiles of schools that were closed were in most cases lower than the average across Canberra. Earlier this year, both the Productivity Commission and PISA—participation in international studies of student achievement—analyses found that the ACT was slipping towards lower equity across its school systems.

The Stanhope government started well. When it was elected in 2001, its first educational initiative was to set up an inquiry into educational funding in the ACT. Lyndsay Connors, who conducted that inquiry, pointed to growing pockets of disadvantage in our community. Now the ACER analysis of the PISA information, prepared specifically for the ACT government, has made the achievement gap for students across the ACT even more obvious.

If you look at the graphs that accompany that report, you will see that the ACT has a steeper gradient than any state and that students at the lower end of the spectrum experiencing the most disadvantage are further behind their peers than anywhere in Australia other than the Northern Territory. I do not see why the minister keeps denying that. When you look at the figures carefully it is clear that the claim that those students in the ACT experiencing disadvantage are doing better than others in Australia is just not supported. Where is the ability to read a graph that leads the government to make that denial?

Mr Barr: Ask ACER. That is what they have said.

DR FOSKEY: The graphs tell a different story. Research by Barbara Preston last year—which built on work she conducted in 2003—provided an analysis of family

income, religion, indigenous status and family type in government and Catholic and other non-governmental schools. The social make-up of schools shows the growing proportion of students from poor families, single-parent families and so on in government schools, particularly secondary schools. This is an important report. In that context, one would hope that, in making decisions about how to invest more resources in education, the ACT government is informed by the kinds of information that report presents.

One would hope that the government will seek more disaggregated data, telling us who is leaving ACT government schools and who is staying. One would hope to see qualitative research telling us why they are going and what they imagine they get when they go. One would imagine that the ACT government is looking harder at all the research regarding the engagement of students who have more difficult and more challenging lives. Nothing the ACT government has done convinces me that these are the priorities it is taking to the next election.

We have here an amendment—which is far longer than the original motion that it seeks to amend—which details the initiatives that are being taken. Many of these are worthy initiatives, but without the basis of work done to show what is needed in our education system we cannot be sure that these are not just bandaids. We need to see why these particular initiatives were chosen over others. And when the government justifies what it is doing with education, we certainly need more—I am very pleased that we got it today—than just the total sum of spending.

The Liberal Party motion projects a specific strategy to deal with the upcoming changes—which is, in essence, Liberal policy. I support most of its ambitions, but I would be arguing here and now for a strategy that would allow us to sort out the mess after the October election, when, with a bit of luck, there will be a minority government.

I would like to move the amendment that is circulated in my name.

MR SPEAKER: Dr Foskey, you cannot move that amendment until we dispose of the amendment moved by Mr Barr.

DR FOSKEY: Thank you. I will speak to the amendment when I move it.

There are many models around. I am very loath to accept a motion that sets up a process when we have not really looked at other models. For instance, I have mentioned the Victorian model a number of times. The department set up councils with stakeholders based on education department regions and told them the problem and the resources that needed to be saved. Those communities, including all the stakeholders, came to a solution where, in the Bendigo district, one school was closed. Everyone was okay about that because they could see the reasons for it.

But you can never undo a bad consultative process. That is the problem that the ACT government is facing now, just before an election. The damage has been done and I am afraid that it will not be fixed easily.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (11.30): The fundamentals of education used to be the three Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic. The Stanhope education system has given us a new version of the three Rs: reduce, remove and rebuff. It has reduced services and support for families, especially those most in need. It has simply removed school buildings from the system. There are 23 slated to go; most have gone and another group goes at the end of this year. But more important than anything is the rebuff to the community—the rebuff of any attempt to involve the community, particularly parents, to try and make the government accountable for its underhanded underfunding of our most precious resource.

The minister's defence is: "We have thrown more money at it. We have put \$350 million into bricks and mortar." The real questions are: what do the parents actually want and what is causing the drift out of the government system? "Drift" is a very weak word in regard to this. It is not a drift. This government has seen a massive movement of students out of a free system, a free product, into a system where you have to pay—where in some cases you pay significant fees to get what you want. That says that the government is not giving parents what they want.

Perhaps the minister should go to the ACT Department of Education and Training school movement survey on his website, from August 2007.

Mr Barr: I quoted from that in my speech.

MR SMYTH: Perhaps he should read it. The minister says, "Yes, I mentioned that in my speech." He mentioned a lot of things in his speech that do not make sense. He says that what they want are new buildings, that what they want is this investment in infrastructure. Yes, buildings are important, but fundamentally what people want out of their system—52 per cent of those who responded—is quality of education. Why are they leaving the system?

Mr Barr: That is what I just said.

MR SMYTH: They are leaving the system because of quality of education. They are leaving it because of peer relationships—read there bullying—discipline and standards. They are leaving because of the lack of professional standards of staff. And they are leaving because of the school culture. They are not leaving because of the shape, size, colour or age of the buildings. They are leaving because the service is either inadequate or perceived to be inadequate and they are willing to pay for what they want for their young person—their student, their child.

We have a minister who constantly harps on the fact that they are spending \$350 million on infrastructure. You have to question it. We will dissect the figures over time and we will keep coming back to this place to reveal the figures. The minister keeps saying, "We are spending 30 per cent more." The budget is actually 50 per cent more than what was in the budget since 2001, so you could make an argument that in real terms growth has actually declined. The budget has grown by 50 per cent; the education budget has grown by 30 per cent. Make your own judgement on that.

The reality is that this has to be a discussion about the quality of education and how we deliver that. Quality of education is delivered through teachers. You only have to look to one simple fact on this. Back in 2000, the previous Liberal government put up a fund of \$1 million for the continuing education of teachers. At the leaders forum on schools in Calwell, Clive Haggart pointed out that that has not grown. Yes, we are putting more money into the system, but important things like the continuing education of teachers have been left at a funding level of seven years ago. That is an indictment of the three successive education ministers and the Stanhope government and an indication of their true commitment to education—the true commitment to education that exists in this government.

The amendment is interesting. The minister is now inventing words. He does not want to talk about literacy and numeracy. We have a new word: “numerously”—n-u-m-e-r-o-u-s-y.

Mr Barr: Yes, there was a typo. It has been fixed.

MR SMYTH:—I am sure the minister will get up and say it is a typo. But “numerously”—I checked the dictionary—does not exist. He can explain himself in that regard, but it is there in probably the longest amending motion that has ever been tabled in this place. There are two and a bit pages to justify what we are doing. Basically nobody is hearing him. The sting that the minister is feeling is because what he has done as education minister is not welcomed by the community in the main and is not having the effect that he said it would. That will leave the minister exposed in the lead-up to the election.

Point 7 of the amendment says:

... the ACT Liberals have released no substantial education policy since the beginning of December 2007.

Oh, gosh; pardon me: we have not said anything for three months in terms of a policy! Perhaps the minister would like to stand up and now explain all of the policies that the various ministers in the cabinet have released since December 2007. By the same judgement, by the same standard, they would be very thin on the ground.

We will release our policies. We have said we will do that. We will release them, as oppositions do, when we are good and ready. We are not going to run to your timetable because you are desperate and you cannot justify what you have done because it is failing.

There we have it: the new three Rs—reduce, remove and rebuff. When we look at the numbers, we find that we are losing more and more students from government schools. There are 890 fewer students in government primary schools and 850 more students in non-government primary schools. When you ask Mr Barr to explain this, he just avoids the question. We go back to the old position: “But we are spending more money.” If that is not the head-in-the-sand approach to this issue, I do not know what is.

If we are really going to get to the nub of this, Mr Barr has to start listening to the parents and what they are saying. He has to understand what they are saying about what he has done. I will enlighten Mr Barr. According to his own department, the reasons for moving are, first, quality of education; second, professional standards; third, school culture; and—the most important factor—teacher quality. The inescapable fact about education is that this government gets an F for fail. It has failed the students; it has failed the parents; it has failed the teachers. It has failed in every way.

When we ask—when the community asks, when this Assembly asks—for the true basis for why the government has done what they have done, we will not be given the answer that people deserve. When elected in 2001 and re-elected, the Stanhope government campaigned heavily on open and accountable government. Here they are: “ALP Labor priorities”, “good governance”. “Our agenda is the new emphasis on open, democratic and responsive government.” They have not been open; they have not been democratic; they have not responded to the community in the way that the community deserves and wants. If they want to be, they will release the functional review that has led to this debacle.

In many areas where the functional review has been quoted as the basis for change—where the government releases or uses the small amount of statistics out of the functional review to its own benefit—the government has been proven wrong. On education, it is wrong. The government constantly ignores the community and its wishes and it ignores its own surveys. It ignores the reason this is happening.

Yesterday in the MPI, the minister came down and said, “Mr Smyth, you are wrong when you quote the PISA figures on what is happening to education; it is about all students—all students in the ACT education system.” Fantastic! We finally got the minister to acknowledge that there are other students than those in government schools. He does not want to talk about them; he does not want to fund them. But when there is some blame to be shared, when there is some fault to spread around—when you want to spread it around—the minister for government schools is quite willing to say that the reason that we have had this significant decline—which he fails to mention in his press release, which he fails to give us an answer for—is that non-government schools are included as well.

Give us the breakdown, minister. It is your report. You have got access to it. Ask us what the relative declines in the two sectors are. Come back and give us the full picture. Don’t just rope in somebody who on most occasions you ignore and then come back in here and use them as the excuse for your failure.

What do we want? The minister said this: “What do we want?” What do we want from our education system? I think everybody in this place is united in that we want a system that meets the needs of students, their families—their parents—and the community that they enter into. How do we get it? The government’s simple answer is to build more buildings, to renovate and to do things that should have been done over the last 20 years of self-government. We all acknowledge that there has not always been the money. But that is just a small part of it. The government’s own survey said that it is way down the list of what parents want.

What do parents want? They want quality education. They want teachers to be able to teach. At the forum that was recently organised by the Leader of the Opposition, a principal who heads up the principals association here in the ACT said that five per cent of ACT students are in some sort of trouble or cause some sort of disruption at school. We need to address that. That needs to be addressed far more urgently than putting so much money into—(*Time expired.*)

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (11.40): I am glad to be speaking on the motion and the proposed amendment, as I believe that education services provided by the government are an important subject which is worthy of serious attention in the Assembly.

I will take some time to address the points of Mr Seselja's original motion, the first of which relates to the drift away from the government sector. In 2007, public schools in the ACT had 34,617 full-time students; this was 58.3 per cent of the total enrolment of full-time students in the ACT. Over the past decade or so, we have seen large growth in enrolments in private schools. This trend has been particularly pronounced in the ACT, and it is worth looking at the national data versus the territory data to get a better feel for it.

The 2007 report on schools by the Australian Bureau of Statistics sets out the number of enrolled students in different types of schools in the last decade. This report sets out figures for each of the states and territories in Australia as well as giving an overview of the nationwide trend. From 1997 to 2007 throughout Australia there was an increase in public school enrolments of 38,425 students, an increase of 1.7 per cent. At the same time, there was an increase in non-government school enrolments of 206,574 students, an increase of 21.9 per cent.

In the ACT, we have seen a more pronounced shift away from public schools towards non-government schools. From 1997 to 2007 there was a decrease in public school enrolments of 4,978 students, a reduction of 12.6 per cent, yet at the same time there was an increase in non-government school enrolments of 3,141 students, which represents an increase of 14.5 per cent. The current level of enrolments in public schools in the ACT is down from the enrolments in 1997. We currently have 58.3 per cent of all full-time students in the ACT enrolled in public schools; this is down from 64.7 of all full-time students in 1997. So the long-term picture is quite revealing. From these figures, we can see a large shift in the ACT away from public schools and towards non-government schools.

In these discussions, it is important that members be respectful of the school choices of parents. A drift towards private schools is not something to be frowned upon per se. It simply means that many parents are making different decisions from the ones they were making a decade ago. Recently in this place, I spoke about the fine job that the independent Catholic schools do for our community, and I reiterate these comments now. Independent schools should be congratulated for the work that they do. That parents choose to send their children to such schools is at least partially recognition of the work that these organisations do and the quality of services that is offered.

In this Assembly we need to focus on whether public schools are providing the best service that they can provide and whether there are any deficiencies that are

contributing to the shift away from public schools. This question really goes to the heart of the question of management. The purpose of managing any service enterprise is surely to provide the best service possible and to attract people to that service. The fact that the public schools are failing in this endeavour is cause for investigation and some analysis.

The report prepared by the Australian Council for Educational Research in August 2004—I think the minister cited it earlier—examined the question of why parents choose public or private schools for their children. The study used statistical methods as well as surveys of parents to determine the various reasons for school choice and the strength of these various reasons as determinative factors of school choice. Interestingly, that study found that 34 per cent of parents of children in government schools said that they would change their children to private schools if there were no additional cost. The most common reasons given for this desire to change to private schools were the view that there is better discipline in private schools, the view that children receive a better education or have better teachers in private schools, and the view that more individual attention is paid to students in private schools.

Whether these assertions are backed up by evidence is a separate matter, but these results are the reported views of parents who have children in public schools and who would change to private schools if there were no additional cost. These results are, at the very least, representative of the perception of these parents. Of the various factors that influenced school choice, the study found that the strongest effect on the selection of private over public schools was the desire by parents for traditional values in the school. The report concluded:

In so far as this research was able to pin down reasons for the selection of a private or public school, one factor stood out: the extent to which the school was perceived to embrace traditional values to do with discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself, and the requirement that a uniform be worn.

This report examined the whole of Australia; the ACT formed only a small part of the total data used. But it is an incredibly useful indicator of the sorts of things that influence parents' decisions.

The study gives empirical confirmation of a matter that I have heard raised anecdotally many times before; that matter is poorer discipline in the public school system relative to the level of discipline in private schools. I know that Mr Seselja is tiptoeing on this—I think he is worried he might brand himself as a right-winger like Mr Pratt if he talks too much about discipline in schools—but the reality is that it is a major issue in the minds of parents. I hear the issue raised by parents. People have said to me that they have sacrificed the additional cost to get their kids into a Catholic or non-government school because they are worried about these issues.

The day before yesterday, I spoke with an education department official in a non-official environment—I just happened to be chatting to somebody within Mr Barr's ministry—and I raised this issue. I said that it seems to be something that comes through. This person said to me that one of the problems with perpetually troublesome students is that if you take them out of one school and put them all in one particular school you are going to have an impossible job to find teachers to manage them. I said,

“Maybe you offer a premium in incomes for teachers who go into those schools.” But the feeling was that they would shy away from that.

I do not know what the solution is in the public system. If you are going to say that the public schools are open to everyone but you have this minority element that cause difficulties and teachers who are somewhat hamstrung in terms of their ability to discipline those children, it presents quite a problem. But I firmly believe that it is one the central reasons why parents try to move their kids out of the public system, and this study provides further evidence that gives credence to that view.

In the ACT, we have had recent incidents of serious disciplinary problems in public schools. This has even included serious assaults occurring in school grounds. This must surely be a management priority in ACT public schools. It is an issue which has been found by objective research to be a major factor in school choice by parents. When I hear discussions about the drift to private schools, there are often insinuations or even outright statements that the problem is merely a lack of money for public education. This is touted as a panacea to solve all of our education problems; we have all ad nauseam heard the government tout its efforts in investing in our schools. However, basic problems of discipline and values—which are shown to be major factors in parental choice—are not issues which are hampered by funding constraints. They are issues of management, of creating an environment in which students are held to a reasonable standard of discipline and good conduct.

While I am not impressed by the government’s management of some public schools, I do not think that anything was gained by the opposition’s recent forum. I share the scepticism that has been expressed by the minister about that exercise. The forum essentially copied what the government had already done 12 months ago. It seems to me that the opposition are not presenting a real alternative for Canberra families.

The minister’s amendment was deficient in that he talked about there having been no new policies in education since December. He ought to say in everything: we do not hear tax policy; we do not hear economic policy; we do not hear education policy; we do not hear health policy. We are told, “Hang on, it is coming. Trust us.” Hopefully, we will hear something before 18 October, but I am sure that if we do not get it before then we will get it shortly after.

Mr Seselja’s original motion called for recognition of the disruption to local communities and the education system by the *Towards 2020* program. There is no doubt that this is true. I do not think that the impact of school closures on communities, students and families can be underestimated, even though it is a small percentage of the community that this is affecting. It must be a traumatic experience for many. Change for children—whether you have to move them between schools or between suburbs—is an issue. Those of us who are parents appreciate that; I do not diminish the effect that this might be having on some of those families.

Many people have adjusted. This is testament in no small part to the schools that they have transferred to and the efforts of the staff and communities in those areas. I have spoken to some of those school leaders. Others have found the transition harder. It is to be hoped that work is continuing to ensure that students assimilate into new surrounds.

Closing schools is always going to be traumatic and face strong opposition. There will be times when it is necessary. I believe that Mr Stefaniak presided over some of that when he was the minister for education. But these decisions must be made on practical grounds in an open and clear process. I have little doubt that the closures announced in 2006 have had a massive impact on the community. (*Time expired.*)

MS GALLAGHER (Molonglo—Minister for Health, Minister for Children and Young People, Minister for Disability and Community Services, Minister for Women) (11.50): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the amendment circulated by the minister for education, Andrew Barr. I feel that, as the minister for education when we first started this investment of renewal in education infrastructure in the ACT, it is appropriate that we go back and have a look at some of the work that was done prior to 2020 and the situation which the government was faced with at the time.

It is easy to forget, I think, the reality of the state of government school infrastructure that the government began analysing, particularly after the 2004 election. Really, it started not long after the election. On 30 November, as part of my visits to schools as minister for education, I visited the Ginninderra district high school, I think for the first time but it could have been the second. Two things, I think, were clear to me on that visit. One was the fantastic teaching environment or the culture of teaching the close-knit students within that school. The second was the terrible state of the school at the time. I think more than half of the school was closed in some way and not being used at all by the students.

From memory, there were about 180 students at that school. I think year 10 was the biggest year; I think 60 of the students were in year 10, which left 120 over the other three years of the school. It was at that time that I started considering a major upgrade to that school. I walked around the school with the school principal, who was clearly distressed about the state of the teaching environment that she was having to provide for the students.

Not long after that visit, the Chief Minister visited that school as part of his general round of school visits and he and I spoke after that tour, after his visit and after mine. We were both clearly concerned at the state of the school, the infrastructure and the facilities. We spoke about the enrolment decline at the school, which had been considerable and was continuing. I think over 70 per cent of the local school enrolments were avoiding that school; they were actually taking the very clear decision to go a public school outside that area. In fact, Belconnen high and Canberra high, from memory, were the schools that were taking all the overflow. There was a conscious decision in those suburbs for parents and students not to attend that school. When I toured that school, I could not think of any reason other than the state of those school facilities as the major reason for the decline.

In February, I think, on my return from leave, I discussed the issue of Ginninderra district high with the Chief Minister. We spoke about the possibility of looking at a new school for that site. It was clear that a major redevelopment would not have assisted with the overall issues to any great degree and that really the way forward was the single biggest investment in school infrastructure in the ACT's history, to build a state-of-the-art, brand new school in west Belconnen for the people of west

Belconnen and their students. I note today in the motion from the Liberals that the west Belconnen school is the only school that they are not opposing.

It is interesting to note, though, that the Holt and Higgins primary schools at the time, I think, had about 150 or maybe 140 students enrolled in each of those schools. It is interesting to see now, in preparation for the new school opening in that area, that both of those primary schools have actually increased their enrolments over the last few years and now have primary school students in excess of 200.

I know this is uncomfortable for the Leader of the Opposition, because it actually does not fit with the arguments that they are putting forward, but that is the reality. We had a situation where we had a school where people were actively making a decision not to attend it. We took a decision on that, on investing in the future, to build a fantastic new school for the people of west Belconnen, the first new school in that area probably since the 1970s, I would say. What we see now is students returning and preparing to enrol in that fantastic new facility for next year. That is what this has been about from the beginning.

This government was clear before the election that the issue of dealing with the viability of our schools would have to be dealt with. I have said it on numerous occasions; I said it in here; I said it at education meetings in the lead-up to the election. I think Mr Pratt was the shadow minister then. He and I attended and I repeated it at all of those forums. I repeated it in the *Canberra Times*.

The issue, I think, which the opposition seem to be pinning their entire election campaign on is the unauthorised comment by a spokesperson from my office. I stand here today and I say, "If there was a mistake I made, it was not writing a letter to the *Canberra Times*, a letter to the editor, saying that was an unauthorised statement." It was not in line with the statements I had made as minister the day before or the statements that I made after that time.

Mrs Dunne: What about the one the same person made at the time of the closing of Ginninderra district high?

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER (Mr Gentleman): Mrs Dunne, I warn you.

MS GALLAGHER: You guys win. I made a mistake. Okay? Everyone can hear it. I made a mistake; I did not correct the record, apart from correcting the record in about 50 different forums where I made it clear the government said we would need to deal with the issues of declining enrolments and school viability across the sector. It is in the *Canberra Times* on numerous times.

In fact, my chief of staff spoke and gave that comment in response to the Liberal proposal to close schools. This originated from Mr Pratt's comments. The Liberals came out and said they would close schools. I can honestly stand here—and cabinet documents will prove that I am telling the truth—and state that at the time of going to the last election the government had no plans to close any schools.

I will tell you when that planning started. The planning started on 30 November 2004, when I went and visited the terrible facilities at west Belconnen, at Ginninderra

district high school. On 30 November, I said, “It is not acceptable that we expect our children in 2004 to subject themselves to school facilities such as this.” Not only did I say it was unacceptable, the parent population and the student population said it was unacceptable because nobody was going there.

Here we had a school built for over 1,000 students and it had 184 students and declining. That is when the planning started for this; that is when the government decided the single biggest investment in school infrastructure since self-government should start. It started in west Belconnen and has continued under the minister for education with *Towards 2020*. Time will show that we are doing the right thing. That is not to say it is not hard; that is not to say it is not disruptive for some families. But it is the right thing. One day, all of us in this place will have to stand up and accept that.

As we walk around schools now and look at the actual fruits of this investment in a school which I visit frequently, we see a new lift for a child in a wheelchair who can now get from the bottom of the school to the top of the school. Her classes are not constrained by her wheelchair and the fact that she could not actually move around the school she attends. This money has allowed that infrastructure to be completed and for that child to move freely around her school.

When I was education minister, I had the task of choosing between two schools to be upgraded every year, with a million dollars each; that was the choice that came to me. In fact, when we upgraded Ainslie primary school, because it is heritage listed, it took all of the money. We have reversed that. Time will show that we made the right decision.

The documents, which will be revealed when the cabinet documents become available, will show that there were no plans to close schools in the lead-up to the election. Our election policy is clear. On 30 November, we started the major investment in renewal. That is the truth; that will be shown to be the truth. The plan to invest in public education for this community was started then. In years to come, the government will be thanked by the community itself; you wait and see.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (12.00): I welcome the opportunity to follow that disgraceful display by the former minister for education, a minister for education who, by her own admission today, had been a minister for education for two years before she visited Ginninderra district high. What was she doing for the two years before that? How many schools had she visited before that?

Let us look at the history of the closure of Ginninderra district high. The closure of Ginninderra district high was very revealing because it was a complete abrogation of all of the public statements, the published statements, of this minister and her spokesman. I make the point again that there was never an occasion, until 13 or 15 October—

Members interjecting—

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER: Members on both sides! Mrs Dunne has the call.

