



Debates

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Wednesday, 20 September 2006

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

Petition

*The following petition was lodged for presentation, by **Dr Foskey**, from 401 residents:*

Schools—closures

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory.

This petition of certain residents of the Australian Capital Territory draws to the attention of the Assembly that there is considerable disquiet with the ACT Government's proposal to close 39 schools and preschools, particularly as some are marked for closure at the end of this year.

School communities want the opportunity to explore other options.

Your petitioners therefore request the Assembly to pass ACT Greens MLA Deb Foskey's "Education (School Closures Moratorium) Amendment Bill 2006" – in order to ensure that no schools are involuntarily closed until 2008, and that no school closures take effect from that date unless supported by a specific vote of the ACT Legislative Assembly.

The Clerk having announced that the terms of the petition would be recorded in Hansard and a copy referred to the appropriate minister, the petition was received.

DR FOSKEY: I seek leave to table drawings from students of Giralang primary school relating to their proposed school closure.

Leave granted.

DR FOSKEY: I table the following documents:

Giralang Primary School—Proposed closure—Drawings (13).

Education (School Closures Moratorium) Amendment Bill 2006

Debate resumed from 16 August 2006, on motion by **Dr Foskey**:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

MR BARR (Molonglo—Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation and Minister for Industrial Relations) (10.34): The government will not be supporting Dr Foskey's proposed amendments to the Education Act 2004. The Education Act 2004 clearly acknowledges the rights and obligations of parents and the government in providing high quality education for all children.

Section 20 of the act acknowledges the important role of schools in the lives of individuals and the community. In recognition of this role, the section sets out principles for extensive consultation that the minister for education must undertake before closing or amalgamating a school. In particular, the act calls for consideration of the educational, financial and social impact on students, their families and the general school community. This act was passed by all members of the Assembly, the Greens and the opposition included. They voted in favour of this legislation.

The only possible result of Dr Foskey's amendment would be to introduce an arbitrary delay in the implementation of the government's Towards 2020 proposal and duplicate the community safeguards which are already embedded in the legislation. Dr Foskey's bill calls for a moratorium on school closures until 1 January 2008. However, Dr Foskey has not provided the Assembly with any substantive educational, social or financial reasons why she believes such a delay is necessary.

I certainly do not undervalue the pride and passion people feel for their schools. But, along with its role of responding to the community, the government has an important stewardship role and should put forward proposals and policy that it believes will benefit the whole community, both now and in the future. While the decision to propose these education reforms is not an easy one, and certainly not a universally popular one, it is nonetheless what the government believes is the best course of action for the Canberra community. We cannot stay frozen with indecision.

If we want our current and future students to have access to education second to none, we must have the courage and foresight to adapt our education system to meet the emerging needs of our community. Rather than giving comfort to the communities concerned about the future of their schools, the primary effect of Dr Foskey's proposed amendment would be to create an extended period of uncertainty, disruption and greater anxiety for our students and their families.

As I have continued to engage in the six-month community consultation process on the Towards 2020 proposal, I have been approached by individuals and communities who, rather than wanting the process to be extended, have asked me to move more quickly to implement proposed closures and amalgamations immediately, rather than have communities face long periods of not knowing about the future of their schools. Prolonging the wait for answers would have a detrimental impact. It would hinder the ability of students, family and staff to plan future pathways, and it would discourage the community from engaging with schools facing an uncertain future.

Dr Foskey's other proposed amendment is to prevent the minister from closing or amalgamating a school unless a comprehensive analysis has been made of the educational, financial and social impact of the proposed closure or amalgamation on students at the school. Whilst I appreciate the sentiment, I am at a loss for the necessity of its inclusion, given that the Education Act already states:

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

- (a) have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students' families and the general school community;

The government is already engaged in a comprehensive and ongoing consultation process with affected school communities, and with the wider public, on precisely these issues with regard to the Towards 2020 proposal. The government's extensive consultation process on the proposal has included:

- eight community information forums, one in each education region;
- more than 550 consultation meetings so far, involving me and/or senior departmental officials;
- letters from me and from the department inviting feedback from school and community members via email and postal submissions;
- regular updating of information on the department's Towards 2020 website;
- invitations to school board chairs, community and business groups to submit their views and suggestions;
- meetings between departmental special education and early intervention staff with parents of students with special needs to discuss possible options should the proposal proceed;
- support from school directors and other departmental staff to parents and school communities on a daily basis; and
- meetings between principals of schools proposed for closure or amalgamation at the end of 2006, students and their parents on an individual basis, to discuss transition planning should the proposal proceed.