MRS DUNNE: Those denials went on and were capped off three days before the ACT election in 2004, when Ms Gallagher came out again and criticised Mr Pratt for daring to suggest that schools might close and said again that schools would not be closing. Her press release just before the election said again that schools would not be closing.

We add to this her failure back in August to set the record straight and we add to this that the same spokesman at the time of the closure of Ginninderra district high went to the *Canberra Times* again and said, “There will be no more school closures under this government.” I will give the minister leave to speak again, to stand up and say that that was a mistake and that she did not correct the record on that one. That was a statement made by the same senior adviser who, when I had the final briefing on the commencement of the Education Act at the beginning of 2005 and I asked him where in the regulations the process for consultation in relation to school closures was, told me, “They are not there and, Mrs Dunne, they will not be necessary because there will be no school closures.”

The Australian Education Union, the P & C association, who were the original architects of those regulations which Mr Stefaniak introduced and which were not translated into the new education bill, and I were told the same thing by that same employee of Ms Gallagher’s. We were told, “We do not need those guidelines because there will be no need to close schools. We will not be closing schools.”

Everything that this previous minister has done has been founded on a lie—a lie told to me, a lie told to the P & C association, a lie told to the wider ACT community—that there would not be school closures. This lie was perpetuated over and over and over again, including after the announcement on Ginninderra district high school when that same spokesman said, “There will be no more school closures.”

When is it that this former minister is actually going to come out and say, “We deceived the community time and time and time again”? That is what they did. This minister went to the last election with deception on her lips every day. She has been in this place when her successor and her Chief Minister have come in here and waved pieces of paper around time and time again trying to get her off the hook. I cannot remember the number of times that I have stood in this place and said that this minister never, ever, ever corrected the record. It is only today, years later, that, under considerable pressure, she said, “Oops. Perhaps I did make a mistake.” There were plenty of other mistakes.

I was at the first consultation meeting on Ginninderra district high when people asked you, “If the children are bypassing Ginninderra district high to go to other schools, will you find out why? Will you tell us why you are closing our school and why a school that is appealing to us is not appealing to other people?” To this day, that work has never been done. They do not know, apart from their gut-feeling indicators, why people were passing by Ginninderra district high.

Yes, it was rundown. I saw it. It was rundown. I visited the school. It was rundown and there should have been work done on it many years before. That is a failing of

successive governments. There is no dispute about that. But when the Ginninderra district high school P & C and the school board came to you and said, “Do we have a problem? Are we at risk?” what did the department tell them? “No. Do not worry about it. You are not at risk.” They were deceived. They were deceived, the same as everybody else was. The whole Stanhope government approach to the government school sector in the ACT is characterised by Ms Gallagher’s deception. It has been perpetuated by her successor.

What we actually have here today is disgraceful. This is the acme of the Stanhope government’s approach to private members day, which is always “take out everything and substitute words of our own”. This started off as a motion about school closures and reopening schools that have closed and finding the reasons for it. What have we got? We have got a litany of all the things that have been done down to—and I think that this may be one of the things that make it out of order—the appointment of the vice chancellor of the University of Canberra. I think that is entirely out of order, because it is not about the original purpose of this motion.

This is Andrew Barr, minister for education, in super-drive. What he does when he is in a difficult position is speak very quickly and fill the space with a lot of words so that people cannot get a word in edgeways. People are not fooled by that. They might think he has got an amiable manner and he has got a good way with words, but they are not fooled by his technique.

In the same way, when he got on radio the other day and was talking about federal government cuts to national institutions, he spoke really, really quickly so that people could not get a word in edgeways. He made a fool of himself. He made a fool of himself by actually being in favour of cuts to national institutions because that would mean that people would come to the ACT rather than having to wait for the national institutions to go to them. This is the way that Mr Barr—

Mr Barr: On a point of order: aside from misrepresenting me, I am not sure what this has to do with education at all.

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER (Mr Gentleman): Mrs Dunne, stick to the relevance of the debate, please.

MRS DUNNE: It is a small aside that goes to the way that this minister operates because, when he is in trouble, he just keeps talking as much as he possibly can to try to cover his confusion.

Mr Barr: Coming from Ms Verbal Diarrhoea herself.

MRS DUNNE: I want that withdrawn, Mr Assistant Speaker.

Mr Barr: If Mrs Dunne has taken offence, I will withdraw.

MRS DUNNE: It is unparliamentary. This is a minister who has been confronted this week with the mismanagement and the callousness of—it could be his department but we know that this matter has gone as high as his office because we know that on

Monday afternoon his media adviser told the *Canberra Times* that, in relation to Lyons primary school, the options on the table were moving the kids to Yarralumla early or moving them into the hall.

On the same day, a parent who had made inquiries of the minister's office, after being told about things, was rung—

Mr Barr: How dare you seek to verbal someone! Were you party to that conversation?

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER: Mr Barr, I warn you.

MRS DUNNE: At the same time, a parent who had made inquiries of the minister's office was rung by your DLO—on the same day—and told exactly the same thing. The options before her were that the children would be relocated early to Yarralumla or they would be removed to the hall—this is what the parent told me—and that the department would make a decision soon and she would be rung yesterday, to be told what the decision was.

She said to me, "Vicki, why are they bothering to go and talk to the school board if the minister is going to make up his mind beforehand?" That is what she was told; that was the understanding that she got from speaking to your office. You have been embarrassed; you have been shown to be recalcitrant; you have been shown to have no care for the people of Lyons. This is why you are in trouble. (*Time expired.*)

MR SESELJA (Molonglo—Leader of the Opposition) (12.07): Speaking to the amendment, not to close the debate, I do have to respond. We have seen some honesty finally from Ms Gallagher—to a point, it must be said. Finally Ms Gallagher has today, for the first time, made at least some acknowledgement that the people of the ACT were misled at the last election as a result of what she terms a mistake—not to retract what was said by her adviser on her behalf, which was that there would be no school closures in the next term of government.

Ms Gallagher can talk about how she had no plans, and cabinet documents will demonstrate they had no plans, at the 2004 election to close schools, but what was said on her behalf was that there would be no school closures—not that there were no plans—in the next term of government. That statement was never at any stage retracted.

Ms Gallagher, in an aside across the chamber, has acknowledged that our point that we have been making is correct. She never repudiated that statement. She terms it a mistake. I would suggest it was a deliberate strategy to mislead the people of the ACT because we saw, further to that, only two or three days out from the ACT election, in October of 2004, Ms Gallagher put out her statement which was scaremongering about the Liberals' plans to close schools. We had the statement from Ms Gallagher's adviser "no school closures in the next term of government". We never had that repudiated.

Then we had a press release from the minister suggesting that it was the Liberals who had the plans to close schools, once again reinforcing the perception and the

impression that had been given by Ms Gallagher's office that they would not close any schools in the next term of government. I am pleased that Ms Gallagher, even with all of the falsifications that have been put on it, has finally acknowledged our argument that the people of the ACT were misled. They were misled by the statements of this government. The 23 school closures that will occur by the end of this year are a direct betrayal of the promise that was made to the people of the ACT.

Ms Gallagher can say they never had any plans at that stage. It is interesting that you go to the election and you say, "We will not close any schools in the next term of government," and then, by November, one month after the election, that is when the plan forms. That is when the plan to start closing schools forms.

It is outrageous that Ms Gallagher, having been the minister for two years, is able to say to us, "No, we did not have any plans. We said we would not close any schools in the next four years." But a month later she was prepared to throw that promise out the window; she was prepared to betray the trust of the people of the ACT who had voted in a Labor government, partly, I am sure, as a result of their education policies and their education promises, none of which can ever be trusted again. Ms Gallagher has finally, in her own way, acknowledged that this government misled the people of the ACT on school closures. I think that is a step in the right direction and a step forward.

But Ms Gallagher should go further and say, "Actually it was not a mistake. It was not a mistake not to retract it. It was deliberate." We know it was deliberate because the perception was perpetuated by the subsequent statements by Ms Gallagher, including three days out from the ACT election, where the perception she wanted out there was that a vote for the Liberals was a vote for school closures, and a vote for the Labor Party was a vote against school closures. That is the perception. That comes from the statements made by her spokesman. That was never repudiated.

I am grateful that Ms Gallagher has at least partially admitted the truth of that, but it is outrageous that she tells us now that there were no plans until just after the election, after an election where they promised not to close any schools. But in November of 2004, they decided that that promise was worth nothing; they decided that that promise was expendable because they now had a plan to close schools. It was only one school at that time, but we know now that the subsequent plan to close 39 schools, which led to the closure of 23 schools, was a direct betrayal of the community and a direct breach of the promise that was made and never, ever repudiated by Ms Gallagher.

I am grateful that she has finally acknowledged that in part. I think she should go further and acknowledge the truth of the situation. But she was very happy for that statement to lie there; she was very happy for that statement to stay on the record so that the perception could be created. It was a false perception, it was a betrayal and it is a fundamental breach of faith with the ACT community.

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (12.16): This motion represents yet another example of the opposition's preference for political point-scoring over substantive policy development. Time and time again those opposite have derided the government's commitment to public education. I think "good money after bad" is the phrase that we

have heard a number of times. However, there is deathly silence from the opposition benches when it comes to the massive education investment made by the Stanhope government since 2001.

Yes, we have not seen one education policy come out of the Leader of the Opposition's office since he took over the portfolio in December 2007. I am sure it is an alarming discovery for the people of the ACT that the alternative education minister is a policy-free zone.

The school renewal proposal involves one of the most extensive consultation processes ever undertaken in the ACT. The minister and departmental officials attended over 7,000 public meetings. The process involved responding to more than 1,600 pieces of correspondence and considering 350 written submissions. In contrast, the only substantive consultation which the shadow minister for education undertakes is with his party room to ensure he still has a job.

The government listened to the community and developed a package to see the ACT education system well into the 21st century. The package includes record investment in public education, record investment in information and communication technology and record investment in capital works. Only the Labor Party has the drive and the commitment to invest \$350 million in important education infrastructure for our city. We are building new schools in areas where they are needed and improving infrastructure in all public schools.

Every public school community will see the benefits of this extensive investment. Each school community has different needs and, therefore, each and every school will receive different upgrades. These include new classrooms, new dedicated teaching areas, science labs and art rooms, new halls and gymnasiums, new carpet, new painting and new landscaping. All over Canberra, school communities are welcoming this investment and are pleased that the Stanhope government is showing leadership in public education in the ACT. I have noticed that in my own electorate.

The Stanhope government is investing in new schools. In Harrison, the fastest growing suburb of Canberra, there are hundreds of young families seeking out high-quality education and, when they visit the new state-of-the art Harrison school, they are delighted with what they see: the most modern and best-equipped school in Canberra. Harrison school sets a new standard in public education infrastructure in this country. This is a fine example of a school for the 21st century. I think the minister mentioned yesterday the record initial enrolments in that school.

Also in the Gungahlin area, the Stanhope government is investing in a wellbeing precinct that will include a senior secondary school, a Canberra institute of technology facility, a library and a community arts and sports facility. This precinct will be a jewel in the crown of the Gungahlin town centre.

But schools of the 21st century are not only for the new suburbs. The Stanhope government will also be ensuring 21st century facilities are available in older, more established areas of Canberra. A state of the art P-10 school will be opened in west Belconnen in January next year, as we have been discussing a bit earlier, and in

northern Tuggeranong in 2011. This investment shows that the management of public education is in good hands under this government, a government that has actually done some strategic thinking about education for the future of the territory and the future of our young people.

The early childhood schools are fine examples of proactive policies that this government has brought to education since 2001. Rather than continue to do what was always done, we looked to the research. We went to the community with ideas and then committed funds to establish four new early childhood schools at Southern Cross, Lyons, Isabella Plains and Narrabundah. These new schools ensure that we can offer this specialised form of education across all areas of Canberra. The focus will be on quality learning, student wellbeing and family participation in a purpose-built environment.

Services will vary from site to site and will incorporate the functions of a number of government and community agencies, including education, child care, health, parenting, early intervention and preschool programs. The schools will also have links to the University of Canberra and the CIT early childhood courses. These early childhood courses are building on the success of the O'Connor cooperative school but are offering more. The community is embracing these schools; the enrolments at preschools are evidence of that. I look forward to watching them grow in the future.

Our early childhood focus in education is not just at these four schools; this year all preschools have joined with their local primary school to provide smoother transitions in early years of schooling. As part of the government's commitment to early childhood education, all preschools amalgamated with a primary school at the start of 2008. These amalgamations improve the continuing learning for young children and provide strong pathways for children.

There is already evidence that the government's early childhood policies are working, with this year's preschool enrolments increasing by 6.6 per cent over the last year. Those opposite have argued that the increase can be put down to increased fertility, but this fails to recognise that preschool enrolment is not mandatory and the increase is above and beyond any increase in three and four-year-old children.

The Melba-Copland secondary school is an example of the government's forward thinking policies. Under the concept, the Melba high school and Copland college have amalgamated to form a twin campus with one administrative structure. The Melba campus provides outstanding teaching and learning for years 7 to 10 students, and the Copland campus provides years 11 and 12 college-learning environments, as students move towards gaining an ACT year 12 certificate and a university admissions index.

Melba-Copland secondary school offers a diploma program of the world renowned international baccalaureate program. This program provides our students with access to international curriculum for the world of today. The new structure is already receiving an excellent response, with the principal, staff and students indicating that they are delighted with the program and, since the decision, enrolments at the two schools have increased.

It is very easy for those opposite to sit back and ridicule the government for closing schools, which they frequently do. But it is the Stanhope government that has had the courage to make the tough decisions and the vision to provide record investment to ensure that the ACT education system remains the best in the country and meets the emerging needs of students of the 21st century.

Since 2001, the Stanhope government has established Canberra as the leading education jurisdiction. The contrast in today's debate is that, while the Liberal Party will always seek to score the easy political points by sniping from the sidelines, the Stanhope government is committed to the education of Canberrans and has invested the resources that it has needed since 2001 to back up this commitment. I am pleased to support Mr Barr's amendment.

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

Sitting suspended from 12.25 to 2.30 pm.

Questions without notice

Vocational education and training

MR SESELJA: My question is to the minister for education. Minister, the most recent National Centre for Vocational Education Research figures show that there have been 900 fewer people commencing apprentices and traineeships in the ACT between September 2006 and September 2007. The AEU, in its response to the *ACT Skills Commission Interim Report 2007*, said:

There is no question that the 2006-07 ACT Budget, based on an incompetent Treasury analysis of the ACT economy and Government finances, has exacerbated the skills shortage in the ACT.

Minister, why have you chosen to exacerbate the skills shortage in the ACT?

MR BARR: Thank you, Mr Speaker—

Mr Hargreaves: It's the new climate-change denialists!

Ms Porter: That's a silly question.

MR SESELJA: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Minister, why has your government reduced funding for skills training at a time of serious skills shortages?

MR BARR: The government hasn't, Mr Speaker.

Schools—closures

MRS DUNNE: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, today in the Assembly Ms Gallagher apologised for not correcting the record in 2004 about the

government's policy on school closures. She claimed that all the statements she had made were consistent and that the only inconsistent statement was the one made by her staff to the *Canberra Times* on 12 August 2004. Ms Gallagher apologised this morning for what she claimed was a mistake. However, on 24 August 2004, the last sitting day before the 2004 election, Ms Gallagher told the Legislative Assembly: "The government has no plans to close any schools." Later, she said: "In short, we have no plans to close any schools." Another mistake? Chief Minister, will you now apologise to the people of the ACT for these mistakes which misled them on school closures at the 2004 election?

MR STANHOPE: I thank Mrs Dunne for the question. The answer is no. Ms Gallagher this morning, quite appropriately and with significant integrity—an integrity that is not shown by the opposition in relation to this matter—sought to explain again the nature of statements made preceding the last election. The minister's position at the time was patently clear. A statement was made by an officer. That statement did not represent the view of the minister. The minister at all times over the last four years has explained, and explained in detail, the nature of her position and the government's position in relation to schools and school closures.

It is relevant, of course, that the then opposition spokesperson for education, Mr Steve Pratt, in public releases and public statements, explained the Liberal Party's position in relation to school closures—namely, a position that schools would close under a Liberal government.

Ms Gallagher has shown significant integrity—the sort of integrity that one hopes would be accepted at face value and would be acknowledged as appropriate in the circumstances. Indeed, one would have hoped and expected—a forlorn hope in relation to this opposition's attitude to issues of integrity—that it would have been accepted essentially with the grace in which it was proffered. The minister, on sober reflection, and having regard to the extent and the way in which the Liberal Party has deliberately over the last three years misconstrued the government's position in relation to school closures, has stood up in this place and done something that you would hope would come naturally to all politicians and all people within this place—namely, having the capacity or preparedness to stand up and say to the Assembly and, through the Assembly, to the people of Canberra, "On reflection, I may have done this better or differently."

The price in politics for standing up and acknowledging that something might have been done otherwise or may have been done differently is, of course, the puerile nonsense that we see proffered by the immediate past shadow minister for education. And who is the current shadow spokesperson for education? Oh, it's the scarlet pimpernel—the invisible man! I must say that I had forgotten. The invisible man is the shadow spokesperson. In fact, it is the first question asked by Mrs Dunne on education, including during the entire time she was the shadow spokesperson for education.

It is interesting that we have to have this changing of the guard before the immediate past spokesperson for education for the Liberal Party actually gets around to asking a question on education. That is reflected, of course, in her commitment to public education and the infamous assertion by Mrs Dunne that investing money in public schools is throwing good money after bad.

MR SPEAKER: Supplementary question, Mrs Dunne?

MRS DUNNE: Chief Minister, why do you allow the continual misleading of the people of the ACT on your plans for school closures and why do you not do anything about the fact that the minister said in this place, and it is recorded in *Hansard*, that “the government has no plans to close ... schools”?

MR STANHOPE: That was the position that the government put at the time. That was the position that the minister put, and it was the truth.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR STANHOPE: It was the absolute and whole truth. At the time that the statement was made, it was absolutely 100 per cent gold-plated truth.

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

Civil unions legislation

DR FOSKEY: My question is for the Attorney-General and it concerns civil unions. The media has reported that the federal Labor government does not accept ceremonial aspects of the ACT’s civil partnerships model. Can the minister please inform the Assembly of the progress the government has made in talks with the current federal government about amendments to the Civil Partnerships Bill?

MR CORBELL: I thank Dr Foskey for the question. Yes, I can advise the Assembly that negotiations are continuing between the ACT government and the commonwealth government. There has been no conclusion reached in those negotiations to date, but I can indicate that the lines of communication have remained open and positive throughout between me and my counterpart Mr McClelland and I am hopeful that we can reach a productive outcome that will allow the ACT to proceed with its legislation in a form that is consistent with the principles we have said are important and which, hopefully, is able to address and clarify the concerns being raised by the commonwealth government.

MR SPEAKER: Supplementary question, Dr Foskey?

DR FOSKEY: Yes, thank you. Could the minister please advise the Assembly how long the ACT government is prepared to remain in negotiation with the federal government before it will make a decision on the course of action it will take?

MR CORBELL: I do not think it would be helpful to indicate such a position while negotiations are ongoing.

Schools—closures

MRS BURKE: My question, through you, Mr Speaker, is to the minister for education, Mr Barr. Minister, last week the ABS released its measures of

socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage. The majority of the schools you have chosen to close are, in fact, in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of the ACT as identified by the ABS. Minister, why have you chosen to pick on the most socioeconomically disadvantaged families in the ACT by closing more schools in these suburbs rather than in other suburbs?

MR BARR: I thank Mrs Burke for the question and for the opportunity to put on record once again this government's commitment to investing in public education and to providing world-class education institutions for those communities that Mrs Burke has identified. To turn this question around, it would be: why is it that the Liberal Party is prepared to see the public education infrastructure stagnate and rot and let successive governments ignore this problem? Why did they do nothing during their time in government to address these issues?

Investment in public education in these areas and renewal in education infrastructure is a core belief of the Labor Party. We want to ensure that students across the ACT, and most particularly those who are in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, are provided with the best public education facilities. That is why we are investing record amounts of money in infrastructure renewal.

I would draw to the attention of Mrs Burke that, in two of the particular areas that the ABS identified, west Belconnen and north Tuggeranong, the government is investing more than \$100 million in new education infrastructure. We are renewing the public education infrastructure and providing the best schools in Canberra in those suburbs that suffer from some socioeconomic disadvantage compared with other Canberra suburbs.

It is also worth noting, for the 200th time in this chamber, the range of factors that the government considered when making the difficult decisions we did in 2006 to renew public education infrastructure encompassed economic, social, financial and education outcomes and factors in making our determinations following six months of extensive consultation.

But the question I would pose to those opposite is: do they believe it is fair and reasonable to let the public education infrastructure to continue to decay? Do they believe that it is fair and reasonable to say that higher socioeconomic communities should be getting a massive subsidy straight out of the education budget simply because of the size of the school, not its socioeconomic status?

You can name a couple of schools right away where there was certainly not an issue of socioeconomic disadvantage; it was simply the fact that the school was small that it was attracting a massive public subsidy. If you want to be fair to all schools across an education system and you want to direct resources to where they are most needed, that means making difficult decisions. But it also means backing those difficult decisions with significant investment.

The opposition would have a legitimate point if the government were not reinvesting all of the money saved, plus hundreds of millions of dollars more, into public education. It comes down, fundamentally, to whether you believe in quality. Is it

quantity or quality? For the people of north Tuggeranong in particular, do we need and was it viable to have five schools operating at less than 40 per cent capacity, with nearly 60 per cent bypass, as 60 per cent of the local community in Kambah was bypassing the high school and the primary schools? Was it viable to have five schools so small that they are not able to offer a full educational program and do not have the facilities and resources? That is the opposition's preferred model—just let it sit there and rot.

This government would not accept that. That is why we have invested \$54 million in a new education facility for north Tuggeranong. That is why we are investing money in west Belconnen. We believe that those communities deserve the best in public education, the best infrastructure, the highest quality teachers and their fair share of education resources. The challenge that any education minister or any government faces across a system as diverse as ours is: how do you fairly allocate resources?

The changes that we have made have been around investing in quality and investing in those areas that have been suffering educational disadvantage and in providing them with world-class education facilities. It is no wonder that the Tories, the toffs, the high end of town, sitting over there—that lot—reject this investment in public education in west Belconnen and Tuggeranong. It goes against their core philosophical beliefs.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! Members of the opposition will cease interjecting. A supplementary question, Mrs Burke.

MRS BURKE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Minister, what guarantees can you give to the most disadvantaged families that they will be no worse off financially under your school closure regime?

MR BARR: I thank Mrs Burke for her question and the opportunity to continue on this theme. This government is investing in key areas of educational disadvantage, most particularly, as I have already highlighted in this place in this morning's debate, additional support for Indigenous students, additional support for student welfare and pastoral care, additional support for—

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! Stop the clock, please. Members of the opposition will cease interjecting. Start the clock. Mr Barr.

MR BARR: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I know those opposite cannot bear to hear this. This government is investing in quality and investing in opportunity.

Mrs Burke: The community can't bear to hear what you're doing.