At the end of this six-month consultation period the government will consider all the feedback and submissions. Having regard for the educational, financial and social impact, it will make a decision and take the necessary action to ensure the continuation of our high-quality education system.

The Stanhope government is well aware of the central role that schools play in the development of the individual, the family and our community as a whole. For this reason, the government gave careful consideration to a range of educational, social, geographic and financial considerations before putting forward a proposal and taking it to the community for their response.

The government will not be supporting Dr Foskey's proposed amendments. Far from benefiting school communities, their effect would be to create further uncertainty and instability. It would simply be irresponsible to avoid facing facts. If we want to give our students the best schools and the best opportunities, we need to be prepared to make some changes—and make some changes now. The choices we make today will secure a sustainable education system into the future.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (10.39): The opposition will be strongly supporting Dr Foskey's Education (School Closures Moratorium) Amendment Bill. As a measure of our support for this bill, we have introduced and circulated amendments we would like to see which would give extra teeth to the proposals brought forward by Dr Foskey.

I have to congratulate Dr Foskey because she was the first of the members here to move on this issue in a legislative form. I think the moratorium bill she has introduced is a reasonable start, but it has always been the view of the opposition that a moratorium by itself is nothing more than a stay of execution.

The minister referred to the fact that a moratorium would in some sense create more insecurity and more uncertainty. But this is not the principal reason for doing this. The principal reason for Dr Foskey's move, I understand, is to create certainty about where people will be next year.

The heady combination of school closures in December, combined with schools having to do their staffing formulas and close down for the school holidays, means that there is a huge amount of uncertainty about what is going to happen with the 1,000 or so children directly affected by school closures that will be announced and brought into effect at the end of this year. Dr Foskey's moratorium bill is to shift the decision making so that, when we are so far towards the end of the year already, parents have certainty about where their children are going to be next year.

This is about providing a service to the community. This is what we are here to do. We are not here in this Assembly to implement our own ideology or to tell the community, as this minister has just had the audacity to do, what is good for them. What Andrew Barr thinks is good for my constituents—the parents of children in my electorate—is not what they think is good for their children and their children's education.

Andrew Barr can sit here and say, "I am providing you better outcomes in the long term." Mr Barr, they do not believe you. They do not believe anything you say when you talk about school closures. My constituents are highly suspicious of everything this government says about school closures. They are not bamboozled by the mealy-mouthed pap words about quality of education and higher outcomes in the long term.

The parents in my constituency are concerned about where their children are going to go to school next year; whether the children who currently go to school in Giralang will find that they will be moved from a beautiful school—a picture of a school—to demountables somewhere else. They will go from an architect designed school to demountables. Do they think they are getting value for their money? Do they think they are getting value for the 39 per cent increase in rates and charges in Giralang? No, they do not.

Cook primary school is another picture of a school, with picture grounds. The minister says, by his own admission, that Cook is a great school. What is going to happen to them? They are going to move into demountables somewhere the year after next because the schools where they have a right to enrol do not have space for them.

Mr Barr: That is rubbish, and you know it.

MRS DUNNE: How many vacancies are there at Aranda, minister? You have told those children that every one of them can go to a school of their choice. If they choose to go to Aranda when you close their school—if you close their school—there is no room for the children there. There is not room for the 190 children from Cook at Aranda.

Mr Barr: There are not 190 children at Cook. You should get your facts right.

MRS DUNNE: Sorry—90 children at Cook. There are eight to a dozen places at Aranda. There are virtually no places at Aranda. There are not enough places at Macquarie. If they choose to go to Aranda there are no places for them, when this minister has guaranteed that they can go to the place of their choice.

We propose to support Dr Foskey's bill today. I have foreshadowed that we will move amendments to give more teeth to the moratorium bill, because we do not believe that this process should be just a stay of execution. If the moratorium is successful in being passed, we want to see real changes, real inquiry and real discussion with the community.

The minister says, "You do not need to do this, because the statutory requirements are already there." The statutory requirements are mealy-mouthed, weasel words. The members of the community have not seen any evidence of any of the things that are required in the legislation being done by this minister. There has been no discussion with the community about the social and educational impacts on the community. You have not talked to the Hall community about the financial impact of the closure of Hall preschool and primary school.