MR BARR: That means having to take difficult decisions. It means prioritising resources. Anyone who has an objective look at where the ACT education system was

in 2006 and compares it to the level of investment and resources that are now available to schools as a result of that difficult change process need only look at the reallocation of resources and the ability the government now has to strengthen investment in all those areas as well as providing direct financial assistance to affected families. Some \$750 was provided to each student affected by a closure to address the one-off costs associated with moving to a new school, such as the purchase of new school uniforms and a range of other things that might be associated with changing schools. The government provided that direct financial assistance to students affected.

The benefits for the education system as a whole are clear, because the resources that are available are now better able to be shared equally around the school system and better able to be targeted to areas of need, because we are not spending money heating and cooling empty school buildings, and we are not spending money subsidising well-off communities to the tune of twice as much as the average student in some instances simply for the reason that the school was small. That is an important—

Opposition members interjecting—

MR BARR: Resources were not being allocated according to socioeconomic need; they were being allocated according to the size of the school. Anyone who believes that that is fair, Mr Speaker, and that that addresses disadvantage in our school system is kidding themselves.

Mrs Burke: So you've pushed autistic children to Rivett.

MR SPEAKER: Mrs Burke, I warn you.

MR BARR: It is important that the opportunities that are available across our public education system are there for all and that it is the highest possible quality. I do not think anyone could say that the situation we were in prior to the changes we undertook in 2006 were fair and equitable across our system. Yes, that means making difficult decisions, but they were made to invest in the quality of our education system overall.

That, Mr Speaker, is the goal that must guide governments into the future—quality in education and investment in our teachers, but also in the quality of the teaching facilities, the classrooms, the infrastructure that they teach in. It is very difficult to attract quality teachers into an education system if the teaching and learning environment is second rate.

Alcohol—regulation

MS PORTER: My question is to the Attorney-General. Can the Attorney-General advise the Assembly what steps the government is taking to ensure that the legislation governing the regulation of alcohol remains consistent with community standards and expectations, particularly in relation to the important issue of binge drinking and that of antisocial behaviour by intoxicated persons?

Mr Stefaniak: In the latter part, they're not doing very well at all, Mary!

MR CORBELL: I thank Ms Porter for this question. I am disappointed that those opposite think it is funny. There are important issues that need to be addressed when it comes to binge drinking and the sale and consumption of alcohol in our community. Unlike those opposite, who seek to denigrate and downgrade the significance of this issue, the government believes that it is important that these issues drive a substantial review of the Liquor Act here in the ACT.

For that reason, yesterday I released a discussion paper on the government's commitment to review the Liquor Act in the ACT. I remind members that this follows a commitment made by the Chief Minister earlier this year that we would release a discussion paper by the end of March. That is what has been done. We have met that time frame and that discussion paper is now available for people to comment on.

In that discussion paper, the government is outlining a range of factors that the community needs to consider and which we are seeking community feedback on. Again, the opposition just does not seem to care about this issue. They seem to be completely unhelpful and disparaging when it comes to a very important piece of policy reform.

We want to hear from the whole community on the issues around how the Liquor Act should operate in the future. The types of issues that will be considered as part of this include, obviously, the licensing regime itself, whether we should change the classification of licences and whether we should move to a risk-based approach for licence allocation. This would mirror approaches taken in some other jurisdictions such as Queensland.

Some licences see more risky behaviours associated with the consumption of alcohol. The late-night sale of alcohol, sale of alcohol from nightclubs and pubs open after midnight—those types of activities are deemed to be higher risk and higher cost to the community. Therefore should we, for example, put in place a more onerous fee regime for those licence holders compared to those who are more low risk—the suburban restaurant open only until 10 pm that serves alcohol with a meal? Obviously that is a lower risk activity and something which could perhaps attract a lower licence fee. These are the types of approaches the government is exploring in its discussion paper. I look forward to feedback from the community on that.

The government is also exploring issues such as random breath testing in nightclubs and in public areas. This issue has been raised by a number of people in our community. Indeed, I get frequent representations from people who sell breath-testing products. They say that it should be made mandatory for those breath-testing products—breathalysers—to be made available in licensed clubs and hotels. That issue raises all sorts of questions. The government has no concluded view on this matter, but we believe it should be put to the test through the discussion paper process. That is what we will be doing.

We will also be pursuing in the discussion paper the issue of closing times. Are the extended opening hours on the liberal basis we have at the moment appropriate going forward? Should we consider issues such as lockouts for nightclub districts where you

are not able to enter a premise after a particular time of the night? If you are already in the premises you can obviously stay until closing time, but you cannot move from one premise to another in the early hours of the morning. Other jurisdictions are looking at that. I think Queensland has implemented that sort of regime.

These are all the issues that the government is committed to exploring in the discussion paper. This is a very important reform for our community. Our community as a whole is very interested to see how we can use our liquor licensing laws to better regulate the sale of alcohol in our community and to make sure it assists in reducing harm associated with alcohol abuse in our community. That will be the government's objective as we move forward with this discussion paper. (*Time expired.*)

Australian Federal Police—security clearances

MR MULCAHY: My question is to the Attorney-General. Attorney, as you are aware, the AFP processes significant amounts of security clearances. My question is: is there a backlog of clearances submitted to the AFP that are handled in the ACT but have not yet been processed, and can you give the Assembly an indication of how large this problem is?

MR CORBELL: I am unclear if Mr Mulcahy is referring to requests for clearances from ACT government employees—

Mr Mulcahy: No.

MR CORBELL: or from the broader community. If it is in relation to the broader community, I am aware that there is a delay in seeing those clearances completed by the AFP. The reason for that is that the AFP receives a huge number of requests for clearances every year from across the country. I do not have the figures to hand, and clearly it is not an issue over which the ACT government has any direct control, because this is done as part of the AFP's national policing responsibilities. But I am aware that there is considerable delay in some instances when it comes to getting security clearances, and that is because of the very significant increase in the number of jobs and number of positions where employers are now seeking a police clearance as part of engaging a person to work in a particular industry.

That said, I know that the AFP are working hard to try and address that matter but it is not an issue unique to the ACT; indeed, it is driven by the overall demand for security clearances across both the private and public sectors across the country.

MR SPEAKER: Supplementary question, Mr Mulcahy?

MR MULCAHY: Yes, thank you. Attorney, what are you able to do through ACT Policing to address this matter, if anything?

MR CORBELL: The difficulty with these clearances is that the AFP obviously check their own records, but they also cross-reference those checks against every other police service in the country, to see whether or not someone has a matter pending or completed or relevant which is held in the records of police services in other states or

territories. So the process can take some time. It is not a matter over which ACT Policing has any direct role; it is a national process that we are a part of.

Schools—enrolments

MR STEFANIAK: My question is to the Minister for Education and Training. The latest ACT schools census shows that ACT government schools have lost 310 students since 2007. The non-government sector increased enrolments by 433 in the same period. Minister, why is this exodus happening?

MR BARR: There are a number of factors that have contributed to that drift. I indicated one of them in this morning's debate—that is, in the primary sector, Radford College expanded its year-level provision. So about 44 students in each of the kindergarten, year 1, year 2 and year 3 levels now attend Radford. The advice we have, when comparing data from 2007 to 2008, is that just over half of those students were previously attending a government primary school.

When you look more broadly across the rest of the education sector, Mr Speaker, you will note that the extension of Burgmann college in Gungahlin to also incorporate years 11 and 12 has meant that the students who previously completed year 10 at Burgmann and then went on to a government secondary college in years 11 and 12 are now staying at Burgmann. I understand that accounts for about two-thirds of the drift between the public and private system at a secondary college level. So there are a couple of expansions in private sector provision that clearly have impacted on enrolments in the public sector.

It is interesting to note, though, that there are significant regional variances across the ACT. The growth in public sector enrolments in Gungahlin, as a result of a new education facility, Harrison primary school, is particularly strong. As I indicated this morning, early childhood schools are showing real growth, most particularly at the preschool level. Interestingly, this census has revealed that, at the four schools that are proposed to become early childhood schools in 2009, including Lyons primary, which has been the subject of some considerable debate in this place, preschool enrolments are up on recent years. That is a real sign that the community is supporting the government's position in relation to establishing early childhood schools.

In the context of this debate around public versus private, and the role perhaps that we in this place have in influencing the direction of enrolments, I received a letter this afternoon that I thought I would share with the Assembly. It was from the President of the Lyons Primary School Parents and Citizens Committee. It reads:

Dear Minister Barr,

On behalf of the Lyons Primary School Parents and Citizens Association, I would like to apologise for any inconvenience caused by the unfortunate media events of the past few days. The Lyons P&C Association appreciates the fact that you consulted with, and listened to, the communities regarding your decision at the end of last year to move the Italian bilingual program to Yarralumla.

Mr Stefaniak: Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order regarding relevance.

MR SPEAKER: You asked why—

Mr Stefaniak: I asked very specifically why there is this exodus from government schools to non-government schools. It has nothing to do with Lyons. In fact, he is probably also reflecting on a debate we are having at present in the Assembly and which is part heard. It is totally irrelevant.

MR SPEAKER: Come back to the subject matter of the question, please, Mr Barr.

MR BARR: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In looking at factors that influence enrolments, it is worth noting the views of a government P&C president. The letter went on to say:

We have been looking forward to working collaboratively with the Department of Education on the move to Yarralumla for the Italian bilingual program and on the renovations to the Lyons Primary School—

MR SPEAKER: Mr Barr, the question was about why people were departing from the school system.

MR BARR: That is right. I am about to get to an important insight, Mr Speaker, into why that is so. So if you let me finish, I will be able to bring this all together very succinctly. The letter goes on to say:

We have been looking forward to working collaboratively with the Department of Education on the move to Yarralumla for the Italian bilingual program and on the renovations to the Lyons Primary School building in preparation for the P-2 structure next year. It is disappointing to us as a committee that one parent in our community has used our children to score a few points for her political career. Mrs Dunne is not qualified to speak for the school community—

Mr Stefaniak: On a point of order, Mr Speaker: I maintain that it is clearly not relevant to an exodus.

MR SPEAKER: Sit down, Mr Stefaniak. Mr Barr said he was going to draw this together, and I trust that he will. He has not yet.

MR BARR: The letter states:

It is disappointing to us as a committee that one parent in our community has used our children to score a few points for her political career. Mrs Dunne is not qualified to speak for the school community as a whole as she does not hold a position on the school board, nor does she attend P&C meetings. We remain committed to achieving the best possible outcome for our children and to working with the department to achieve that result. I look forward to attending the school board meeting tomorrow evening to hear—

MR SPEAKER: Sit down, Mr Barr. Resume your seat. I won't tolerate that sort of behaviour. You said you were going to address the question.

MR BARR: I am trying very hard, Mr Speaker. (*Time expired.*)

MR SPEAKER: Is there a supplementary question?

MR STEFANIAK: Minister, why has the *Towards 2020* program failed to meet its objective of attracting students back to public education?

MR BARR: In response to that question, I can indicate that the government always stated, from the commencement of this four-year renewal program, that it would take some time to turn around a 30-year drift. But, as I indicated in this morning's debate, when you look at the long-run trend of enrolments between the non-government and government sectors and look at who is in power federally and where resources are directed by the commonwealth government, it is interesting—it is no surprise—that when there is a federal Liberal government and massive public subsidies flow into the non-government system, enrolments follow those subsidies. Equally, it is interesting to note that that drift slows considerably—in fact it even turns around—for the public sector when there is a federal Labor government that is investing appropriately in public education.

I go to no higher source than the Australian Education Union; the Australian council of parents and citizens; and ACSO, the government schools council across Australia. Even Trevor Cobbold agrees on this. Over the last 11 years, the federal government has short-changed public education to the tune of nearly \$3 billion. I am very confident that, following significant investment by the ACT government, coupled with a renewed interest in public education at a commonwealth level, we will see a return to public education.

The key to that is investing in quality—assuring parents that the public education system offers quality equal to or better than what is available in non-government schools. Part of that is addressing a perception that that does not currently occur, which I believe is an incorrect perception. But it requires resources, energy and effort. It also requires political leadership. That is where I come to the point: what we say in this place and the sort of campaigns that we have seen run by Mrs Dunne that have been so comprehensively repudiated by the president of the parents and citizens council of the school—to go to the point that that parents and citizens committee have expressed such disappointment that Mrs Dunne would seek to advance her political career at the expense of their children.

Mr Stefaniak: Point of order, Mr Speaker. It is the same point I made earlier: relevance.

MR SPEAKER: Come back to the supplementary question.

MR BARR: Mr Speaker, I think it is entirely relevant—what we say as politicians, the leadership role that we take, and what we say in the public arena about public education.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Barr, the question was about the 2020 program.

MR BARR: That is right, and this project is entirely a 2020 initiative. It is entirely a 2020 initiative—around early childhood education. What we are seeing from Mrs Dunne are the depths that she is prepared to go to to advance her political career to the detriment of the students at Lyons primary school. We have it here in black and white from the president of the P&C committee.

Mr Smyth: Who is the president?

MR BARR: The president is Lisa Ramshaw. She has written a letter which I am very happy to table, in addition to the letter that I read out yesterday from the school board chair, which said, “I do not think the school community has been shabbily treated as quoted by Mr Seselja.”

Mr Stefaniak: Point of order again, Mr Speaker, on relevance.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Barr made the point that these matters relate to a school which is being dealt with under the 2020 program, so it is relevant.

Mr Stefaniak: That is about as far as it goes, Mr Speaker. It is in relation to one school.

MR SPEAKER: I have ruled on it.

Mr Stefaniak: We are in the middle of a debate—

MR SPEAKER: I have ruled on it, Mr Stefaniak. Sit down.

MR BARR: They really do not like to hear this. Their political meddling and political point scoring have been caught out by the school board chair and by the president of the P&C. The lengths that Mrs Dunne is prepared to go to to generate media publicity, to derail this effective consultative process, as has been indicated by both the school board chair and the P&C chair—

Mr Seselja: You’ve changed your position three times in 24 hours.

MR BARR: We will take Mrs Dunne’s word for it over that of the P&C president and the school board chair, will we?

Mr Smyth: No, we take it over yours.

MR BARR: Is that what Mr Smyth is suggesting? Only in his fantasy world would he suggest that about Mrs Dunne, who has been caught out here not once but twice—caught out, sadly, going to any lengths to get a headline. She stands condemned.

The parents at Lyons primary school will engage in a constructive process with the department of education to get the best outcomes for their kids. That is what is important here, not cheap political stunts from the opposition.

ACTION bus service—network

MR GENTLEMAN: My question is to the Minister for Territory and Municipal Services. Is the minister aware of the claim that ACTION will be spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to change the colour of the bus fleet with the introduction of the proposed new network, and is there any substance to this claim?

MR HARGREAVES: I thank Mr Gentleman for the question and his abiding interest in things to do with transport in the ACT. Mr Speaker, we have seen media releases put out by the shadow minister for, I guess, transport. Who is it this week? Is it Mr Seselja, perhaps?

Mr Gentleman: Probably.

MR HARGREAVES: It probably is. Maybe it should be after today. The shadow minister says—and this is relevant, I have to tell you, Mr Speaker, to this notion that we are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on logos—that it is up to the Stanhope government to tell the community they will not waste any more money on further focus groups. Of course, that issue of logos was discussed where, Mr Speaker? It was discussed with the community. Through what? Through focus groups. They do not want us to have focus groups. They do not want us to talk to the community, Mr Speaker.

They say the government was planning to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars making changes to ACTION logos and colours and that they would prefer to spend the money on improving services. Let us take a couple of these claims and whether there is any substance to them. Mr Speaker, hundreds of thousands of dollars? No. They have got it wrong again. As somebody in my office was once heard to say, “Get with the program, Mr Pratt!”

Opposition members interjecting—

MR HARGREAVES: They can babble away and I will ignore it, Mr Speaker, because I am used to it.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Hargreaves, address your comments through me.

MR HARGREAVES: I am, Mr Speaker.

MR SPEAKER: And address the question asked by Mr Gentleman. Members of the opposition should cease interjecting.

MR HARGREAVES: Mr Speaker, the government is not spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on the logo, and it is not spending hundreds of thousands of dollars painting the buses. They are about four and a half years out of date, as we could kind of expect of them, because they do not understand that they lost the last election, and they are going to lose the next one.

The truth about the buses—and it might come as a surprise to those opposite who only see orange buses—is that the orange buses have not been purchased since 2004. All of the new buses that have gas-powered engines in them and the wheelchair-accessible buses are—shock and horror, you guys—green. They are green and white. As I said a couple of days ago through the media—because these guys only listen to their own voices—every time we replace a bus that is orange, we will replace it with a green and white one in just the same way as we have been doing for the last four years.

In the budget there was provision, as we know, to replace the buses, because you have to. So, when we replace the buses, we replace the livery. Mr Speaker, \$10,000 was, in fact, expended on the logo. When I went to school—which, admittedly, was a long time ago, sadly—\$10,000 did not cost you tens of thousands of dollars.

Mr Pratt: I tell you what, it would deliver a few bus shelters.

MR HARGREAVES: Mr Pratt, of course, changes direction like a duck with his feet on fire. It is very, very difficult to work out where they are coming from from time to time. Mr Speaker, what we will be doing with all of these hundreds and thousands of dollars will be talking to the people in the community who are about to experience a brand new bus service. For example, there are 130 bus stop signage bollards. They will have the information on it.

Mr Pratt: Is that two logos, John, old and new?

MR HARGREAVES: I do find this guy with the chequerboard mind tedious, Mr Speaker. I am trying to refute the misinformation that this guy is putting out into the community, and he is talking down this network, talking down this system before it has got one centimetre of rubber on the road.

Mr Gentleman asked me whether I can put that rumour to rest. Yes, I can; yes, I have. Mr Speaker, it is a brand new system; it is a brand new network. It will have a refreshed logo, and it will have the same livery it has got on the road today. I would like members of the opposition to go out there and stand at a bus stop and have a look at one of those great big things with the wheels on them. Those great big things are green!

MR GENTLEMAN: Minister, can you explain to the Assembly how ACTION intends to communicate the network changes to the travelling public?

MR HARGREAVES: Yes, I can.

Mrs Dunne: On a point of order, Mr Speaker: can I get your ruling on whether the supplementary relates sufficiently to the first question? The primary question was about logos. This one was about communicating changes to the bus timetable.

Mr Gentleman: On the point of order, the first question was regarding the introduction of the proposed new network.

MR SPEAKER: Proceed, Mr Hargreaves.

MR HARGREAVES: Thanks very much, Mr Speaker. I thank the opposition over there for wasting their own valuable educative time. We will be conveying information to the community—through you, Mr Speaker, to Mr Gentleman—because we have actually learned some lessons from the 2006 exercise. We know that we have been out there and consulted with the community extensively.

We did that through a number of ways, not the least of which was to listen to a standing committee of this place. The standing committee of this place said, “You have to communicate what the network is all about. What are the timetables? What are the bus routes? What are the things that you are doing and what are the things that you have to do?” We are going to do that. We are going to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars doing just that.

Before you issue warnings, Mr Speaker, let me put a few numbers on the table. When we introduce the new network—you work out the timetables—the timetable production is \$100,000. They are going to say, “You are producing it.” The print run is \$30,000. We, of course, will have to do radio campaigns to tell people because the bus routes are so different. We have to go through this.

We are required, under the Disability Discrimination Act of the commonwealth, to advise people of the changes there will be—to interchanges, to bus stops and to bus routes. We are required to do it. We will have major route bus stop signage. We have \$200,000 to spend on that. We also have bus stop blade signs, \$60,000; interchange route and map signs, \$10,000; interchange overhead signs, \$20,000.

We are talking about passenger information brochures, \$10,000. We are going to have touch screens at the computer kiosk—\$20,000. We will have a push-button link to the call centre at the interchanges. That is going to be introduced. If you add all those things up and a raft of other things, you come to the \$1.2 million, of which \$10,000 was put on the logo refresher. This network is not a bandaid version of 2006. This is a completely new network.

What we have got over there is a bunch of people who will use whatever dirty tricks campaign they can to talk it down. What we are trying to do with the new network, with the logo, with the livery, with the interchange information, with the kiosk, with the push-button information is communicate with the community about what exactly it is that they are receiving for those millions of dollars that this government is putting into the new network.

We have the support of the Transport Workers Union who have to deliver the service. We have the support of the community for the extra routes. Talk to those people that go to the eye hospital and tell them they do not need the service. Talk to those people that have to go to the Brindabella Business Park and tell them that they do not need the service. We consulted with them and have further tweaked it and tweaked it. That has cost us extra millions of dollars as well, which this government has provided.

This is a brand new network. That is a very old and very tired opposition. They are in opposition for the rest of their political lives in this place. As my staff member said,

all of them ought to get with the program; come up to date. You are out of date by four years. You have wasted four years of your lives. They have grown old while we have got on with it.

The communication strategy is to go out there and talk to the community before you do something, while you do it and then you do it afterwards. What happens? Where are my table tennis balls? Plop, plop, plop, plop. For heaven's sake! They criticise us for not talking to them when we do. (*Time expired.*)

Mr Seselja: Could you let it go for another five minutes, Mr Speaker?

MR SPEAKER: No.

Schools—violence

MR PRATT: My question is to the Minister for Education and Training, Mr Barr. Minister, at the opposition's recent forum on schools we heard the graphic details and saw the pain and distress of a young girl who had been the victim of a serious case of bullying, resulting in a violent assault, at Chisholm high school. Minister, you said recently, in relation to a case of violence at Calwell high school, that violence was not an issue at that school or any other government school in Canberra. Why did it take you several weeks after this violent attack to announce that police would now be formally involved in the government's Safe Schools Taskforce?

MR BARR: I must address the first part of Mr Pratt's question where he is again using a statement that the ABC attributed to me that was never made. The ABC have withdrawn—

Opposition members interjecting—

MR BARR: The ABC have acknowledged their error and withdrawn that statement. So at no point did I ever say that there were no issues at that school or within the ACT public education system or within the ACT education system as a whole, because, as we all know, unfortunately, incidents occur across all schools in the ACT. The data that we had out of ACT Policing was that, in terms of incidents where police were required to attend a school, it was pretty roughly split between the government and the non-government sector. So I am absolutely sick to death of this accusation that all of these issues are in the public sector only and do not apply in the non-government sector.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR BARR: The sort of stuff that we get peddled from the opposition about this is distressing not only for those school communities but for the public education system as a whole. And it is not just me who says this; it is everyone who is involved in public education. Just ask the Australian Education Union what their attitude is to the sort of misinformation that is peddled that this is a public sector issue only. It is not.

Mr Pratt: I raise a point of order, Mr Speaker, on relevance. The question was: why did it take you several weeks after that violent attack to get police involved in the Safe Schools Taskforce? Are you going to answer that?

MR BARR: There were two parts to your question, Mr Pratt. I have just answered the first part and put that one to bed.

Mr Pratt: Yes, but they are both supposed to be relevant. Both parts need to be relevant.

MR BARR: Indeed. I have five minutes to answer it, Mr Pratt—

Mr Pratt: Both parts!

MR BARR: So, if you would just let me finish, on the second point let me make this clear: 12 months ago we established the Safe Schools Taskforce, and on that task force ACT Policing were involved and they sent representatives to the monthly meetings. But, through the development of the policies and on the recommendation of the task force, last month I formally asked for a more senior AFP involvement, ACT Policing involvement, in the task force and for them to move from an ex-officio capacity, where they were attending the monthly meetings, to have a formal role. Twelve months ago this started.