Mr Barr: Yes I have, Mrs Dunne. You should get up to date with your facts.

MRS DUNNE: You have not talked to the Hall community about the social, financial and environmental impacts.

Mr Barr: Yes, I have.

MRS DUNNE: When the minister was asked this at the consultation meeting he said it was not the job of government to support individual businesses. That is this minister's approach to the financial impacts on a rural village like Hall. This minister has not consulted with any community about the impacts this will have on their community.

His officials have not done this. They have gone through the process. They can say that they have been to 650-odd meetings, but quantity does not equal quality in this place. Of the thousands of people in this community who are affected by these closures, there is not a member who believes that they have been consulted with properly.

As a member, I am out and about in the community talking to people, as I presume Ms Porter is, as I presume you are, Mr Speaker, and as I presume Mr Gentleman is. People laugh about the consultation. They tell me it is a farce. They do not believe that what this government proposes to do will be good for them.

Mr Stefaniak: It is just a charade.

MRS DUNNE: It is a charade. That is why in this place today, in addition to supporting this moratorium bill, we want to add teeth. We want to ensure that at the end of the process, when the minister makes the decisions and those decisions are announced, the community knows what is going on and that the community has in its hands the results

of a comprehensive survey of the reasons why there is a drift of enrolments from government to non-government schools. The close questioning by Dr Foskey, Mr Smyth, Mr Pratt and me in estimates showed that this government, this minister and his department have no idea why people are moving from the government to the non-government system.

Mr Barr: Rubbish. There is not one simple answer to that question. You know that.

MRS DUNNE: We know there is not one simple answer. There is not one simple silver bullet answer. There is a range of factors. This minister cannot tell us what they are. We all have our gut feelings about what they are, but there is no survey. There is no instrument. When a child leaves a school there is no means of ascertaining whether they go to another government school or to a non-government school, or why they are leaving.

Mr Mulcahy: That is the nub of the issue.

MRS DUNNE: That is the nub of the issue. If we are having falling enrolments and a drift to the non-government system, this minister and his predecessors have taken no interest in why. Since the beginning of 2002 Mr Pratt and I have been asking successive ministers for education, "Why is this happening?" The previous two ministers said it was not a problem. I presumed that they thought it was an economy measure.

This minister suddenly says that he thinks it is a problem, but he cannot tell us why. He cannot tell us when he is going to find out why. I could give you my reasons; Mr Mulcahy could give you what he thinks or his reasons; and Mr Stanhope could probably give what he thinks or his reasons; but that is not the answer.

You have to actually ask the people who are taking their children out of government schools why they are doing it. You cannot sit here and say, "We are spending \$110 million on capital injections into schools; we are spending \$65 million in writing off our assets." We do not know why. We do not know whether it is well directed.

This minister and this Treasurer have no idea why they are spending the money they are going to spend. For all of these reasons, we should be putting a halt to the process so we are collecting some thoughts. In addition, we need to have long-term demographic analyses of school places because we see over and over again that suburbs go into decline.

Mr Barr: That is your policy: do not spend money on schools.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Mr Barr, cease the interjections.

MRS DUNNE: I heard him in silence. We see this over and over again: suburbs work in cycles. I will give an example. My son goes to Lyons primary school. I make no secret of this. It is a school that will be affected by this policy. Lyons is in a phase of increasing population and an increasing school-age population. Chifley, next door in Ms MacDonald's electorate, has done its own survey—because this government will not do a survey—of the prospective children coming into the school. There is a baby boom in some of these inner city suburbs.

Our planning policies are working. For years we have been trying to encourage people to move closer to their places of work. People are moving into places like Lyons, Chifley and Giralang, which are on good transport routes, with their families. In the future there will be increased demand for primary school places in those suburbs, but this government has not done the analysis. They have had a knee-jerk reaction. As a result of that, we will see bad policy decisions with money spent badly—good money after bad—because the government has not done the work.

There should be a long-term analysis of the future use of surplus school land and buildings. Most importantly, detailed transition arrangements need to be prepared, and published to the families concerned, for each student affected by a closure or an amalgamation. The minister says, “Do not worry; we are doing it.”

Mr Barr: We are.

MRS DUNNE: When you talk to the parents, they are not getting the message. I talk to parents, Mr Barr. You talk to bureaucrats. Mr Speaker, you talk to parents and I talk to parents. On the weekend when I was talking to parents, they were saying, “We do not know what is going to happen to our children next year.”