The thing that gets me about the opposition's position is that they were asking questions about this last year in estimates, yet they seem to have forgotten all of the questions they were asking then and have now decided that this is a new initiative. No, it has been going for more than a year. You were asking questions about it last year. So to suggest that this is a knee-jerk response from the ACT government is again a ridiculous assertion from an opposition that have done no research on this issue. When they change portfolio spokespersons, they do not communicate with each other; that is fundamentally clear, and we have seen this time and time again. They have had so many different education spokespersons; between the three, between Pratty, Mrs Dunne and now the new spokesperson, if and when he pops his head up, which he is doing this week, which is good to see—it is good to see he is engaging in the education debate finally—

Mr Corbell: He is on duty, is he?

MR BARR: He is on duty; he has stopped taking his Zs and he is on duty now. It is good to see. But, fundamentally, the government undertook this work a year ago. Who did we involve? We involved parents, we involved teachers, we involved the police, we involved the education department and we involved mental health providers and a range of other people who had a stake in ensuring that we have safe school environments. As a result of this work, we have in place new policies regarding a safe school framework preschool to year 12, new policies around countering bullying, harassment and violence in ACT schools, countering sexual harassment and countering racism.

We have sought to work collaboratively with key stakeholders to develop the new code of conduct that I launched last week—12 months worth of work into this new code of conduct and a code of conduct that has been endorsed by the key stakeholders. What does that code of conduct do? It makes it crystal clear to everyone—to staff, to students, to visitors, to anyone who is on ACT public school grounds—what their responsibilities are and what their rights are, but also what sanctions are available if they breach the code.

MR SPEAKER: A supplementary question, Mr Pratt.

MR PRATT: My supplementary question is this: minister, given the history and the ongoing situation, why have you not been able to address the issues of violence and bullying in ACT schools that we know have been ignored for a number of years, including the case of a serious violent assault in an ACT high school that came to light on 18 May 2006, about which you did nothing?

MR BARR: That, Mr Speaker, is one of the more outrageous allegations we have heard in this place. All of the issues that Mr Pratt and his partner in crime, Mr Smyth, on this issue sought to peddle outside of this place have been utterly rejected by not only the police investigation but by the investigation at the school itself. That does not stop these two from spreading muck. Again, it goes to a consistent theme about what this lot are about. It goes to a consistent theme of what the parliamentary Liberal Party is about—that is, behind-the-scenes muck raking and tearing down the public education system.

Mr Pratt: Tell us what steps you took, then. Tell us all the steps you have taken.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Pratt, I warn you. Cease interjecting or I will name you.

MR BARR: Thank you, Mr Speaker, there was an extensive police investigation and an extensive internal investigation within the Department of Education and Training. I was fully briefed throughout those processes, as was, I understand, the police minister in relation to the police investigation. I will pay credit to Mrs Dunne in this instance, because she at least had the good grace and good will to not only seek private briefings but to try and get her colleagues to desist from the campaign they were running. I remember, in fact, having to take it to the then Leader of the Opposition, Mr Stefaniak, to almost referee in the dispute between Mrs Dunne and Mr Pratt and Mr Smyth over this issue.

Every time it was raised in the media that the student concerned was self-harming, they did not care about that. They wanted to pursue a political point. That, Mr Speaker, is the lowest of the low. I am so, so sorry that this is continually raised and that this poor individual who suffered considerably through this process has to go through this again and again. No, Mr Pratt will not give up on it, and it is to his amazing discredit that he will not give up on this issue.

I need to say fundamentally that this government has engaged with all of the key stakeholders on this issue. We have sought to bring everyone to the table to find a

solution. Ultimately, we will eliminate violence and bullying in our schools when we eliminate violence and bullying in our society. Schools can play a very, very important leadership role, and they do. They continue to do amazing work to address some major societal issues. For those opposite to continue this campaign against public schools is despicable, and it reflects on their character and the sorts of things that they consider are important in the public debate. For Mr Pratt to continue this line of questioning and suggest there was some sort of cover-up over the incident he has referred to is disgraceful.

Schools—enrolments

MR SMYTH: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, an objective of your government's *Towards 2020* program was to arrest the exodus of students away from the government school sector to the non-government sector. Since 2004, government school enrolments have declined by 1,564 students, 3.9 per cent, whereas enrolments in non-government schools have increased by 1,217 students, five per cent. This trend has continued despite the government's 2020 policy. Chief Minister, why have your government's school policies failed?

MR STANHOPE: Our school policies quite clearly have not failed. The ACT government education system continues to deliver the best outcomes of any school system in Australia. Indeed, when you disaggregate and remove ACT school results from those for the rest of Australia, we are the only place in Australia that competes with the leading nations of the world.

It is a matter of enormous credit to the ACT public education system—and the non-government sector—that when you remove ACT school education results across the board from the national average and look at them in toto, they compete with the best nations in the world. We are there in the top five schools in literacy and numeracy

Mr Smyth: So what about the exodus?

Mrs Dunne: Point of order, Mr Speaker.

MR SPEAKER: Stop the clock, please. What is the point of order?

Mrs Dunne: Mr Smyth's question was about the move of children from the government school system to the non-government school system. Mr Stanhope is talking about the performance of the school system in general. He should get back to the question, which is about why people are moving from the government school system to the non-government school system and why his policy has failed.

MR SPEAKER: Mrs Dunne—

Mr Corbell: On the point of order, Mr Speaker—

MR SPEAKER: I want to deal with something first. Mrs Dunne, I think that you attempt to verbal me. Mr Smyth's question was about whether the 2020 plan had failed. The Chief Minister is on song.

Mrs Dunne: Mr Speaker, on the point of order—

MR SPEAKER: I have ruled on it.

MR STANHOPE: The facts speak for themselves. The ACT education system is the best education system in Australia—by far. We produce, year on year, the best educational outcomes of any place in Australia. And in producing the best educational outcomes of any place in Australia, when removed from Australian averages, it puts the ACT as the only jurisdiction in Australia in the top five educational jurisdictions in the world.

We here in the ACT compete favourably in literacy and numeracy, across all age groups, with the best in the world. We are the only place in Australia that, in terms of educational outcomes, can hold its head with Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Finland—with the great achieving nations of the world. And guess who is in there with them? Guess who is there in the top five educational places in the world. The ACT.

We have this puerile nonsense: “Chief Minister, could you explain why your policies have failed?”—when we are only the fifth best in the world! Only the fifth best in the world! And this is a sign of failure! We have an educational system with educational outcomes that the rest of Australia and the rest of the world would cry for or die for. Such is the strength and the quality of education here in the ACT.

Certainly there are issues. There are always issues. Everybody can always do better. We are in the top five. In the last round, we came in fifth. Yes, it would be wonderful if we were first, but we are fifth. And we are to be condemned by this puerile, childish, continuing nonsense about a failure of educational outcomes or excellence. The ACT stands supreme in the production of educational outcomes or standards that are the envy of not just the rest of Australia but the rest of the world.

When I go to ministerial council meetings, when I go to COAG, and we discuss performance across the jurisdictions, the premiers look away and say, “We won’t count the ACT in that, because they are different.” Why won’t they count the ACT when they are comparing educational outcomes across jurisdictions? Because we show in stark relief the effort in other places within Australia and across the world.

We have a superb education system. It is to the eternal discredit of the Liberal Party in this place that they do not have the integrity or the grace to stand beside public education in the ACT. They continually create this perception that it is a second-class system, that you are better off if you send your kids to the non-government sector. It is the underlying message. It is the perception you continue to create—the questions you ask about violence and bullying within the schoolyard: this great serial question that Mr Pratt and Mr Smyth have been asking for two years now, to their great shame. They have been counselled by their previous leader and the previous shadow for education. I recall the speech in this place by Mrs Dunne when she essentially implored you to leave the issue alone because of the damage—

Mr Smyth: Your memory loss is still affecting you.

MR STANHOPE: I remember Mrs Dunne standing in this place—

Mr Smyth: Your memory loss is still affecting you.

MR STANHOPE: I remember Mrs Dunne standing in this place as shadow minister for education and imploring Mr Smyth and Mr Pratt to leave the issue alone because of the damage that they were doing to a number of individuals in a government high school. And what was the purpose of the attacks by Mr Pratt and Mr Smyth? It was a personal agenda. It was an agenda designed to create a political point at the expense—at the enormous expense—of a young person involved in incidents at one of our high schools. It was absolutely outrageous—grubby, outrageous politics.

MR SMYTH: Chief Minister, if you are the fifth-best education system in the world, why did the ACER report identify significant declines in literacy in the ACT over six years and why is the exodus from your fifth-best system in the world continuing unabated?

MR STANHOPE: It is not continuing unabated. The decline in the move from the public sector to the non-government sector is at its lowest, I understand, for years and certainly lower than it was during any of the years of the previous Liberal government. It is, I think, 0.8 per cent in this last year, two years after a massive reform, *Towards 2020*.

Whoever thought, claimed or suggested that we could, in two years, turn around the decline or the drift from the government to the non-government sector? We never claimed it; we never suggested it; we never asserted it; and we know it is not possible. We have never claimed, thought, asserted or imagined that you could turn around a 30-year period of continuing decline from government to non-government schools in the ACT in the space of two years. But we are having a go. We are the first government since self-government, now 19 years, to have a serious go.

We have taken the political risk; we have taken the hard decisions; we are investing massively; we are standing behind the system. As important as anything in relation to encouraging community support for the government system is a government, a Chief Minister and ministers that will stand beside the government system and say, “This is our system. This is our system of first choice. This is the system that we will continue to invest in and that we will invest in massively.”

We took the decisions. They were hard decisions; they were politically problematic, as you all know. We took the risk because it is so important. It is so important that we maintain our edge and seek to produce the best outcomes possible in the public education system. We are succeeding. In the space of two years we have slowed the drain. We have not overturned it; we have not overcome it; but we are turning it around. The results this year are a significant achievement by this government in terms of declining enrolments.

It is interesting, again, that the question today was focused entirely on the government sector. Why would not an opposition that is so blatantly aligned with the

non-government sector and so blatantly opposed to the public sector not pose questions in relation to declining enrolments to include the Catholic systemic system in the question and ask the government does it have any advice on or understanding of the reasons for the decline in systemic Catholic school enrolments over the last year? Do you know what they are? Can you sort them out? Have you asked? Is ours the only system with declining enrolments? Have the Catholic systemic schools increased their enrolments over the last year?

Do the Liberal Party and Mr Smyth make the same criticisms of the Catholic system as he makes of the government system? Does he stand here today and say that everything he has just said about the government system applies equally to the Catholic systemic system? Does he stand and say it? No, he does not. He does not inquire about the system across the board. He does not inquire, ask or suggest he has any interest in whether or not this particular issue which affects just the government system is a serious issue.

We are seeking to address it, and we have taken the hard decisions and are putting money into the system to ensure that the ACT government school system retains its place and its reputation as the best government school in Australia and, on international comparisons, in the best five systems in the world. It is a system I am enormously proud of. I look forward to continuing to work with the government school system in the ACT to the point where it will be the best system in the world. That is the aspiration. We are nearly there. That is what we seek to achieve with this massive, historic \$350 million investment in schools as a feature of the last two budgets. I believe that we will, with continued effort and commitment, sustain continued improvements in the ACT government education system.

It has to be said that we will do it without the support of the Liberal Party in this place because they do not care; they do not have the gumption for it; they do not have the stomach for it; and, quite simply, they do not care enough about government schooling to make the effort. Essentially, they do not care about it. It is not their system of first choice, as it is ours. We will do it and we will do it without your support and we will do it without you on side.

Council of Australian Governments—meeting

MS MacDONALD: My question is also to the Chief Minister. Can the Chief Minister inform the Assembly of the benefits that will flow to the people of Canberra from the decisions reached at last week's COAG meeting?

MR STANHOPE: I thank Ms MacDonald for her question. It is a very important question, and, indeed, it was a very important meeting. I was pleased to attend last week, on behalf of the ACT, the Council of Australian Governments meeting, the first of four proposed meetings for 2008. There were a number of very significant issues discussed. One of the foremost of the issues was agreement on a cooperative and accountable arrangement for the Murray-Darling Basin.

All basin governments, which, of course, include the ACT, agreed at COAG to a new approach to undertake reform in securing water for households, farmers and the

long-term health of the Murray-Darling Basin. That was expressed through an in-principle agreement through a memorandum of understanding for consultation with each state and territory. The memorandum establishes the independent Murray-Darling Basin Authority; arrangements that give the commonwealth minister power to approve a new basin-wide plan, including a new cap on the amount of water used in the basin; the continuation of the states and territories role in setting annual water allocations; decisions on natural resource management across the basin and a new role to provide input into the basin-wide plan; all basin governments to sign an intergovernmental agreement at the July COAG meeting giving effect to the new basin arrangements; and an in-principle commitment from the commonwealth to invest up to \$1 billion in stage 2 of the food bowl project in Victoria.

Mr Speaker, the ACT has expressed continuing support for the broad policy objectives of the reforms of the Murray-Darling Basin, and COAG is working to ensure sustainable water supply by expanding the CSIRO's assessment of sustainable yields.

In addition to water, there were a significant number of other outcomes from the meeting. In relation to climate change, COAG recognised and stressed the urgency to combine into one national scheme the different approaches on renewable energy targets in order to have complementary policies and measures that achieve emissions reductions at least cost and provide consistency for investors looking to support Australia's renewable energy industry.

In relation to infrastructure, COAG agreed that the immediate priorities for infrastructure for Australia over the next 12 months were the completion of a national infrastructure audit. There were also significant commitments in relation to affordable housing, with a national priority that supports the initiatives discussed through the COAG working group. This includes the distribution of \$150 million to deliver new homes for homeless people, with a guarantee that no state and territory will receive less than \$1 million per annum; \$30 million from the housing affordability fund for the rollout of electronic development applications; and a COAG commitment to providing support for infrastructure provision. The ACT welcomes the commonwealth's commitment to an audit of vacant commonwealth land which can be released for housing. We are, of course, hopeful in the ACT that that will benefit us.

COAG also set practical goals in relation to Indigenous reform and agreed on more than 23 specific actions across its agenda aimed at closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage by providing at least 48,000 dental services to Indigenous people over four years; asking the Indigenous reform working group to bring forward a reform proposal on Indigenous early childhood development; and requesting reform proposals no later than the COAG meeting in October on basic protective security from violence for Indigenous parents.

In relation to business regulation and competition, COAG also agreed to 27 areas of regulatory reform, including a landmark intergovernmental agreement to harmonise occupational health and safety laws. COAG also agreed to breakthroughs on 12 further regulatory reforms. In addition, the new COAG regulation reform agenda was settled covering nine areas: standard business reporting, food regulation, mine

safety, electronic conveyancing, upstream petroleum regulation, maritime safety, wine labelling, directors' liabilities and financial service delivery.

MR SPEAKER: Supplementary question, Ms MacDonald?

MS MacDONALD: Yes, thank you, Mr Speaker. Can the Chief Minister tell the Assembly how the additional funding that COAG agreed will be provided under the health care agreement will serve Canberra's health care system and hospitals?

MR STANHOPE: I must say that the issue that captured much public attention in relation to the COAG meeting and its outcomes was a decision by the commonwealth government for the immediate allocation of an additional \$1 billion to relieve the pressure on public hospitals. The \$1 billion is made up of the indexation of the previous commonwealth allocation for 2007-08, plus a further \$500 million in additional money. Overall, that meant for the year an increase in commonwealth funding for public hospitals of 10.2 per cent.

The exact amount of the funding to be received by each jurisdiction is yet to be provided, but on the basis of the previous formula it can be expected that the minimum amount the ACT will receive would buy in the order of 1,400 cost-weighted separations, allow for an increase of approximately 15 per cent in elective surgery or, just by way of example, slash our elective surgery waiting lists by approximately 25 per cent in one year.

Why this particular announcement was so important was that it is the first time for a decade that the commonwealth government has increased, above a standard indexation, funding for public health in Australia. It has taken a decade. In fact, it is the first time since the election of the Howard government over a decade ago that the commonwealth has increased proportionately funding for public health in Australia. It is interesting and a very clear signal of what a change a change of government federally has made for Australia—that here we have, within four months, a government coming into power, recognising the crisis in public health care or funding around Australia, the issue that is the greatest drain on state and territory funding, and it being addressed in the first COAG meeting of the year by a reversal of a decade-long trend under John Howard and the Liberal Party.

This is a really significant decision that was taken at this meeting: for the first time in a decade, after 10 years of Liberal government, a government has come to power that has said, "Yes, we recognise that public health is the number one issue for the people of Australia and, yes, we recognise that it is time for a commonwealth government to begin again to accept its level of responsibility for the funding of the health care needs of the people of Australia."

It is interesting that in the space of that 10 years the commonwealth proportion of funding for public hospitals and public health has declined from a rough fifty-fifty split when John Howard came to power to a roughly national sixty-forty split of expenditure, 60 per cent being picked up by the states and territories and 40 per cent by the commonwealth. That is remarkable when one thinks of it and when one thinks that for every state and territory the number one budget item is, of course, health. It is

the item that takes the largest proportion of every budget in Australia, and over this last decade, this Howard decade, this dark decade, the commonwealth government has, year on year, reduced its commitment to public health to the point where, in the space of that decade, the commonwealth government, under the Liberals, reduced expenditure on public health over the year by about a per cent a year, and the burden falling on the states and territories got to the point where the percentage proportion contribution by the commonwealth to health has declined by a per cent a year. It is no wonder, of course, that the states and territories have faced some of the issues that they have in relation to the provision of health in Australia.

Of course, as a result of that extra burden that the ACT government has picked up in relation to health expenditure, we have been able to reverse not just some of the implications of the previous Liberal government in power and its disinterest in health and health care and health funding, to the point where we have been able to add an additional 147 beds to replace the 114 closed by the previous Liberal government, closed by Bill Stefaniak and Brendan Smyth and Michael Moore. We have been able to double spending on mental health from the position left us, the legacy we inherited from Brendan Smyth and Bill Stefaniak—the Michael Moore legacy of the lowest expenditure on mental health per capita of any place in Australia, the legacy of the Liberal Party, the legacy of Brendan Smyth. The lowest level of mental health expenditure per capita in Australia is the Liberal Party legacy.

We have been able to undo the damage in disability services that was revealed so starkly in the Gallop commission of inquiry, the Brendan Smyth legacy on disability service provision in Australia, working with a government that for the first time in a decade has been prepared to recognise the burden of health on the states and territories. We look forward to continuing to work in the interests of the people of the ACT to provide the high-quality health care that they have a right to expect and which they receive under this government

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

Answer to question on notice

Question No 1825

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo): Mr Speaker, under standing order 118A, I wish to seek an explanation from the Minister for Police and Emergency Services as to why question 1825 from 12 February has not yet been answered.

MR CORBELL (Molonglo—Attorney-General, Minister for Police and Emergency Services): I apologise to Dr Foskey for that question not having been answered in time. I was not aware that I had any questions outstanding, but I will make some immediate inquiries. I am sure that it is in the process of finalisation now with my department, and I will provide the answer as soon as possible.

Housing—affordability

Discussion of matter of public importance

MR SPEAKER: I have received letters from Mrs Burke, Mrs Dunne, Mr Pratt, Mr Smyth, Mr Seselja and Mr Stefaniak, proposing that matters of public importance

be submitted to the Assembly. In accordance with standing order 79, I have determined that the matter proposed by Mrs Burke be submitted to the Assembly, namely:

The continuing decline in housing affordability in the ACT.

Standing orders—suspension

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (3.51): Mr Speaker, I move:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent private members' business being called on forthwith.

A matter of public importance is a one-hour discussion with no vote. It is a way to raise an issue, but it has no outcomes. The MPI for a sitting day is chosen through a random process. Any non-executive member wishing to have an MPI discussed writes to the Speaker to let him know, and the MPI is selected by the Speaker drawing one from a hat.

It was a proposal of Vicki Dunne, then the Liberal Party whip, agreed to by the crossbench and the Labor backbench in the administration and procedures committee on 29 March 2005 that MPIs not be put on Wednesdays, which are set aside for private members' business. Clearly, by secretly breaking that agreement and writing to the Speaker to propose an MPI, as it seems all the Liberal Party members did, they could be certain that their preferred MPI would be chosen.

There are two reasons why the Liberal Party might have decided to secretly break the agreement originally proposed by Mrs Dunne. One relates to ensuring the opposition uses as much private members' business time as possible. In an election year, clearly there is a lot to be gained by grabbing as much time as possible. The fact that the Liberal Party will do anything, with no regard for previous agreements and not even an attempt at courtesy, would seem to indicate that they would act as appalling bullies if ever they were in government.

It has been suggested to me that this is a way to avoid debate on my motion calling for a curfew for the airport. The Liberal Party has been very silent on the issue of airport noise and development. One of the Canberra Liberal Party's financial backers is Bob Winnell, whose Village Building Company plans to build under the flight path and who supports a curfew. But, as the EpiCentre dispute demonstrated, the Liberal opposition in the Assembly also has close ties with the airport. It is not too long a stretch to see this secret breaking of an agreement as a cowardly step to avoid having to put the position on the table.

MR CORBELL (Molonglo—Attorney-General, Minister for Police and Emergency Services) (3.54): The government will not be supporting this motion today, because we accept that the standing orders do provide for a matter of public importance on each sitting day. But we do share with Dr Foskey her concern over the extremely underhanded and duplicitous way in which the Liberal Party have conducted themselves in this matter.

The government is very happy to go back to the previous arrangement where there was an understanding—that is what it was; it was an understanding—amongst all parties in this place that MPIs were not sought on Wednesdays because that is the day for debating private members' business. Quite clearly, the Liberal Party are now indicating that they no longer wish to pursue that agreement and that understanding. The Labor Party will, of course, submit MPIs on private members' business day from next private members' day onwards, because, clearly, that agreement has now been broken.

If, of course, members collectively wish to go back to that arrangement, the government would be willing to oblige, because we accept that Wednesday is the day for private members' business, and MPIs are not necessarily the best use of time on private members' business day.

What is most disappointing is that this is the new regime under Zed Seselja. This is the new regime—it is about being duplicitous; it is about breaking understandings without giving notice of doing that; and it is simply a continuation of the approach we have seen from the Liberal Party for the term of this Assembly. I have met with members of the Liberal Party every week before a sitting week to discuss government business. At every one of those meetings, I ask the Liberal Party representative, "Any items that the opposition would like to flag as coming on for debate in the coming week?" This is after the government has laid out its whole legislative program and the great bulk of its agenda for each sitting week. Guess what, Mr Speaker? They never do flag anything. They never do. As late as today, I again asked the Liberal Party representative: "Any business? Is there any business the opposition would like to flag for debate in the coming sitting week?" The answer was no.

This does not augur well should they ever get into government. It would highlight the fact that they are not prepared to keep deals; they are not prepared to work within the agreements that are in place in this Assembly; nor are they prepared to share information that allows for the timely conduct of business in this place. The government has enormous sympathy for Dr Foskey's position, and we would agree that it would be absolutely desirable that there not be MPIs on Wednesdays, which is private members' business day.

We agree that, indeed, if there was to be a change to that, the Liberal Party should have actually done everyone the courtesy of advising them that they would not be doing that anymore. But, of course, they have done neither. They have not been prepared to signal the government in advance; they have not been prepared to do everyone else the courtesy of informing them that they would proceed in this manner. They might not tell the government, but what does this say about their relationship with the crossbench? What does this say about their relationship with those people who they perhaps need more than they need us in this place? It just shows the very poor political judgement of those opposite.

The government will not be supporting this motion today. We accept that standing orders are quite clear—MPIs are available. But this place operates on more than just the letter of the law—the letter of the standing orders; it operates also on our ability to

cooperate around the smooth flow of business in this place. Today the Liberals have been found sadly lacking in that regard.

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (3.59): I rise to support the motion by Dr Foskey. The word “underhand” is not one I use lightly, but, as has been pointed out by the previous speakers, on this occasion I am afraid it is the only one that really can adequately describe what the Liberal opposition has done. It has been handled in a sneaky, deceptive and underhand fashion. It then begs the question: why do you have to take that approach? We have seen some fairly sloppy handling of legislation, as was highlighted in an earlier debate this week where there was no consultation by the shadow Attorney-General, but I just put that down to work ethic. I hear Dr Foskey’s theory of what this is all about today.

Mr Smyth: Where have you been for the last three weeks? Interesting concept—Richard, work ethic.

MR MULCAHY: Well, Mr Smyth makes jokes about my work ethic. I would be happy to stack my effort up against what he accomplishes. Dr Foskey makes the valid point that there is another reason for this, and she has hypothesised that it is related to the motion on the airport. I am not sure that that is the case, although she puts a plausible argument. What I suspect it is about is part of the ongoing dummy spit over the changed arrangements for private members’ day. The reason I say that is the tantrums we have heard upstairs—of storming out because the Chief Minister is 10 minutes late and the failure to turn up today for a meeting with the Chief Minister. It is all about: “We can’t get our own way. We resent the fact that there are two members in this place on the crossbench who are initiating legislation that the people of Canberra want, who are initiating motions that the people of Canberra want. We are bereft of ideas, so the best thing we can try and do is shut down people who have got ideas.” Sadly, after four months here with the supposed new-look opposition, I think we are seeing most of it being directed by the master puppeteer, who is driving this new agenda and saying, “We’ve got to do all we can to shut down these two members in Molonglo.”

I think you will find that there is going to be a growing body of view in the ACT—I am seeing it by correspondence and calls—with people saying: “We can’t rely on this Liberal opposition to provide a viable alternative to the Stanhope government. We are going to be looking elsewhere.” I think you are going to find, as your opinion polls showed last November where you were down to only four likely seats before all the dramas started, that you are going to have more people in this place to contend with after next October who are not aligned to either party.

In terms of this particular stunt, it is good for one week. As of next week, of course, as Mr Corbell has pointed out, we will all put in our MPIs. So whatever great advantage has been accomplished is beyond me. I think they have missed the media opportunity for their motion, so it cannot be for that purpose. I think there is a measure of sour grapes in this motion. It is all part of a strategy to say, “Well, we’ll thumb our noses at convention; we’ll thumb our noses at pairs.” All of this is because there is a strong voice now putting up issues that concern the people of Canberra on tax reform, on various other issues of regulation. This is coming from an opposition that has been incredibly silent and inactive on a range of legislative fronts.

Where are their reform packages? Where are their policies? We are now in April, and in the four months since the leadership change there has been an incredible lack of performance. The Chief Minister came up with this “scarlet pimpernel” line, which I thought was pretty accurate, unfortunately, yesterday. We do not see the visibility of the opposition here, and that is not good for the democratic process. They are still struggling with the internal warfare that goes on, and that will continue on with their preselections. The fact is that, by demonstrating in this place their incapacity to honour agreements, they are showing that they cannot be relied upon.

Dr Foskey made the point that it troubled her. She said to me earlier that she is looking at things in terms of a minority government circumstance after October. In fairness to her, she is trying to look at the performance of the government and the current opposition, but this issue has troubled her—this lack of integrity being shown to her as a crossbencher. I expect it; I am still seeing the sour grapes coming forth. The fact of the matter is that the people of Canberra want to see a viable opposition in this place, and they need to perform and not do things behind the scenes like this. They should be straight up and down and honour agreements that are made here for the good governing of this Assembly.

MR SESELJA (Molonglo) (4.03): We will not be supporting this motion. The government have made a decision to deny the Liberal Party its fair share of private members’ days; they have made that choice. They have chosen to give two members of the non-executive part of the Assembly one further business day compared with that given to six members. This is a reasonable and rational response. We have no choice. The government has decided to deliberately deny us a reasonable share of private members’ business. They informed us of that at the administration and procedure committee, and we put them on notice. It is unreasonable for the government to act in that way. We should get our fair share of private members’ business, and we will fight to maintain our share. If we need to do it by doing MPIs on Wednesdays, so be it. It would be more reasonable if we went back to the previous arrangements or if some account were taken of the new arrangements.

Mr Corbell: Just look at your history, Zed—1997, Zed.

MR SESELJA: There are six of us. Six out of the 11 non-executive members are Liberals, and we are being denied our share of private members’ business.

Mr Corbell: 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000.

MR SESELJA: Well, I was not here in 1997, Mr Corbell.

Mr Hargreaves: You won’t be here in 2008!

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mr Hargreaves!

MR SESELJA: We are being denied our share. Now, I know that there is this love-in between Mr Mulcahy and Dr Foskey. It was not long ago that he was thrown off a committee because apparently he was a bully, but now they are apparently of one

mind on most things. It is interesting. But the reality is this: we believe that we deserve a reasonable share of private members' day. It is unreasonable for the government to deny us that, and that is why we have taken this stand. We think it is unreasonable that this motion has been moved. The MPI is on the daily notice paper, and it should go ahead.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (4.06): I concur with the manager of government business, but I think we need to set history straight here. Mr Seselja rises in his chair, with Mr Smyth's hand up his back—the master puppeteer at strike—trying to say: “Bleat, bleat, bleat, bleat. We need our fair share of it.” I remind the house of the time when the Labor Party was in opposition and there was one Labor, one Liberal and one crossbench piece of private members' business. What happened when this government was in minority government? There was one Labor, one Liberal, one crossbench. It has always been that way. The reason why it has been that way is because the parliament has been paramount. It has been the parliament, and it has been the various segments of the parliament which will have access to private members' business. (*Time expired.*)

Question put:

That **Dr Foskey's** motion be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 2	Noes 15	
Dr Foskey Mr Mulcahy	Mr Barr Mr Berry Mrs Burke Mr Corbell Mrs Dunne Ms Gallagher Mr Gentleman Mr Hargreaves	Ms MacDonald Ms Porter Mr Pratt Mr Seselja Mr Smyth Mr Stanhope Mr Stefaniak

Question so resolved in the negative.

MRS BURKE (Molonglo) (4.11): The decline in housing affordability has been a while in the making, and the sad situation now facing many Australian families and individuals is in large part the story of the failure of governments at a state and territory level over the last 10 years. Housing affordability I take to mean both the high cost of buying a place in which to live and renting a dwelling in Australia.

According to a survey of 227 cities published in the 2008 Demographia study of international housing affordability, Australia and New Zealand were the least affordable in the world. Demographia rates a city's housing market affordable when the cost of an average home is three or less times the average household income. A four-year multiple is seriously unaffordable and a five-year multiple is severely unaffordable.

Australia has 18 cities in the top 50 severely unaffordable markets and none in the world's 50 most affordable markets. On average, Australian families are forced to spend 6.1 times their entire household income to buy a typical home compared with 3.1 times in Canada and 3.6 times in the US, and that was calculated before the rise in interest rates since the start of this year. While Australians have been facing this growing crisis, state and local governments have been gleefully pocketing all the extra revenue and, as in the ACT, actually raising property taxes.

According to ABS data, state and territory and local government revenue on property taxes is at an all-time high. There has been a hike of \$1.3 billion in stamp duties on conveyances. You may well remember that the Howard government introduced the GST which goes in full to the state and territory governments with the understanding that the states and territories would phase out taxes such as stamp duty. In fact, the states and territories have simply not kept up their end of the bargain and have abolished very few state and territory taxes. They will all, including the ACT government, share in \$41.8 billion from GST next financial year, \$3.3 billion more than they were guaranteed when it was set up. But still they will not abolish stamp duty.

It is no wonder that the Chief Minister puts out regular media releases telling us that the ACT is one of the most affordable places in which to live in Australia. The truth is quite different. The data being used by the Chief Minister is skewed by the statistics showing that Canberrans have higher per capita incomes than the rest of the country, and more married women work than elsewhere in Australia. This is because it is really very difficult to survive either renting or buying in the nation's capital on one household income. This makes it especially difficult for young families and single parent households to survive in Canberra.

Five of the states and territories have recorded the highest proportion of income ever needed to meet loan repayments this quarter, while the ACT recorded its third highest proportion. That statistic is from the Real Estate Institute of Australia media release of 28 February 2008.

There is, I suggest, an increasing trend of households leaving Canberra because of the cost of housing, including renting. One young family that came here from Queensland lured by the Live in Canberra campaign tried it for almost a year and decided the cost of living was just too expensive in Canberra. I know of other cases in which households are moving to as far away as Goulburn and commuting to Canberra for work. This goes for my daughter. She had to move out of the ACT with three small children and move to rent privately in Queanbeyan.

Last August the Residential Development Council estimated that the combined taxes, fees, levies and charges on a new detached house are now typically anywhere from \$80,000 per lot to around \$160,000 per lot in south-west Sydney. Those home buyer taxes have risen by 300 to 400 per cent in recent years. An increase of \$80,000, for example, means an extra \$80,000 on a mortgage, or over \$617 extra a month—that is as at August 2007 figures—and over \$700 extra a month since those figures came out in the middle of last year.

I think there is little doubt that public concern over interest rate rises, capitalised on by the then federal Labor opposition, was a strong factor in eroding support for the Howard government, which became the fall guy for the incompetence of the states and territories. In fact, at Rudd's housing affordability summit, the focus by participants was not on rates but, in fact, on state and territory taxes and charges.

In the December quarter 2007, the house median rose above \$450,000 for four out of eight capital cities, including Canberra. The report *Beyond reach* by the Residential Development Council found that an ambulance officer and a nurse earning between \$75,000 and \$103,000 could only purchase a median priced house at four locations—all in Melbourne and Hobart—and could only purchase a median priced unit in nine locations out of 16. A single full-time childcare worker on \$35,000 would be completely locked out of home ownership and able to rent only in one location—Glenorchy in Hobart in Australia.

Renters are negatively affected by the increase in interest rates and property taxes. Recent media commentary in the *Canberra Times* suggests that home affordability can be improved by removing or restructuring negative gearing provisions. This is totally deluded as it would immediately decrease the supply of accommodation, already scarce in the ACT and elsewhere. The last time a federal Labor government tried this, this is exactly what happened, and Keating had to reintroduce it 18 months later. What we need are incentives to increase supply, not to take investment out of the housing market.

At the territory level, as Liberal leader Zed Seselja has often pointed out, we have had a problem with the Stanhope government's failure to release land in a timely manner. It is scarcity of land and, in turn, housing stock due to bad management by this government as well as a raft of increasing taxes and charges which have made housing so unaffordable here in the ACT. The report of the ACT government's affordable housing steering group last year was only the latest report to be given to this government about the parlous state of housing affordability in the ACT.

The government's own task force on housing affordability brought down a report in 2002, but little action followed despite the task force warning that solutions could not be instant and something needed to be done urgently to stop the acceleration of housing stress. The Chief Minister admitted at the launch of the task force report that the ACT has the lowest rental vacancy rates in the country, as well as the highest rents in Australia. Yet he continues to churn out media releases celebrating the affordability of housing in the ACT. It was significant that Mr Stanhope admitted for the first time on this occasion that the government got it wrong in not having a land bank—that is, a stockpile of land ready to release to the market as required. The government is largely responsible for the creation of the land supply shortage through not releasing enough land. Why has the government taken so long to realise this? Canberra is a planned city and there is no excuse.

Speaking of the initiatives mooted in the task force report, on the plus side, deferral of stamp duty and lowering the amount of duty payable for eligible first home buyers are welcomed. The deferred land payment until the certificate of occupancy is obtained

should help many who are now renting to buy a property for the first time. The idea of being able to rent a land component in a development is innovative. Shared equity schemes are likewise a progressive move. I have been pushing for this since 2002, because it allows the potential purchaser to buy a share in a property with an organisation and ultimately buy out the other party.

The notion of encouraging developers to build up to 400 dwellings for rental for a period of four to five years also has merit, but we have yet to see the detail, and the devil is often in the detail. On the face of it, the proposal to expand community housing looks good, but the government has done nothing to expand community housing significantly since it came into office six years ago. The Liberals initiated the idea of 1,000 properties being run by community housing in 1997. The number of community housing properties has remained static since 2001 under this government. The proposal to add 1,100 properties will take 10 years to roll out.

The Chief Minister still refuses to accept that his government's property taxes and charges play a major part in making housing unaffordable. However, the Property Council has stated that government taxes and charges account for no less than 25 per cent of the cost of a new home in the ACT. On average, this equates to \$108,011 when purchasing a \$425,500 home.

In conclusion, the Chief Minister also continues to ignore the disincentive of his government's land tax regime on investment in residential property in the ACT. This is a much more restrictive regime than in the states. The evidence from the real estate industry is that investors, who are mostly mum and dad investors, are put off by this government's property taxes.

The lack of housing affordability is the result of abysmal management by Labor governments at state and territory level over 10 years, and this is despite years of booming revenues. It is time that the people of Australia, particularly the people of Canberra, woke up and understood that. This government has failed to actually look after and enable more people to buy their own homes and has failed to create a position where young people can have that dream. It will require a government to take action for that to occur. So far we have not seen too much of that. I hope that by moving this matter of public importance today we will see the Chief Minister respond. Let us hope he has some answers on this matter.

MR STANHOPE (Ginninderra—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Business and Economic Development, Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Minister for the Environment, Water and Climate Change, Minister for the Arts) (4.21): There is something richly ironic about the Liberal Party lecturing anyone on housing affordability. The biggest barrier to affordability by a country mile, as those opposite well know, is the Liberal Howard legacy of interest rate rises—rises that have added \$367 a month, month after month after month, to the household bills of ordinary Canberrans. The interest rate rises bequeathed to us by the Liberals are adding \$367 a month to a standard ACT mortgage. The Liberal Party interest rate rises are a direct response to their economic mismanagement and fly in the face of promises that they made when they were last elected. They have added \$110,000 to the mortgage burden of ordinary Canberrans—the young families that the Liberals pretend to defend and represent—over the life of a loan.

Just imagine that: the Liberal Party has added \$110,000 to a standard mortgage in the ACT. So \$110,000 has been taken by the Liberal Party, through its economic mismanagement, out of the pockets of young Canberra families. That is the legacy of the Liberal Party—a \$110,000 mortgage burden, courtesy of the Liberal Party. It is the party of those who have the audacity to stand here today and moralise on housing affordability. It is the party that, over a decade of profligate spending and vote buying—economic mismanagement on a grand scale—set the inflationary foundations for the rate rises that are now burdening ordinary Canberrans.

This Liberal legacy is biting not just in the ACT but right across the nation. We are all hurting as a result of this Liberal Party legacy. The difference here in the territory is that the Labor government has been more proactive than governments anywhere else in Australia. We have recognised that, while the Liberal Party's interest rate rises are the single biggest obstacle to housing affordability for millions of Australians, there are others. The issue is complex and it deserves a complex solution. And that is what the ACT government has devised: a solution. It is in stark contrast to those on the opposition benches, who have no plan, no idea and no policy—just a grab-bag of attacks on the integrity of public housing tenants and a penchant for fear mongering. That is not a plan; it is not a solution; it is not a policy.

I say that affordability is a complex issue, and so it is. When compared with other jurisdictions, the ACT fares well on housing affordability measures. The December quarter 2007 home loan affordability report published by the Real Estate Institute of Australia gives the ACT the highest affordability index in the nation. That is not an ACT government report; that is a report in 2007 by the Real Estate Institute of Australia on home loan affordability in Australia.

The basic measure of affordability across Australia is the proportion of family income devoted to meeting average loan repayments. And the ACT performs well in this regard. It is good of the Liberal Party to give us this opportunity to again put on the record the facts about what happens in the ACT, on average. We have to say “on average”; we have to acknowledge that some Canberra families are in very significant housing stress. There are some families—indeed, quite a number of families—within the ACT who do have significant stress or difficulty in meeting their mortgage payments. Of course, adding to that stress is the Liberal Party's interest rate rises, which have added \$337 a month to the mortgage of an average Canberra home buyer.

As I say, I accept that there are families who continue to be in significant stress, but on average, 21 per cent of the family income of an average Canberra family goes towards meeting loan repayments. Nationally, the proportion is 37.4 per cent. Just compare those figures. In the ACT, 21.1 per cent of the average family income goes towards meeting loan repayments. Nationally, it is 37 per cent. In New South Wales, it is 34.7 per cent. In Victoria, it is 36.2 per cent. In Queensland, it is 38.7 per cent. In South Australia, it is 35.7 per cent. In Western Australia and Tasmania, it is 33.5 per cent. Compare all of those percentages in the states with the figure for the ACT. In the ACT, it is 21 per cent. We Canberrans, on average, spend 21 per cent of our incomes on our mortgages.

Let me repeat that: in the ACT, the figure is 21 per cent. In New South Wales, 34 per cent of the average household income goes on the mortgage. In Victoria, 36 per cent of the average household income goes on the mortgage. In Queensland, 38 per cent of the average household income goes on the mortgage. In South Australia, 35 per cent of the average household income goes on the mortgage. In Western Australia and Tasmania, 33 per cent of the average household income goes on the mortgage. In the ACT, 21 per cent of the average household income goes on the mortgage.

The proportion of income needed to make rent repayments reveals a similar picture. In the December quarter 2007, the proportion of the family income devoted to meeting median rents in the ACT was 16.6 per cent. Nationally, the proportion of family income devoted to meeting median rents was 23.9 per cent. Across the border in New South Wales, it was 24.8 per cent. In Victoria, it was 20.6 per cent. In Queensland, it was 25.1 per cent. In South Australia, it was 24.5 per cent. In Western Australia, it was 23.8 per cent. In Tasmania, it was 28.4 per cent. In the Northern Territory, it was 26.1 per cent. And what was it in the ACT? In the ACT, it was 16.6 per cent.

No-one denies that there is enormous demand for housing in the ACT; there is. While we in the ACT fare well in the measures that I have just mentioned, some in our community, as I said, are finding it more difficult to access affordable housing than has been the case at certain other periods in our history. A number of complexities have led to that position. That is why the Labor government, my government, established the Affordable Housing Task Group, as far back as 2006. It is why, a year ago, we released the country's most far-reaching and comprehensive action plan on the issue—a plan that is now being looked at by other jurisdictions, and even by some jurisdictions overseas.

In fact, some of the initiatives developed by Labor here in the ACT have been adopted by the Council of Australian Governments as a way of addressing housing affordability nationally. Indeed, I received just today a recent report which quotes Michael Wellsmore, the President of the Real Estate Institute of the ACT, as saying, in relation to the ACT government's housing affordability strategy, that he welcomed the initiative. He went on to say: "I think it's brilliant." That was said by the President of the Real Estate Institute of the ACT. What does he think about the ACT housing affordability strategy? He says—

Mrs Burke: When do we see it work?

Mrs Dunne: Let's see it work.

MR STANHOPE: Let me just finish that quote from Mr Michael Wellsmore, the President of the Real Estate Institute of the ACT. When he was asked to comment on the ACT housing affordability strategy, Mr Wellsmore said, "I think it's brilliant." Indeed, other governments do as well.

As I say, the Council of Australian Governments has adopted parts of the action plan. The action plan includes a range of initiatives right across the accommodation

spectrum. It is creating more opportunities for home ownership by accelerating the release of residential land by 1,000 blocks in this financial year alone, with much more to come. It is delivering a wider diversity of housing products at a range of prices. It is inviting institutional investment in private rental accommodation, expanding the provision of community and not-for-profit housing, providing more targeted public housing and delivering more supported and aged accommodation. It is a whole-of-government program and—something that those opposite quite clearly do not understand when they attack it in a quest for political points—it is being delivered in partnership with the private sector: with builders, with developers, with architects, with investors and, indeed, with the whole of this community.

The government has moved quickly to implement the housing affordability plan. Already, we have increased the supply of land to the market by an additional 1,000 blocks to an unprecedented total of 3,200 in this financial year. We have streamlined the release and approval processes for land, including responding to industry calls for englobo releases. We have mandated the delivery of new house and land packages priced between \$200,000 and \$300,000. We have provided more generous and more targeted financial concessions to help more Canberrans take the step into home ownership, and to do so with greater confidence and less trepidation.

We have embarked on an exciting initiative that will involve institutional investors in the provision of affordable private rental accommodation. In relation to that, we have gone to the market for expressions of interest. We have massively expanded the role and capacity of Community Housing Canberra by providing an equity injection of \$40 million and a loan facility of \$50 million, with an aim and a challenge to Community Housing Canberra over the next 10 years to produce an additional 1,000 affordable houses for purchase and for rent by those that do experience some housing stress.

We have ensured that better and more targeted use is made of public housing. We have released two demonstration projects to showcase affordable land and housing packages. We have rewarded innovation in affordable housing design and construction through an excellence in housing affordability award. Just this week, I announced the winners of the Housing Industry Association and Royal Australian Institute of Architects affordable housing design competition. I was very pleased to be at that function this week in order to acknowledge those who participated. The response from architects, designers and students in architecture at the University of Canberra was overwhelming in regard to the prizes that each of them had achieved.

The government has partnered with business and community organisations to achieve real results. I would like to acknowledge and thank all those organisations that are working with the government to address housing affordability and that have shown leadership and are committed to making a difference for the Canberra community. The government has been very pleased to create the circumstances where these challenges can be met through innovative ways of thinking and delivery of creative solutions. Labor is getting on with the job of providing access to affordable housing for all.

At the launch of the action plan, I acknowledged that there was no quick fix and that we would need to make fundamental changes to the system. This is a very ambitious

long-term program and the government is committed to it. We believe that, over time—and we have always made the point that it will require time—we will achieve significant change and deliver benefits to people within the ACT seeking to enter the housing market.

Canberrans could be excused for wondering what the Liberals' plan is. We have not seen the plan from the Liberal Party in relation to this. The reason we have not seen a housing affordability plan from the Liberal Party, other than their commitment to abolish the Land Development Agency, is that they do not have a plan. Their plan, essentially, is to carp, cavil and criticise while, all around them, Labor is busy, in partnership with the private sector, with getting on and getting things done. More initiatives are scheduled for delivery soon. For example, our innovative land rent scheme will be rolled out very soon—another helping hand for those contemplating entry into home ownership.

Affordable housing has been, and will remain, a priority for the government over the coming years. I am proud of what we have achieved to date and I look forward to the ACT remaining at the forefront in this area of national policy development. It is a pity that, to the extent that we have made significant gains here in the ACT, many of those gains have been severely impacted by the Liberal Party's economic mismanagement that has led to an average Canberra householder, young families, having to pay, on average, an additional \$367 a month. That \$367 a month, month on month on month, is as a result of Liberal Party economic mismanagement stretching over the last decade.

Liberal Party mismanagement: profligate spending, outrageous and audacious attempts at vote buying, the promising of tax cuts and the driving of inflation. The greatest issue facing young homeowners today in the ACT is the Liberal Party legacy of a \$367 a month extra burden on their monthly mortgage payments—\$110,000 over the life of an average mortgage. That is the Liberal Party legacy. To the extent that governments around Australia, in partnership with industry, have sought to deal with issues around affordability, they have been seriously constrained in their capacity to get on top of the problem as quickly as they would like by the Liberal Party's indifference to the young working families of Australia as a result of their economic mismanagement, which has driven inflation to the point where an average young Canberra family, courtesy of the Liberals, now pays an additional amount of just under \$400 a month for their mortgage. It is a matter of eternal shame for the Liberal Party.

MR SESELJA (Molonglo—Leader of the Opposition) (4.36): We once again see the hypocrisy of Jon Stanhope when he talks about young families in the ACT.

Mr Stanhope: You remember young families now, do you?

MR SESELJA: We are going to have the Chief Minister again preach to me about how I am out of touch with young families. We look forward to that debate going on, as the Chief Minister leaves the chamber. He can never stand to hear the response to his diatribe. He can't stand to hear the response. He throws the diatribe out there without any justification. We know that he and his office and the new planning

minister and his office have been busy running around and blaming the predecessor, Simon Corbell, for all of the problems in housing affordability in the ACT.

Industry constantly gets the message: “It’s not our fault, it was Simon’s fault. Simon is responsible.” And, to an extent, I agree. The policies, under Simon Corbell as planning minister, and when he had responsibility for land release, did hit young families hard. But in hitting them so hard, what did the Chief Minister do about it? Nothing. For years, he did nothing but sit back and watch as land release in the territory was deliberately squeezed by this government—by his government—and now he claims to care about the issue as he tinkers at the edges in dealing with this serious issue.

We know that the Chief Minister is out of touch on this issue when he constantly talks about how the ACT is an affordable place to buy a home. He constantly lauds it, yet we know that the reality for young Canberrans on the ground is very different. We know that for many Canberrans with small mortgages and high house and land values, housing affordability is simply not an issue. That plays into those figures that we hear cited. But the overarching message from the Chief Minister is that it is affordable: “So what are you complaining about, young families? Why are you complaining that you would have to borrow \$330,000 or \$350,000 to buy a basic first home? Why are you complaining? We’re affordable.” That is what the Chief Minister tells us: “We are an affordable jurisdiction.”

We have seen the Chief Minister today, in numerous press releases, in a speech on 6 March this year, and over and over again, talking about the ACT being an affordable jurisdiction. It demonstrates how little he cares for the young families who have been adversely affected by the policies of his government in pushing the dream of home ownership out of their reach. There is absolutely no doubt that it was the deliberate decisions taken by his administration that have caused so much pain for thousands of Canberra families.

With respect to the data, Mr Stanhope talks about the home loan affordability indicator. As I said, this does not take account of the reality on the ground for first home buyers at the moment. It is comparing the cost of mortgages across the board, and that includes those on very high incomes with low mortgages as well as the thousands of young Canberrans on average incomes who are faced with the prospect of very high mortgages or actually servicing those very high mortgages at the moment.

Mr Stanhope, in the 21 February edition of *B2B in Canberra*, boasted about the affordable housing action plan. He skates over the fact that the government is responding to an issue that it created through its deliberate policies—through deliberately stifling land supply, through deliberately stifling competition and through refusing to make reasonable reviews of its tax settings. All of those things have led to thousands of Canberra families facing very difficult circumstances in terms of buying a home.

We have only to look at the allhomes website, which reveals that the cheapest three-bedroom house in Banks, Canberra’s southernmost suburb, is a courtyard home priced at between \$315,000 and \$330,000. It is “voted most likely to sell this week”.

The website's mortgage calculator tells us that, with a full 10 per cent deposit, they will still wind up paying a mortgage of \$2,110 per month for a 30-year loan.

We can put this into perspective when we consider that, for an average Canberran, for an EL1 in the public service on \$75,000, this would consume almost half of their after-tax pay. So we are not dealing with low-income earners. Someone on \$75,000 is not considered to be a low-income earner. They have done reasonably well but they are certainly not wealthy. In order to buy the cheapest house in Tuggeranong, they are now faced with paying half of their after-tax income in servicing their mortgage. The median sales price for Banks in 2008 is \$380,000. Mr Stanhope himself, in his March media release, said:

It is generally accepted that housing stress occurs when more than 30% of the gross family income is required to pay for housing.

So we know that thousands of Canberrans are in mortgage stress. It is not just low-income earners; be they low-income earners, middle-income earners or even relatively high-income earners, they are working hard, and much of that is in order to pay their debt.

The problem that has been created by this government is not one that can be fixed overnight. It simply cannot. We have long advocated that some time needs to be taken, because we do not want to see distortions in the market in responding to the crisis that has been created by this government. They squeezed it on the one hand, but we on this side will not be advocating, in response, any flooding of the market. But over a period of time, we do need to see more land ready to come onto the market quickly. We do need to see competition. We want to see genuine competition. Whether it involves the LDA in its current form or whether it involves private sector developers, we need competition in this market.

This government has deliberately stifled that competition. We have only recently seen it pull back, to some degree, from being the monopoly developer of residential land in the territory. The record, despite the assurances of the planning minister when the agency was set up, has been that it has made housing less affordable for young Canberrans. So we do need to see land that is ready to respond to demand, and that means ready to respond when there is a slowing in demand. At the moment, with the mismanagement of this issue by the government, because of the significant gaps between when a subdivision is announced and when it actually comes online, not only do we see dangers on the upside in terms of artificially pushing the price up because of the delay in things coming to the market, but also, if things do turn around, if we do see a slowing of our economy as a result perhaps of public service cutbacks at a federal level, and we have got this massive delay in the release, there is a risk to the other side.

The way that this government has managed land release in the territory has caused a lot of pain to thousands of Canberrans at the moment. Potentially, if things were to slow down, it could actually cause pain the other way. We do not want to see either situation occur. We do want to see over a period of time a much more sensible management of land supply and land development in the territory. We want to see

supply ready to come onto the market when there is a spike. And when there is a slowdown, the supply of land should slow down somewhat as well so that we do not see a flooding. But this government is not going to be in a position to do that either way because of the significant gaps between when it announces the land release and when it comes onto the market. That has caused problems and will continue to cause problems.

We have seen the combination of slow land release and a lack of responsive land release. We have seen no real changes to the tax arrangements and we have seen a stifling of competition. All of these issues are the primary drivers of price in the territory and of making housing unaffordable for young families. I have relatives in Melbourne who, just six months ago, were able to purchase a house in the outer suburbs for \$290,000—a three-bedroom ensuite home on a 900-metre block.

Mr Mulcahy: But you need a cut lunch and a visa to get there!

MR SESELJA: It is a longer trip into the city—it takes about 40 minutes to travel into the city. We have not seen Toorak prices go down but we have seen some reasonable prices in the outer suburbs, and that is what we would like to see. We should see some reasonable prices for first home buyers, particularly in the outer suburbs. This government has mismanaged this issue so badly that it is causing pain at the moment. Of course, potentially, through its mismanagement it could cause a downside pain in the opposite direction in the months and years to come. We need to get the balance right over a period of time by consistently managing the process, by having competition in the market so that we have a responsive market, and not a market that dips suddenly or rises too sharply, to the detriment of first home buyers.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (4.46): I note that, in bringing forward this matter of public importance, Mrs Burke ended her speech five minutes before her time was up. I can see how important it really is to her.

Mrs Burke: I talk quickly.

MR HARGREAVES: This government should be commended for its unique, innovative and comprehensive affordable housing action plan. Mrs Burke indicates that she talks quickly. I do not believe that; she just talks a lot. The plan leads the nation, giving leadership in the face of inaction and neglect on such an important issue by the previous federal government. It is not just benign neglect. The additional \$110,000 in interest payments over the life of an average home loan—perhaps the single most exacerbating factor—is a result of ignoring persistent warnings by the Reserve Bank, and economic mismanagement.

The Treasurer has provided comparisons of housing and rental affordability. It would be useful for me to provide the Assembly with some national comparisons of growth in house prices. The ABS house price index data released recently shows that established house prices in Canberra rose by 4.4 per cent in the December quarter 2007, and 14.3 per cent compared to the December quarter 2006. The Canberra result is in line with the weighted average of the capital cities. Nationally, house prices were

up by 3.2 per cent in the December quarter 2007 and 12.3 per cent compared to the December quarter 2006. Melbourne at 18.1 per cent, Adelaide at 20.2 per cent, and Brisbane at 21.6 per cent recorded much stronger growth in prices in the December quarter 2007 compared to the same quarter in 2006. Sydney at eight per cent, Hobart at 11.1 per cent and Darwin, also at 11.1 per cent, recorded lower growth over this period.

So the growth in Canberra house prices was in the middle of the figures for the capital cities, in line with the national average. Those opposite have not acknowledged this. The increase in project home prices in the December quarter 2007 compared to the same quarter in 2006 was 3.5 per cent. The weighted average of the eight capital cities was 4.6 per cent. So the growth in project home prices was actually lower than the average of the capital cities. Those opposite have not acknowledged that either.

The Treasurer has highlighted the broad range of measures and actions that the government has undertaken to address housing affordability, and action is actually happening. In order to deliver a range of housing options throughout Canberra, the government has accelerated the release of residential land and worked with the private sector in the development of housing estates either as joint ventures or as englobo estates. Smaller, more affordable blocks are now a mandatory component of all new residential estates.

The government has streamlined planning systems and introduced new provisions to ensure that the leasehold system operates correctly and fairly. New fees will serve to discourage land banking and land speculation by encouraging landowners to build within the time frames contained in their leases. In times of tight land supply, it is unreasonable if significant amounts of land are not being used for the purpose for which they were released. Innovative housing products are being encouraged by showcasing new ways of designing and constructing affordable housing and demonstration villages and through the excellence in housing affordability award. Members would be aware that encouraging institutional investment is one of the major initiatives of the recently elected federal government.

This was one of the 61 measures in the affordable housing action plan, and the government has already approached the market seeking expressions of interest from financial institutions and consortia. The most important part of this action plan is the commitment shown by the government to all members of the Canberra community, not only those who are in a position to own their own homes or rent in the private market. This fits comfortably with the Stanhope Labor government's general approach to govern for the whole of the territory, not just sectional interests.

There is no doubt that the most affordable housing is public and community housing, and providing opportunities for improved community and public housing makes this action plan different. Unlike other cities, where churches or other community organisations, and even private landlords, provide an alternative low-cost accommodation option, in the ACT there are few options apart from social housing.

In addition to our recurrent expenditure, the ACT government provides an asset worth \$3 billion for affordable housing. Housing ACT remains the biggest landlord in the

territory, with over 11½ thousand properties. In addition, the community housing sector manages over 600 tenancies. These properties represent approximately nine per cent of the total housing stock within the ACT. The ACT has a higher proportion of public housing than anywhere else in Australia. This government is committed to maintaining public housing numbers, as opposed to the previous Liberal government's intention of reducing public housing numbers. I suspect that a future Liberal government will reduce the number as quickly as they can.

This government is committed to retaining the most affordable housing at high levels to ensure that, for those most in need, we are able to limit the amount they need to spend on housing and maximise expenditure for other daily necessities. This government retains a strong commitment to public and community housing as a means of delivering affordable housing.

Against the backdrop of the housing affordability challenge, the government has positioned public housing so that it is principally targeted to those most in need and has revised allocation categories so that timely allocations are made to applicants with priority needs. In the recently released *Report on government services 2007*, Housing ACT ranked highly in a number of key areas. Importantly, this included the proportion of new housing allocations going to clients in great need. In the ACT, 86.5 per cent of new allocations now go to applicants in urgent need of housing, compared to 38.1 per cent nationally. Let me repeat that: in the ACT, 86.5 per cent go to applicants in urgent need compared to 38.1 per cent nationally.

In early June 2006, the government embarked on a series of reforms to further sharpen its focus on people most in need of public housing assistance. Those applicants who have needs and risk factors such as homelessness, mental health, serious medical issues, women escaping domestic violence and/or children at significant risk are eligible for priority allocation. Priority housing applicants are limited to 150 at any one time, with the expectation that these will be housed within three months. I am delighted to say that the new system is showing significant improvements.

To date, the average waiting time for priority applicants is 68 days compared to an average waiting time under the previous system of nine months for priority applicants. In addition, Housing ACT's stock restructuring program is continuing to ensure that it best meets existing and future client needs. The government has opened up home ownership opportunities for their tenants and will introduce a shared equity scheme. Under this scheme public housing tenants will be able to buy a percentage of their house from the government. They can buy additional percentages as their circumstances improve and permit. This will allow people who might not otherwise be able to enter the housing market to enjoy the benefits of home ownership.

The government has been working on developing a scheme that is appropriate for the ACT. Shared equity schemes are not uncommon, being run by various state housing authorities around Australia. However, it will be a new concept here in Canberra and, as such, it will be important to make sure that people who want to participate enter into it fully aware of what the scheme entails and do not over-commit themselves.

The government has recognised the important role that community housing plays in assisting those Canberrans on low to moderate incomes, particularly those who do not

qualify for public housing. For some years now, Community Housing Canberra has played a vital role in assisting Canberrans on low to moderate incomes by providing affordable housing that is appropriate to their needs. For this reason the government has provided CHC with an injection of \$40 million through the transfer of properties from Housing ACT. CHC has also been provided with a \$50 million loan facility to support a 10-year program to provide 500 dwellings for rent to low to moderate income households and 500 dwellings for sale to moderate income home buyers. Overall, this partnership will deliver the supply of around 1,000 dwellings.

The ACT government has been working with other state and territory jurisdictions for some time to address a range of housing issues, including social housing and broader housing affordability issues. Since the election of the Rudd government there has been a recognition at the national level that a concerted effort is needed to tackle these issues. Given the importance of the national debate, I believe it is useful to address actions taken since the election of the Rudd government.

In December 2007, the Rudd government announced the establishment of a Council of Australian Governments housing working group, chaired by the newly appointed Minister for Housing, Ms Tanya Plibersek. The COAG housing working group was formed with the key objective of ensuring that all levels of government work together to improve housing affordability and negotiate a new national housing affordability agreement which builds on previous agreements and includes housing for Indigenous people.

Mr Speaker, I think you can tell that this government takes housing affordability particularly seriously. It tackles it from the perspective of land release and from the perspective of public and community housing. It believes that safe, secure and affordable housing is the plank from which people can leap into a better and more secure life.

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (4.56): Mr Speaker, it is an interesting topic that has been put on the paper today. I have already made my comments about what I think must be a short-sighted approach by the opposition, which is being short-sighted. I am amazed that they would sacrifice a vote on a far more detailed motion on housing affordability proposed by their leader and replace it with an hour's worth of discussion, but that is the wisdom of the group.

I will speak on this matter of public importance, but I must say that I have been disappointed by the rather backwards way in which discussions of housing affordability have often proceeded and I have no confidence that anything is going to change today as a result of this discussion. I am happy to stand here and talk about housing affordability; it is obviously an important issue. But we can have discussions here until we are blue in the face and nothing is actually going to change.

This position might buck the trend, but I for one do not believe that much is gained by standing around here and talking about housing affordability or simply bemoaning the fact that property prices are so high. Merely shaking our fists about housing affordability will do nothing to change the situation, no matter how hard and loudly the Liberal Party tries to do so.

I know that the Liberal Party thinks that this is an issue that is going to appeal to the electorate. However, if—as I suspect he will—the Liberal leader chooses to build his campaign on this issue, he is going to have to do more than simply wring his hands and bemoan the fact that housing prices have increased and that people are finding it harder to enter the property market.

There is no question that it is difficult to enter the housing market. Prices for both renting and purchasing properties have increased, and this is presenting a significant barrier for many people who are trying to purchase properties. However, expressing angst and concern and trying to whip up public fury does absolutely nothing to help these people. There is a need for some specifics.

If they want to address this problem, I want Mr Seselja and the opposition to answer a couple of basic questions for the people of Canberra. I am happy to talk about—as this MPI says—“the continuing decline in housing affordability in the ACT”. But at some stage we have to ask: what specifically is the Liberal Party solution? If it is to release more land, how much more land do they propose should be released? And, to continue that train of thought, how much are existing properties to be devalued? If we are going to release land in order to drive down the cost of houses, what is our target? What level of affordability is about right? In other words, what are the criteria by which we decide how much land to release? I have not heard any answers to these questions.

The idea that houses are too expensive is a rather intuitive notion that is built on the large increases in price that we have seen in this decade. These are above historical trends which have persisted since around the 1970s. If we are going to talk seriously about this issue, we need to have some idea of what we think is too expensive. The scarcity of resources, land availability and the labour required to build housing means that houses will be a rather large investment. The family home remains most people’s greatest asset, and I believe that this will probably always be the case. Again, we need greater specificity on what our goal is and how much land we need to release to do this.

This is especially important given that a great many people rely on the existing equity in their homes as a means of securing debt either for the home loan used to purchase the property in the first place or as a means to invest in other assets for their future security and prosperity. Those familiar with the home loan market know that home buyers who hold less than 20 per cent of the equity in their home are generally required by their loan contract to purchase mortgage insurance, which can be a substantial additional cost on top of mortgage payments.

If the government were to flood the market with land in an effort to combat problems with housing affordability, there could, indeed, be a drastic reduction in the cost of housing. In such a case, many people who purchased property before the drop in prices could find themselves with significant equity problems. This is what we have seen in the United States. Many will face additional costs for mortgage insurance. Certainly their lenders will be eager to take whatever steps they can to ensure that they have adequate security, and this could impose further costs. It is already happening in the commercial sector in Queensland, where banks are expecting clients

to reduce their level of exposure because of reductions in the value of certain commercial properties that have been financed.

The degree to which this is a problem is something that can be determined only by looking at the financial data. But the point is that it is not only would-be home buyers that we have to think about. There are others as well who, sometimes through substantial sacrifice, have entered the property market in recent years and rely on the high value of the property they have purchased as security to cover their loan obligations. Just as the large and rapid increases in property prices have caused problems for many people, a drastic reduction in property prices could also cause significant problems.

What is needed is a rational assessment of the magnitude of the two opposing problems and an assessment of how land release will impact on people who have bought property in the property market in recent years since the property boom. We may like to think that there is a panacea for all of our woes, but the truth—as in so many other areas of economic policy—is that there are often only trade-offs.

My message and word of caution in this debate is that we have got to remember that around 76 per cent of Canberra people own their own homes. I am keen to hear what message we are sending out to those people—to say how much they should lose in personal wealth and equity in their home to achieve this notion of housing affordability that Mr Seselja has raised here today. Is it 10 per cent on a typical family home in Gungahlin or is it 15 per cent? They will have to address that issue in terms of their personal stake in the home, and they will have to take that into account in terms of their relationship with their finance source.

It is not as simple as simply uttering a bit of rhetoric and keeping some people happy by saying that we should have more building going on. We have to consider what the consequences are. Those of us who were around in this town back in the early 1990s would recall a situation when the release of land, in my view, was not well managed. It led to quite an adverse impact on home values, with many people incurring losses on sales of property.

We need to be very careful about this. I do not accept that the ACT is an isolated environment. I reject what the Chief Minister said in terms of having a decade of financial mismanagement through the federal government. For heaven's sake! We have two per cent unemployment in this town. There has not been any record of it being that low since the history books were collecting data in this territory. And the rest of Australia has seen prosperity on a scale that is without precedent.

The economic boom that we have had over the last decade has produced wealth on an unprecedented scale. There is wealth in superannuation. There are many people in our communities who have become millionaires through growth in property prices. There are people who have made fortunes on the equities market. It is arrant nonsense to say that this community and this country have suffered through 10 years of economic mismanagement. The fact of the matter is that we have done very well.

Things are certainly under pressure on a global basis. You only have to go across the Tasman to New Zealand: they are now typically paying between 10 and 11 per cent

on mortgages. At night on the news, we see the impact of adverse outcomes in the United States. Is that the fault of John Howard? I think not. There are global factors in play. The great thing that happened in the last 10 years was that we managed to resist the Asian market meltdown because of prudent and clever steps taken by the Australian Treasury under the direction of the former government. So I cannot accept that.

Similarly, I cannot accept that problems with the value of homes in the ACT are unique to this territory. Recently I had someone lobby me and say: "All the problems in Canberra are housing affordability. People will not move from Sydney; it is too expensive." I said, "You have to be kidding. I have lived in Sydney; I have friends in Sydney. Don't tell me that you can go and buy a cheap home in Sydney"—unless you want to live in Siberia or be in a lean-to somewhere on the fringe. No-one will convince me that trying to buy a home in the decent areas of Sydney is even comparable to the cost of setting up shop in Canberra, with lower travel times and the like. These problems have to be seen in context.

In the remaining time, let me say that from my point of view it is difficult to determine exactly what Mr Seselja proposes as his solution to the housing affordability problem. I had this debate with him when I was one of his colleagues; I am still failing to see the end point of the logic in terms of how they are going to solve it.

I have also looked through the government's affordable action plan and I have real issues with that. There is a lot of rhetoric in there, but I do not see solutions, in many cases, that will really work.

Mrs Burke: He was the one that wouldn't do anything about it.

MR MULCAHY: Mrs Burke said you should not do anything about it. In a lot of areas in economics it is sometimes better not to do anything about things because you can sometimes, by government intervention, create a whole new set of problems.

What I am saying is that, if you are going to intervene in the marketplace, you had better be sure that you understand the consequence for home owners in this territory, because they will be savage in their response if you destroy the value of their homes.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (5.06): Housing affordability remains one of the most concerning issues faced by our community. It affects our young people who are trying to accumulate capital in preparation to buy a house; it affects those actively wishing to enter the housing market; it affects parents as they struggle to assist their families to get into the housing market.

The Stanhope government's attempts to place the blame for the housing price crisis at the feet of the former federal government, specifically through recent increases in interest rates, is rubbish. It conveniently ignores the role of the Stanhope government in exacerbating the housing affordability crisis. I want to deal with the housing affordability crisis by looking at the approach of this government to raising revenue. In terms of revenue raising in this city, the Stanhope government is simply involved in

a one-horse race, and that race is the property market. All of this is critical to the issue of the impacts on the price of housing.

What has the Stanhope government done over the past seven years with respect to revenue raising that has had an impact on the cost of housing? It has raised existing taxes and introduced new taxes. I mention the utilities tax, the fire and emergency services tax and the increases in land tax. Some of us will recall that the Stanhope government introduced a new tax as part of its housing affordability package. Under the guise of “a duty deferral proposal”, the Stanhope government introduced a measure by which eligible households can defer the payment of conveyancing stamp duty. This deferred duty attracts interest and increases the costs that have to be met when buying a house. In reality, this interest on conveyancing stamp duty is a tax on a tax—and it is the worst kind of tax. It is also an inefficient tax.

The Stanhope government’s record on taxing the community is pathetic. The parameters of that tax policy were put eloquently by the former Treasurer Ted Quinlan when he told the real estate industry in March 2005 that the Stanhope government would squeeze investors until they bled but not until they died. This government, the Stanhope government, has had a very simple approach to fiscal policy. On the revenue side, it is—in true traditional Labor Party fashion—to jack up taxes as far as they will go.

Last Saturday in the *Canberra Times*, Crispin Hull commented on land tax and what has happened in the ACT over the last decade. Mr Hull is a landlord and he was citing his own examples; he has gone back to his records. He said:

In 1993-94, rates on my rental property were \$297 and the land tax was not much more at \$325.

Last financial year the rates were \$1841 and the land tax was \$4282.

So over the 13 years, rates had gone up 520 per cent. And land tax 1375 per cent.

In comparison, inflation in that time had gone up by a mere 38 per cent and average weekly earnings by 91 per cent.

We have Mr Corbell talking about greedy landlords. Who is greedy here? Let us face it. For the “greedy landlord”, it went up from \$9,199 to \$17,112 in the same period, an increase of 86 per cent, something above inflation but less than the average weekly earnings. Who is being greedy here? Mr Hull went on to say:

So, who is being greedy, or at best fiscally irresponsible, Attorney-General Corbell? The landlord whose rent goes up 86 per cent over 13 years, or the Government that puts up land tax by 1375 per cent in the same period? And this is leaving aside the ACT Government’s new utilities levy and insurance levy.

What is happening here?

The reality is that we have a minister—whether it be the Treasurer or a minister responsible for land release—who is simply relying on one stream. The Stanhope

government will increase taxes from those who, it is judged, will ultimately simply pay up. This is the lazy Treasurer's approach to revenue raising. The Stanhope government has failed to increase the economic base of the ACT. The Stanhope government has failed to diversify the economic base of the ACT.

MR SPEAKER: The discussion is concluded.

Schools—closures

Debate resumed.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (5.11): The failure of the Stanhope government's *Towards 2020* program to put people's minds at rest and give confidence about how families would go forward and be settled has been a milestone of these last 15 months. The program has removed easy geographical access to public education for a large number of families. Those who can least afford it have borne much of the burden of these closures. Today, we have heard questions raised in this place about the demographics and some of the particularly harder hit areas, such as west Belconnen and northern Tuggeranong. I recall Mr Smyth interjecting in question time today, "Why close down an entire four schools?" Do you not realise the scar tissue that has caused within the community? That is my add-on to Mr Smyth's interjection.

The government's program has threatened greater inequity in education rather than improving equity, as the government claims. Schools such as Kambah high school were reliant upon the goodwill and efforts of individuals within that school to ensure a smooth transition for families. The feedback that we continually got was that the families around that particular high school community were very much in the dark for a very long time. I am not saying that they were not dealt with eventually, but they were in the dark for quite some time on what the transition arrangements were going to be. And they were very much reliant upon the good nature and the spirited cooperation of members of that school community, including teachers, in assisting in the transition process despite the government's failure to quickly step in and make sure that the transition plans were absolutely clear cut.

I would like to talk about the blended schools concept, which is very much a part of the 2020 program. There is no doubt that there are some good schools being built. There is no doubt about that. Our argument is about the amount of disruption and the ground zero approach that this government took in approaching the implementation of this program. There is no doubt that there are some good schools being built. But there is a significant question to be asked about the blended schools approach: are we really looking after the interests of all of our students at various ages, particularly our younger students, in these P-10 model schools? Are there barriers in place to allow discrete teaching of the students of those classes and to allow them to be discretely looked after so that they do not mix? The minister would probably desire that that be the case, but on the ground there are questions—that that is not the case.

On 15 March at Calwell shops, I was approached by parents who told me about their year 6 female student at Chisholm. The parents were concerned that their 12-year-old was far too exposed to the behaviours and influences of much older kids. They were

very concerned about that. If they could have found another school where they could allow their 12-year-old girl to continue to develop like all 12-year-olds should in their last year of primary school, they clearly wanted to do that. That is a major issue which I wait to see the government discuss if that chance comes up today.

The issue of Lyons has been debated broadly. We are very concerned. There has been a strong debate about that. We hope that the students finishing at Lyons this year will be able to go through their school year without disruption. I am deeply concerned that the same fate that seems to be materialising at Lyons may also befall Isabella Plains primary, which is destined to become a P-2 school. Let us see what happens there.

We have talked about the drift in this place. This was the major reason why the Leader of the Opposition conducted his forum. We had a very good forum conducted in the Tuggeranong Valley. Coming out of that forum was clearly the issue that teachers are not getting the support that they need. There is a lot of support from the community for teachers, but there is a feeling that the teachers are not getting the backup that they deserve.

Today, we talked about discipline. As the Leader of the Opposition said, “We don’t want to harp on about discipline.” But we do need to bang on about the development of personal discipline. It is essential. It is essential for the character development of our young kids that a school have some sort of discipline environment. Contrary to Mr Mulcahy’s colourful interjection, that does not mean military uniforms at school; it simply means the development of a culture and environment in the school where everybody respects everybody else and we allow kids to develop the personal discipline that they need to get through the school day, to get home and get their homework done, and to get back. These are deep concerns that we have at the moment, and these issues are not being properly attended to.

On the question of discipline, we note Mr Mulcahy’s shock horror comments about the dreadful “discipline” word and those terrible right-wing Liberals. Oh, how Genghis Khan Mulcahy has converted so quickly on the road to Damascus, to Vladimir Ilich Lenin Mulcahy. We have seen a rapid conversion there. No substance—just a laughing stock. I can assure Mr Mulcahy that the Liberal Party are not a bunch of right-wing Tories wanting to turn our schools into penitentiaries, but he seems to have that fear trembling away down there.

Today we have also talked about violence. Violence in schools is an issue. We have talked about the most recent case in Calwell high school. Mr Barr has said that he did not make the comments the *Canberra Times* said that he stated about there being no violence in schools.

Mr Barr: Yes. They got it off the ABC, who have apologised.

MR PRATT: We will see about that. I also refer to the other record of this government in relation to bullying and violence. Until 12 months ago, the track record of this government on dealing with bullying and violence in ACT schools was reactive rather than preventative. Further, there have been ongoing acts of violence that we have talked about here today and the feedback we have continually gotten

from teachers, families and others that the government's safe schools policy is still very much on shaky ground. I think it is sound in principle, but I do not think it is being well applied.

There is still very much the unfinished business of a particular high school which was the subject of an emotional debate in question time today. There were very strong and repetitive claims of serial offences around unacceptable activity in school hours, allegedly leading eventually, in early 2006, to gang assault, violence, intimidation—even intimidation of teachers. I have spoken to the teachers affected. The unfinished business remains unfinished. Yes, no police charges were laid, although Mr Barr does know that the principal at the time believed there should have been and would be.

I speak of a horrendous series of allegations that came to light on 18 May 2006. Mr Barr is too frightened to answer the questions that have been repeatedly asked about this school situation and its history and activities through 2005 to early 2006—questions such as, “What is the welfare situation of the central victim and other potential victims?”, “What happened to the perpetrators?” and “Were all the parents at the school informed about at least the general nature of the allegations so as to ensure that their own children had not been caught up in the matter?” What we saw was a rapid shutting down of the matter and a continual refusal to answer questions.

Did Mr Barr believe that not talking about the matter would stop the central victim from self-harming? In fact, the opposite was the case. Because no justice was seen to be done, or no justice was done, the victim continued to self-harm. What of the perpetrators? Were they remorseful? Have they been counselled? These are reasonable questions, never answered.

Given the approaches from the collateral victims to members here, the Assembly has a right and a duty to ask what departmental steps were taken, as well as what police action was taken. I recall the minister stating at the estimates hearings in July 2006 that he would be prepared to return to the committee and give evidence about what had happened and what steps were being taken—to give evidence in camera, as members requested. But he did not. The mystery continues.

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra) (5.21): The pontificating by those opposite in relation to schools in this debate never ceases to amuse me. Mr Barr's self-serving statement should be treated just as that—a self-serving statement. The hypocrisy of the current Labor government on school closures is absolutely mind-boggling; it is absolutely breathtaking.

The Chief Minister and the minister have said, “We had the courage to do this and no-one else had.” We need only to fast rewind the clock to see what happened 10, 15 years ago when there were school closures. The people at the forefront of any school closure, be it even a preschool with only about 13 people, were those in the ALP. Now we have this amazing road to Damascus change, which suddenly seemed to grip them about a month after the 2004 election, it seems today, in terms of disclosures now made by the Deputy Chief Minister who was the education minister at the time.

I find it really quite amusing and somewhat sad to see the pontificating of this lot opposite in terms of trying to take some—I would not call it high moral ground, but

trying to con the ACT people into thinking that the government have made a brave decision, when they opposed sensible decisions in the past to close some schools. It is hypocritical because this government have closed some 23 schools, with more to close at the end of this year, with no effective consultation, with no warning, with the education community, even up until about mid-April of 2006, thinking everything was going along without a huge amount of change. A paper came out from the then minister, Ms Gallagher, indicating a few forums but nothing to indicate wholesale slashings of schools. And then of course we had the June budget with 39 schools listed for closure, named, and then the consultation process.

No-one, no government of any political persuasion, has treated the school communities with such contempt in the past. Any school closures were done with at least consultation before the event. No-one ever came up with a list of 39 schools, named them and then set about a sham consultation period, which may have saved some, when they gauged community reaction.

Some of these closures are illogical. Why have we closed some schools and not others? Why was Flynn school closed? It is interesting, that one, because it is a heritage listing. Why close the two historic schools that have been going since 1911 in the case of Hall and 1899 in the case of Tharwa, which cost a minimal amount but provide a great deal in terms of diversity of education? Why close the Cook school, which was one of the schools to be closed by the alliance government, reactivated by a promise of the Follett government, now closed again by an ALP government? Why do that when time had moved on and that school was operating very effectively in only half the space that it had back in 1990?

Mr Barr: And about one-sixth of the enrolments—

MR STEFANIAK: You try to justify it by saying that you are putting in \$350 million worth of investment. That is bricks and mortar; but it is not educational outcomes; it is not accepting the views of people in the community, who in many instances do not want big megaschools. They want diversity in education. There are a lot of kids who benefit immensely from going to a school such as Tharwa or Hall. There are a lot of children who benefit from going to a school such as Lyons, which only has 85 students or thereabouts. Even your own figures show the amount you save on closures is minimal. I think it was \$4.5 million a year for the 39 schools and preschools you were going to close back in June 2006.

Mr Barr: No, Bill—much more than that.

MR STEFANIAK: That is not all that unrealistic, because the figures are probably not more than several hundred thousand dollars a year for a primary school. Back in about 2000 they were \$250,000; half a million for a high school.

Mr Barr: No. Try about four times that—

MR STEFANIAK: Even if you double those now, anyone can tell you that you do not save a huge amount of money in closing schools. I have never said you should not close any schools; of course you need to from time to time.

Mr Barr: You could, given your record—

MR STEFANIAK: I have closed schools, Mr Barr, but I have done it in a hell of a lot better way than you lot ever have. We had processes in place. In fact, we had a very good one in 2000, which Mrs Dunne tried to get back into place, which is what the AEU wanted and I think other educational professionals, the P&C and even the school boards liked, because it was a way of bringing the community along if you had to make any changes to your education system and close schools, but doing it in a logical way—not putting the cart before the horse, not arrogantly and insensitively dictating to the communities what schools should close and would close.

I have heard all sorts of reasons given why some schools were saved and others were not. I am not going to go into that because (a) I have not got enough time and (b) I think it is just one of the factors in this debate. But quite a number of people since June 2006 have said to me: “Where is the diversity in education? Our little school was a very good one. Our children felt safe there. It prepared them well. They got a lot of individual attention.” They reckoned it was a great school community, it operated well and the results were there. What is the benefit of closing a school that is producing the goods? Some of these people have grave fears about everyone being in a big mega school and naturally there are going to be a lot of issues there. Is it going to make it any better by having a whole lot of bigger schools and far fewer smaller schools with that much more intimate feel? I do not think so, and I think you are going to cause a hell of a lot more problems.

Mr Seselja’s motion talks about the 2020 program having failed to have an impact on the drift of students away from the ACT government system and the extensive disruption to local communities in the education system via that program. I have mentioned the latter, as other speakers have here today. We have heard some figures bandied about in question time today about that continuing drift. I recall Mr Barr saying it was a continuing drift, but he was trying to sheet the blame home to the Howard government. All Labor people now try to shift incredible amounts of blame, real or imagined, to that most competent government.

You do not have to look much further than your own backyard. The drift accelerated since you lot came in in 2001. I refer you to one year, Mr Barr, which I think was 1988, which is very indicative. The drift had been about half a per cent a year, but it was absolutely arrested; there might have been about 10 or 20 students either way. The reason was—this is the only way I can put my finger on that—that we gave every teacher in 1998 a computer. We showed that they were valued. We showed our faith in the system. It was a great fillip. It was not a huge gesture perhaps—it did not cost squillions of dollars; it was not \$350 million worth of new buildings—

Mrs Burke: It gave Mr Rudd the idea.

MR STEFANIAK: It probably gave Mr Rudd the idea, but it was certainly well received. If you are strategic and you target how you do things, you can reduce the drift, and you can do it too by impressing such things as standards.

A couple of other programs came in around that time, Mr Barr, which cost virtually nothing in terms of running a decent education system—for example, programs such as 150 minutes of compulsory physical activity for kindergarten to year 10. The first year of operation of that was 1997. There were a few things around that time—other than computers, which cost a lot of money—which stopped a drift.

It then continued in later years, has accelerated in a very big way under your government, and continues to occur, despite your much trumpeted \$350 million investment, which is in fact a smokescreen, to try to cover up for the appalling arrogance and lack of consultation that you engaged in; the way you coned the ACT community in 2004 into thinking you were not going to make any wholesale school closures; how you continued that con up until about April 2006, and then hit them with that horrible whammy—and that unnecessary whammy, we have heard; that panic whammy—in the 2006 budget on the basis, “Oh, we are in great financial strife.” But we were not. It shows what brilliant economic managers you are, because we were not in any great economic strife, and future figures have borne that out. In fact, you continue to have more money coming in than you actually anticipated. So that was an absolute furphy and that has caused huge angst indeed.

Mr Seselja’s motion is a very sensible one. We pointed out back in December 2006 how we would fix it up, reinstate some of these schools and end the mess that you have created. I see that has pretty well been incorporated into the motion, which I would commend to the Assembly.

MRS BURKE (Molonglo) (5.31): I draw members’ attention to the *Hansard*, week 10, 26 August 2004. We had a question without notice from Ms Dundas, a member of this place at that time, to the then education minister, Ms Gallagher, on school closures. To part of that question, the minister’s answer was:

The Education Act sets out a very clear process for the closure or amalgamation of any schools, which we have all signed up to this year.

That was 2004.

The government has no plans to close any schools. In fact, the only situation I have dealt with in terms of closing schools was, as members would know, to do with the suspension or closure of some preschools, which I put off until the strategic plan is put out and we have some more community consultation.

There are some small schools out there. I think of Narrabundah school as an example of a small school. It would never be a viable candidate for closure.

I repeat that: “It would never be a viable candidate for closure.”

Mr Seselja: It was a candidate.

MRS BURKE: Indeed it was a candidate. She continued:

There is a whole range of other services coming into that school. It runs Kootara Well; it has a GP coming there; it has a breakfast program; it has families in

great need of the support that that school provides; it has its library let out as a community access point for adults during the day.

The minister goes on to say later, and she repeats herself:

In short, we have no plans to close any schools. The Education Act sets out a very firm and rigorous process for that, if it were to occur, and how it could occur with community support. The government, of course, would abide by that.

But we all know the government did not abide by that, did they? They failed miserably. So there we have it from the former education minister's own mouth—not anything that was misconstrued by the media; not a parent getting the wrong end of the stick. Just two months out from the 2004 election, this government and the former education minister duped, misled, were not wholly truthful with, the Canberra community about their intentions to close schools. That is quite clear. Who is going to buy their argument that they did not go to the election saying they would not close schools? Come on! A government does not just plan to close schools overnight—or does it?

In addressing the MPI before this, the amendment before us and the failure of the *Towards 2020* program, I want to now specifically focus on the speech made in this place, again by the then education minister, Katy Gallagher, on 7 April 2005. Specifically, I want to focus on Narrabundah primary school and this government's failure to address the very real impacts on the community of Narrabundah by the *Towards 2020* vision. On 7 April, the then minister Katy Gallagher said in this place:

I would like to inform the Assembly of the launch today of the Kootara Well promotion for 2005.

Kootara Well is a health and wellbeing project which was launched by Chief Minister in 2002 and is now entering its fourth successful year—

where?

at Narrabundah primary school. Within Narrabundah primary school a clinic room and a health promotion room have been specially set up to provide a variety of free health and support services to students, their families and the local community.

As well as being vital to the physical health and wellbeing of the local community, the co-location of services at the school has helped to forge stronger ties between the school and the people of Narrabundah.

I put it to you that, if this program was so good in forging stronger ties between the school and the people of Narrabundah, why on earth did the Stanhope government decide to reduce the Narrabundah primary school to a P-2 school, particularly and especially after the minister said it would not be a school the government would close? What a monumental duping of the community. Moreover, why was and is there still so much distress and uncertainty in the Narrabundah community about the government's decision on Narrabundah primary school?

Allow me to continue with the former minister for education's comments, to enforce this point. She said:

The variety and flexible delivery of services at Kootara Well is an invaluable resource and allows Narrabundah primary school to work with partner agencies to quickly identify and address health issues in the student population.

Kootara Well is a partnership of agencies between Narrabundah primary school, schools as communities, Winnunga Nimityjah Aboriginal health services, ACT Community Care and Marymead. It is an excellent example of the ways in which our schools, working in partnership with other agencies, contribute to the long-term development and success of their students ...

But it was not going to be for much longer, was it, for these long-term developments to happen at this particular school and with the community as a whole? The minister continued:

I would like to thank and congratulate all those involved, particularly Trish Keller, the principal of Narrabundah primary school, who has been a driving force behind enhancing services for the community involved in Narrabundah primary school.

Is it surprising that the community are confused? Those comments then do not equate with the government's now decision to close and then do what they are going to do, reduce it to a P-2 school.

We all know the tremendous efforts of the Narrabundah principal, Trish Keller, and the Stanhope government's scant regard and treatment of Narrabundah primary school community and all that Trish Keller and her team achieved through their drive, passion, compassion and innovation. So much so were Ms Keller's efforts recognised that she was awarded the inaugural AEU ACT branch Public Education Award in May 2006. I will read an extract from the citation:

She has changed the culture of the school itself through the implementation of innovative programs in the school curriculum, and raised the profile of the school within the community by actively seeking and developing links with other agencies to provide a rich and inclusive support network for Indigenous and disadvantaged families.

But now we see how the previous education minister, Ms Gallagher, and the current education minister, Mr Barr, reward excellence. We also know that there are still a large number of concerns and vast uncertainties within the Narrabundah community as to what the future holds—and rightly so. For instance, what is going to happen to the Kootara Well program at Narrabundah primary that the previous minister for education so proudly boasted about? Will it continue?

Mr Barr: Yes.

MRS BURKE: Good. I hear the minister saying yes; that is good. I would like to hear more about that. How will over 35 Indigenous students, almost half of the school population currently at Narrabundah, be catered for after the restructure? What will

happen to the Yerrabi pathways program? What will happen to the very successful breakfast program at the school that I have attended? I can confirm the wonderful job that the school was doing for the community, having witnessed the large numbers of children turning up for a breakfast they probably would not have otherwise had. This again is testament to the excellent leadership and direction in terms of pastoral care shown by the principal, Trish Keller, and her dedicated team.

In summary, I want to mention a snippet of a letter written by a grandmother of a child who attended Narrabundah primary and which was also quoted by Katy Gallagher as education minister in this place on 6 May 2005:

Thank you for taking the time to read this, but I could not just accept all Narrabundah School's help and support without this acknowledgment. Under the leadership of Mrs Trish Keller and her dedicated staff this school must be one the Education Department are very proud of.

So proud were they that they decided to disband and really do away with the concept of what that school stood for, which was to look after low socioeconomic families in the area, with particular focus on Indigenous and Aboriginal education. We see again a shining light—in this instance a high-quality, professional school, leading the community—decimated by the Stanhope government.

The Stanhope government roll out programs and come into this place and say what a great job these schools and organisations are doing, how fantastic they are for the community and for the building of community spirit, how fantastic the staff are—and then, in the blink of an eye, what do they do? They decimate such schools as Narrabundah, thereby removing years of hard work.

This disgraceful and duplicitous action by the Stanhope government should be seen for what it is—failure. The schools, parents, teachers and the community all see the Stanhope government's *Towards 2020* vision as a failure. It fails the students, it fails the parents and it fails the community—and, unfortunately, Narrabundah primary school is a prime example of that.

This government stands condemned for its unconscionable act and will be judged for this, come October 2008.

Question put:

That **Mr Barr**'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.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (5.46): I seek leave to move an amendment that has been circulated in my name to the motion.

Leave granted.

DR FOSKEY: I move:

Add:

(8) calls on the ACT Government to:

(a) review the proposed school closures and restructures planned for December 2008, in consultation with school communities, teachers and other key stakeholders;

(b) establish a school reinstatement fund to help government schools closed in 2006 and 2007 re-open where viable; and

(c) firmly commit to no further school closures before 2013 other than those outlined in the *Towards 2020* reform process.

I certainly am not comfortable with leaving in the minutes of the proceedings the motion that was passed just now by a majority in this Assembly, as it reads that it has the support of the Assembly. Consequently, I have moved my amendment. It was initially an amendment to Mr Seselja's motion, because I felt that paragraph 2 of his motion was too reflective of Liberal Party policy and not reflective of all the other perspectives in this house. There are Liberals, an independent and a member of the Greens who are concerned about what we have before us now.

My amendment to the motion calls on the ACT government to review the proposed school closures and restructures planned for December 2008 in consultation with school communities, teachers and other key stakeholders. That is what we pragmatically can do. This is a pragmatic amendment. It further seeks to establish a school reinstatement fund to help government schools closed in 2006 and 2007 to reopen where viable—that was also pretty much taken from the Liberal Party's motion—and to firmly commit to no further school closures before 2013, other than those outlined in the *Towards 2020* reform process. It is not as strict as I would like it to be.

I would like to think that we could stop some of the closures that have not happened yet. But, as I said, this is a pragmatic amendment and I believe that there are parts of this that the government could agree to, and it would be very nice if we had something today that was positive and so that we could tell the community, "This is what is going to happen," although not that no schools will close. I seek the support of members in the Assembly for my amendment.

MR BARR (Molonglo—Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Planning, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation, Minister for Industrial Relations) (5.49): I can indicate that the government will not be supporting subparagraphs (a) or (b) of Dr Foskey's amendment but we are happy to support subparagraph (c), and I do thank her for a slight amendment to the wording that made it possible for the government to be able to support subparagraph (c).

It is important to look at subparagraphs (a) and (b) because there seems to be a lot of confusion amongst Assembly members about exactly what is scheduled to occur at the end of this school year. I note from Mr Seselja's original motion that for the first time the Liberal Party have acknowledged that the new west Belconnen school will be completed by the end of this year and that the Holt and Higgins preschools and primary schools will relocate to the new building. There appears now to be consensus that that school building, the new building, the new \$45 million school in west Belconnen, will be completed before the end of this calendar year and ready to take new students for 2009, and that keeping open Holt and Higgins primary schools 500 metres either side of it, having three schools, is not a sensible solution for public education in west Belconnen.

So I welcome the support of the Liberal Party through their original motion and I hope that in fact we can have unanimous agreement of Assembly members that moving in to the new west Belconnen school is a good thing for public education in west Belconnen. I know with Mrs Dunne it will be through gritted teeth; she has already been caught out a couple of times over the last 48 hours with some somewhat awkward statements that she has been making on behalf of people.

Mr Stanhope: She had just had a call from the Lyons P&C.

MR BARR: Possibly, Chief Minister. But it is also then worth noting that the other scheduled changes at the end of this school year relate to the preschool at Isabella Plains moving into the primary school building as part of the new P-2 school. So, whilst that is technically a closure, it is simply the moving of the preschool component from one building to another on the same site. Equally, the changes that are occurring at Isabella Plains, Lyons, Narrabundah and Southern Cross are in fact only a change in year level provision at those sites so are not formally a school closure under the Education Act. Nonetheless, it is important that there was a formal process around the change in year levels. As for the commentary going around that there are more school closures at the end of this year, Holt and Higgins, that was foreshadowed in 2005.

Moving ahead in terms of what else is scheduled for the remainder of the 2020 process, it is at the end of 2010 that we will see Village Creek preschool, as it is currently a stand-alone preschool, incorporated into the new P-10 school in Tuggeranong that is going to be built on the site of the former Kambah high. That will also, of course, facilitate a move of Urambi primary school about 200 metres up the road to a brand-new school building, all of which was foreshadowed in my announcement in December of 2006. That is the extent of any changes in terms of year levels and new buildings for schools at the end of this year.

What we will see at the end 2009 and 2010 will be the establishment of the new infrastructure, west Belconnen, Gungahlin college and the P-10 school in Tuggeranong. So, on that basis, having outlined a significant piece of infrastructure renewal, \$350 million worth of investment that goes forward over the next three years, it is entirely reasonable for the Assembly to make the statement that it does in subparagraph (c) of Dr Foskey's amendment, that there will be no further school closures before 2013, other than those already outlined in the 2020 process.

We look forward to a successful transition, most particularly for the Holt and Higgins communities, into the new west Belconnen school, and I am very pleased to be able to advise the Assembly that, following extensive consultation with those school communities, there is agreement and support for the design of the new building and, most particularly of note, given the conversations we have had today around the level of enrolments, since that has all been settled, and in anticipation of the new school, enrolments at both Holt and Higgins have increased and the school communities are looking forward to moving into a brand-new, state-of-the-art, \$45 million public education showcase—what will be one of the best schools anywhere in Australia. We look forward to the establishment of this new school for the 2009 school year.

With that, I will conclude my comments. I thank Dr Foskey again for putting forward what is an amendment that I think can receive the support of the Assembly and will give certainty for the next four or five years around what will be occurring in the public education system.

MR SESELJA (Molonglo—Leader of the Opposition) (5.54): I am not quite sure from the minister's comments whether or not he is supporting all of the amendment or just paragraph (c).

Mr Barr: No, just paragraph (c).

MR SESELJA: The government's support, in particular of paragraph (c), appears to be going back to where they were prior to the last election. It seems to be a very similar sort of commitment to what they took to the last election. They are saying that they will firmly commit to no further school closures before 2013 other than those already foreshadowed in the 2020 process. They are going to go to the 2008 election with a very similar promise to what they took to the 2004 election, and that is that there will not be any additional school closures in the next term of government.

It sounds very familiar, and I think that today has revealed two things, one which we already knew but which the government has been denying and another which we did not know. It is quite a stark revelation and quite a reflection on how this government treats its election promises and how it treats the statements that it makes before an election after an election.

We heard Minister Katy Gallagher finally acknowledge that she should have repudiated what had been said in the *Canberra Times* prior to the election, and that is that there would be no school closures in the next term of government. We know that that was never repudiated. We know that all the other statements that Ms Gallagher

points to are about the distant future, about the possibility of some schools maybe having to close some time down the track in the context of a clear promise that there would be no school closures in the next term of government. We have finally seen an acknowledgement from Ms Gallagher—something that has been denied all this time—that the community was misled.

The community was misled and Ms Gallagher has finally acknowledged that. I think that is refreshing, although the defence that it was a mistake I think is very hard to sustain given the subsequent comments from Ms Gallagher, particularly the press release just three days out from the ACT election in which she claimed that it was the Liberal Party who had a plan to close schools. She very strongly implied that the Labor Party was not going to close any schools and backed up that statement that was made on her behalf.

It is difficult to sustain the claim that this was a mistake. This appears to have been a deliberate leaving of that promise out there because it was seen as being in the Labor Party's best interests in the lead-up to the election. They milked it for all it was worth. They milked it right up to election day. That is on the record and that is the truth of it. But what was revealed today by Ms Gallagher, which we did not know, is how quickly this promise was tossed out after the election.

My memory of the election is that the result was declared on 29 October 2004. We heard from Ms Gallagher that on 30 November, one month and one day later, she decided that that promise was not worth anything. She had decided that the first of the school closures could occur; the promise not to close schools in the next term of government was not a promise that was going to be kept by the government. One month into a four-year term this government decided that its promises could be broken. It decided one month after the declaration of the poll that its promise not to close any schools for the entire next term could be broken.

This government did break its promise. It betrayed the community, not just once, because at that point there was only going to be a closure in relation to west Belconnen. We heard Ms Gallagher's comment that at the time there were no plans for any further closures. Then, of course, we saw the significant further closures. This gives the lie to the government's promises. It undermines any future promises it makes in the lead-up to the next election, especially when it comes to public education.

The minister has agreed that they will not close any further schools before 2013, except the ones already outlined. It is a very similar promise and it should be treated with the contempt it deserves. When you have been caught out breaking your promise, deciding to break your promise one month after the election, a four-year promise that is broken one month after, this latest promise that there will not be any further school closures before 2013 should be treated exactly the same way. It should be treated with contempt. This government cannot be trusted to keep its promises. In particular, it cannot be trusted to keep its promises on public education or school closures.

At 6.00 pm, in accordance with standing order 34, the debate was interrupted. The motion for the adjournment of the Assembly having been put and negatived, the debate was resumed.

MR SESELJA: In closing, the government again today has made a promise on education. It has made a promise not to close any more schools in the next term of government other than those it has already identified. This promise is a farce. Ms Gallagher has finally acknowledged here today that one month after the election, or six weeks after polling day, the government decided to repudiate the last promise it made prior to the last election.

The 2020 process was not well thought through. Not only was it a breach of faith, but it was a knee-jerk reaction to the Costello report. It was not thought through and we saw this week, with the experience of Lyons primary, the way that ill-thought-out policy, policy on the run, affects everyday Canberrans and the ability of their children to be educated. It affects the ability of school communities to get through what is a very difficult process for many of them. It adds final insult to injury.

The 2020 plan has not stemmed the drift to the non-government sector and we have not seen any evidence that this government is actually serious about stemming that drift. The government deserves to be condemned for its breach of faith to the community. It will have no credibility on its promises on education because it has been shown to have breached the most significant promises that it made prior to the last election.

Ordered that the amendment be divided.

Preamble agreed to.

Paragraph 8 (a) negatived.

Paragraph 8 (b) negatived.

Paragraph 8 (c) agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Adjournment

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

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

Lace exhibition Walking school bus

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (6.04): I want to mention two things today. The first is that as people have passed through the exhibition room on their way up and down the stairs they might have observed that there is an exhibition at the moment. Hopefully, they have had a chance to stop and have a bit of a look. It is called *Lace to a T*. The exhibition was facilitated by Mrs Petronella Wensing, who would be well known to everybody here. She certainly seems to be known to everyone else in Canberra.

Mrs Wensing is herself a lace maker and I believe she actually taught Vicki Taylor, who is the coordinator of the group from Armidale, to make lace.

What is interesting about this exhibition is that it shows lace in all its forms. Lace is usually seen as a very proper art. There is old-fashioned traditional lace and there is also what we see in what looked like Aboriginal burial poles that are sitting on the floor of the exhibition room. When that exhibition was taken to Belgium those cylinders of lace were actually suspended from the ceiling. It is interesting that now they look like burial poles. I think that is a good look for us because we have the wonderful burial poles at the National Gallery which provide a reference. I was very happy on Monday night to share the opening of the exhibition with the Belgian ambassador, Mr Frank Carruet. Belgium really is the home of lace and the exhibition was there last year.

I am pleased that the group is running workshops. Today a woman who had heard about the workshops and the exhibition came along and sat for a whole day and learnt how to make lace. It is really important to these people that this skill is carried on and that is one of the reasons why they are here. It is a collaboration between New England women and Canberra women and between traditional and modern lace making techniques.

I also want to talk briefly about the walking school bus. The walking school bus is about to run out of funding. I believe it will be in June. I quite often walk with the school bus because it is a way of seeing how things are going and meeting children from different schools. On Monday I walked with the bus in Holder with a group of St Jude's children. Of that school of 200, about 30 children regularly walk on the school bus on Mondays and Fridays. Thirty children out of 200 is a very good percentage and it reminds us that when it is safe children will walk to school.

I totally commend to the education minister and to the transport minister that they very, very seriously consider the funding applications that I am sure are being made to them for the continuation of the walking school bus program. It can only grow. It is growing as people become more and more concerned about the impacts not only of greenhouse gases from driving a car the short distance to take children to school but also the obesity issues that arise when children spend their time in cars and do not have a chance to walk or ride their bikes.

I know that there are thoughts about extending the walking school bus to bikes. I think that would be a good thing but I can see that logistically it would add quite a few difficulties to the process. We might as well just stick with what we know works at the moment, the walking school bus, and explore ways to extend that into other forms of transport later on. So the walking school bus is good. Give it a tick.

Industrial relations

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (6.09): Last week marked the second birthday of Work Choices, the unfair industrial relations laws forced into place by the Howard government. To mark this historical occasion, Julia Gillard met with the Governor-General to discuss the dissolution of AWAs. From this discussion

Ms Gillard then announced the beginning of the end for the treacherous legislation. From midnight Thursday, 27 March 2008 AWAs are no longer allowed to be offered to workers. It is a wonderful victory for many of us. After all, many of us say this was the issue that decided the federal election.

I would like to thank Julia Gillard and the Rudd Labor government for their quick action on this important issue, an action that will include new legislation on ITEAs—individual transition employment agreements—a fairer solution to AWAs for all of those unfortunate workplaces where staff are still on AWAs. An employer who has staff on AWAs can offer a worker an ITEA that will be integrated in the new no disadvantage test. In the test ITEAs will be scrutinised against current collective agreements and awards as well as state long service leave requirements. It is a great way to fortify the new laws and a fabulous way to tear away the shoddy political veneer of the so-called Liberal fairness test.

We can also look forward to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission overhaul of the current award system. I have heard, of course, over the last couple of years the opposition on Work Choices, especially in relation to the economy and unemployment figures. I might ask those opposite: what is the point of a good economy if workers have little income to spend? What is the point of a great unemployment rate if the employment is dangerous, unfair and substandard?

One of the finer points of this new legislation may be that the Rudd Labor government will not spend billions of dollars of taxpayers' money, as the Liberals did, forcing it down our throats. I look forward to what the Rudd government has to offer, but I fear it may not be enough. I fear that we may be left with the old right of entry laws that hinder occupational health and safety practices. We may also see the unfair dismissal laws stagnating. I do fear the Rudd government may be looking down Iemma Avenue. There is more to do, but we are heading in the right direction.

In saying this, I must clarify that anything is better than John Howard's Work Choices. Anything is better than forcing retail workers to bring their own cash flows. Anything is better than forcing drivers to drive faster for longer for less. Anything is better than sacking valet drivers, 20 years faithful to their jobs, and offering them their jobs back at \$300 a week less. Anything is better than fining and jailing innocent workers for pointing out safety issues and standing up for their mates. Anything is better than Work Choices.

But let us not get complacent and waste this opportunity. Let us work hard and make this new IR legislation the best in the world. Let us make our workers proud and happy to go to work. That is how I would like to tackle unemployment. In closing, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the federal opposition—and I have been waiting to say that for quite a while—have decided that AWAs were possibly not the best idea.

St Mary in the Valley

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (6.14): I rise tonight to talk about a very pleasant dinner I had on Friday night celebrating the 25th anniversary of St Mary in the Valley. It was a very nice affair conducted at the Southern Cross Club at Tuggeranong.

Mr Hargreaves: Great company.

MR PRATT: Yes, there was indeed great company. I had the great fortune to share a table with Mr Hargreaves, Mrs Hargreaves and a couple of other people. We had a charming old night.

The history of St Mary in the Valley is quite a colourful one. The congregation initially, while they were awaiting the construction of a church, would meet in various halls and community centres around the valley. Finally they had an old timber church transferred from the mountains and established on a site. The church was going along nicely. There was a terrible incident, I think some 15 years ago—Mr Hargreaves might want to correct me on that—when a willy-willy belting through the valley knocked that church down. Before anybody starts to worry about the finger of God, that willy-willy caused a broad swathe of destruction. The willy-willy did not necessarily pick on the church itself. It was indeed part of the collateral damage of a broader hit by that particular willy-willy in the valley at the time.

The congregation is now about 150 members. It is a very strong and vibrant congregation. We all had a lovely night. Even Mr Hargreaves and I found peace to discuss broader issues. I had a charming conversation with Mrs Hargreaves in the process about the workings of the Assembly.

It is the 25th anniversary of St Mary in the Valley. It is a wonderful organisation with a very strong and viable congregation. I am sure they will have another wonderful 25 years to come.

Cricket competition

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (6.16): Mr Speaker, I would like to raise a matter of public importance in the context of the adjournment debate.

MR SPEAKER: You cannot.

MR HARGREAVES: I know I cannot, so I will not. On the other hand, I will use the adjournment debate to inform the Assembly more formally of the results of the cricket competition on the weekend.

Mrs Burke: I know all about it.

MR HARGREAVES: Mrs Burke says that she has heard all about it. But let me tell you that if she has heard all about it from one of the leaders of the opposition, she might like to sit back and hear it from the beginning. The things that you do for your team!

I have to pay due respect to Mr Ryan Hamilton from Minister Barr's office. He took a decent tumble. In fact, he severely sprained one of his ankles and got absolutely no sympathy from the media. He was carried off to jeers and laughter by the media, led

by that legend in his own larynx, Mr Ross Solly. Sledging is his byword, Mr Speaker. I was absolutely disgusted by the underhand and crooked tactics employed by the media. However, the good Lord, in all of his glory, spat at the members of the media and shined his light upon us all. He gave us a significant victory. They got flogged, Mr Speaker—absolutely beaten senseless.

How did that come about? I have to say that the Leader of the Opposition acquitted himself well and did smack them around the park. He did get out twice, however, to Geraldine Norfeldt from WIN. Imagine that! Minister Barr only got out the once to Geraldine, the Joan of Arc of media cricket. But we saw something that we will probably never see again—caught Seselja, bowled Barr. They acted as a team on Sunday. They were pals on Sunday and that is why the good Lord shone down his benevolence upon us and delivered us. We thwarted those giants. I took a cricket ball in a very delicate spot. I coughed, the earwax flew out, but I got on with the game. Furthermore, I did actually take a tumble. I was manhandled by the media, but I was ruled not out and went on to smash them around the park.

On a serious note, it was a case of leave your weapons in the car and let us go and have a good game of cricket. The game was played in a true gentlemanly spirit by representatives of the Assembly and grudgingly by the media. However, we all went back afterwards and we all, the media and the Assembly, congratulated the Assembly on its victory. I think it was a wonderful time. We should see more of that.

Minister Barr is the custodian of the trophy. If you have not seen it, you can make an appointment to see him because his autograph signings are to be seen. We will receive representations from all members on how this trophy can be displayed. I was thinking of the Speaker's showcase. I have seen the Speaker running, but I have never seen him play cricket, unlike his predecessor who actually looked like a Lord's Taverner standing there at the stumps. It was terrible.

Mr Speaker, I think that this place should record that it was an historic victory. It was a victory only delivered by blood on the pitch by the servants of the people—our good selves. Next year, when we defend it, I would like to see everybody in the Assembly come out there and root on the sidelines for the team.

Tobacco retailing

MRS BURKE (Molonglo) (6.21): Mr Speaker, today I received some 132 signed letters from retailers opposing the Tobacco Amendment Bill. I understand that the minister received the original copies of these letters earlier today. I would like to read it out for the public record. Each letter is the same and each is signed by different people from the length and breadth of Canberra. It states:

Dear Ms Gallagher,

Re Tobacco Amendment Bill 2008

We are writing to oppose the Tobacco Amendment Bill 2008, particularly the provisions that relate to tobacco product display.

We are concerned the Government is proceeding with legislation on this matter, the details of which have not been subject to consultation with retailers and the subsequent economic impacts of these proposals on our businesses.

As retailers, we pay a license fee for the right to sell tobacco products we can state we have not been invited to participate in any consultation regarding the proposals.

I would add to that the 2006 regulatory impact study as well. The letter continues:

As responsible retailers we applaud any meaningful efforts to address concerns over young people and smoking and constructive measures to educate and regulate the stakeholders accordingly.

No other jurisdiction has adopted such a punitive approach to this issue in recognition of the impacts of such moves.

We welcome the opportunity to meet at the earliest opportunity to discuss the proposed provisions in the Bill and the impacts they would have on retail businesses. We would also request the Bill be referred to an appropriate committee of the Assembly to allow meaningful consideration of the impact on retailers.

As I said, this letter is signed by 132 small to medium sized family businesses and I think it needs to be taken into consideration. This has been a very poor and tardy process. We set aside the health concerns. As you have heard there, the retailers are responsible retailers and they applaud any meaningful efforts to address concerns. If we are going to make it impossible for them to conduct their businesses then we need to make smoking illegal, basically, and that is it. They have all said that.

I am pleased to hear that the minister will be seeing them, I think on Thursday, 10 April. That is a positive move and hopefully there will be a way forward. There has been similar legislation in places like Canada and Iceland and forthcoming legislation in Tasmania. It is a bit mean spirited to slap the retailers on the wrist. It has been difficult for people to get their heads around some of the strict liability offences and so forth. We are not really getting to the cause of the problem, and that is the uptake of smoking by young people and predominantly by young females.

I am still working through many of the issues outlined in the tobacco bill with the industry and with Mr Smyth, the shadow minister for small business. There is still a bit to work through. I hope that the government is not thinking of trying to rush this through just to be seen to be doing something or to be politically correct. We need to have a right approach to stopping young people from taking on smoking. We need to have a right approach to addressing the issue. That is not by penalising businesses that are running legal operations in the ACT. I seek leave to table the 132 letters from tobacco retailers in the ACT.

Leave granted.

MRS BURKE: I table the following papers:

Tobacco Amendment Bill 2008—Copies of correspondence from tobacco retailers to the Minister for Health.

Cricket competition Schools—Lyons primary

MR BARR (Molonglo—Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Planning, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation, Minister for Industrial Relations) (6.24): I would like to take this opportunity to join with Mr Hargreaves in commending all who were involved in Sunday's cricket match. It was a tremendous opportunity for an array of sporting talent to be displayed.

I would particularly like to thank all of the media participants for their good humour. Some very cutting remarks were made at various points during the game. I would also particularly like to thank young Callum Solly. When we looked at the teams we were one short of the media team and so young Callum took to the field on the Assembly side against his old man and did very well. In fact, he was one of the few members of the Assembly team who could hold most of the catches that went his way. He was fresh from being part of the St Edmund's under-14 grand final winning team on the very same ground earlier in the day.

I would also like to thank all of the Assembly colleagues and members of staff who went to some great personal pain at times. Ryan Hamilton from my office took a quick single and fell off the edge of the pitch and rolled his ankle, which was unfortunate for Ryan, but he took it in very good humour. I also thank the Leader of the Opposition for his fine glove work in achieving a stumping to get the *Canberra Times* out. That was very good work.

In the spirit of bipartisanship, in the time that remains to me in this adjournment debate, I call for some calm on the issue of Lyons primary school. Given the correspondence that I have been able to share with the Assembly in the last 24 hours from both the president of the P&C and from the school board chair, it would be appropriate for politics to be kept out of their discussions with the education department tomorrow evening.

I was unable to read the full letter during question time without being interrupted, but I remind the Assembly that Lisa Renshaw, the president of the Lyons P&C committee, did make quite clear the disappointment of the P&C committee that a parent in the community had used her child to score a point for her political career and to reiterate that, as far as the P&C are concerned, Mrs Dunne is not qualified to speak for the school community as a whole. She does not hold a position on the school board and she does not attend P&C meetings. Mrs Dunne is perfectly entitled to speak for herself, but I think that it was made very clear by both the P&C and the board chair that they would prefer that she not speak on their behalf.

The best outcome will be for tomorrow night's meeting of the school board and representatives from the Department of Education and Training to go ahead without political interference and for the school community to have the discussions that they

need to have with the education department, who will be managing the project works onsite, so that their concerns are addressed and that Mrs Dunne and I steer clear of it.

That would be my approach to this. Let the school community and the education department have the conversations they need to have without it being a political football and without there being a daily commentary in the *Canberra Times*. That is what this meeting was called for in the first place, but the opposition felt that there was a point scoring opportunity to be had. They have been called on it by the school community. I think it is very clear from the correspondence both of the school board chair and of the P&C council president that they want to be able to have their meeting with the education department unhindered by political interference. They make it very clear that they remain committed to achieving the best possible outcome for their kids and to working with the education department to achieve that result. They appreciate the fact that consultation has been extensive in the past 12 to 18 months, and continues, and that the recommendations of both the Lyons P&C and school board and the Yarralumla P&C and school board have been accepted by the government.

What we would now like to see is the growth of the Italian bilingual program at Yarralumla primary. I hope that Mrs Dunne will be able to welcome that because, in fact, the Italian program will now be available for many, many more students than were participating at Lyons, and Yarralumla will get a language other than English that it has not had in recent years. So it is a win-win here. If Mrs Dunne does support the program—and I believe she does—she should perhaps let bygones be bygones and support this program in its new venue at Yarralumla and support and assist the Lyons community through the transition phase, rather than going down the avenue she has.

Schools—Lyons primary

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (6.30): I was not going to speak on Lyons, but I will now very briefly. I acted entirely as a parent. I have always made that perfectly clear. The community came to me with their concerns. A very large number of people came to me with their concerns. I had heard the rumours. Other people had heard the rumours. I took that matter to the shadow minister, who dealt with it.

I have always made it perfectly clear that I speak as a parent. I will take every means available to me as a parent to ensure that the minister for education does not mess around with the education of my son or his colleagues, that he does not get moved after he was promised that he would stay in the one place and that he does not get shoved in an assembly hall with 84 other children for the rest of the year. That is what I have done. I have acted as a parent. I have never purported to speak on behalf of anyone at the Lyons primary school, except my family. The only comments that have been made on behalf of the Liberal Party have been made by the shadow minister.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.31 pm.