Parents of children in schools slated for closure at the end of this year have no idea where their children are going to go. In particular, they have no idea where their children with special needs are going to go. That is the most important thing. The other thing our amendments propose is that each decision to close or amalgamate a government school by the minister would be a disallowable instrument to ensure that the decisions made by this minister are available in this place for scrutiny.

Mr Stanhope: What a stunt!

MRS DUNNE: The Chief Minister says it is a stunt. It is only a stunt because he is afraid to put on the table the reasons why his government will choose to close schools. He is afraid to put them on the table, say, “I want to close Cook primary school and preschool because—” and state the reasons. The reasons are not there. You know that, Mr Speaker. You have been out to the community, unlike the Chief Minister who, as far as I can tell, has not visited one of these schools. He has not visited a school in his electorate. He has not gone to any of the consultation meetings. He has not been there. He has been absent.

His briefing and his understanding of the impact this has on people across the territory is deficient because he is not out there talking to them. I gather that, from time to time, people come up to him during his Saturday morning coffees to tell their stories, and I commend them for that. They have to go in pursuit of the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister is not seeking them out.

In summary, the Liberal opposition is supporting Dr Foskey’s moratorium bill, but we feel that we can make it stronger—and as a community we must make it stronger for the protection of the community. The aim is to strengthen the school closure moratorium bill so it provides longer-term relief to Canberra families. We think that a moratorium by

itself is just a stay of execution and we do not want just a stay of execution on this truly draconian policy.

No responsible organisation would take radical decisions like this without basic information about what services they are supposed to be providing and to whom, but the Stanhope government has done that in this policy. What we propose to do today is put the brakes on.

The Liberal Party's preferred position would be to throw it out and start again, but we do not have the legislative capacity to do that in this place. The best we can do at this stage is to put the brakes on. We want to put the brakes on. When we come back to make the final decision, we want the people of Canberra to have some teeth and some real input into the making of this decision. That is why we must support this bill today.

MR STANHOPE (Ginninderra—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Business and Economic Development, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Minister for the Arts) (10.54): As the minister has indicated, the government will not be supporting this bill. Despite the protestations from the other side, the bill is nothing but a stunt, an ill-conceived attempt to delay the necessary action which the government proposes and seeks to take through the *Towards 2020* proposal.

I think, in order to illustrate the extent to which this is a stunt, it is moot to refer to the position of the Liberal Party in government. It is relevant to refer to the position and the opinion of the Leader of the Opposition in support of his then minister for education, Mr Humphries, when the Liberal Party proposed to close 27 schools when in government. It is relevant, particularly in reply or response to everything Mrs Dunne has just said in relation to our proposal and our policy, to reflect on the policy of the Liberal Party in government and the honest opinions of Mr Bill Stefaniak, the Leader of the Opposition, in defence of the Liberal Party's school closure policies. I will quote from the Hansard verbatim. These are the words of Mr Stefaniak on school closures:

I also want to talk about a few points about our school systems and about the school closures ... the neighbourhood system has changed a fair bit in recent times in that, on the figures we have, it seems that in some cases up to ... about 30 per cent of enrolments at certain schools are from out of area.

It is now 60 per cent. It continues:

That tends to put another slant on the argument often used by the Opposition of the distances some kids are going to have to travel to go to school. Our system is very good.

That is what Mr Stefaniak says. It continues, "Mr Humphries realises that." He says that the Liberal government realises that. It continues:

... and Mr Humphries has continually stated that this excellent system will be maintained. I think we have always had a good system here. It might have been better in the past than it is now, because I note that about a third of our kids are in private schools and a lot of those schools have waiting lists.

Mr Seselja: You guys lied and lied at the last election.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Sit down, Chief Minister. Withdraw that, Mr Seselja.

Mr Seselja: I withdraw.

MR STANHOPE: Mr Stefaniak then went on to say, “That has been the case for many years, but I do not think that we really have to delve into that part of the debate today.” Mr Stefaniak goes on:

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

Mr Stefaniak then recalls walking as a five-year-old from Griffith. He says:

I can recall many students I went through infants and primary school with walking considerable distances to get to school.

Mr Stefaniak then acknowledged:

... it was in those years that we got on to a neighbourhood school system, and in each of the suburbs that blossomed in Canberra—in the expansion in the late 1960s and 1970s—a primary school was provided. But the Federal ... Government in 1988 realised that that really was something that could not continue.

Mr Stefaniak, the Leader of the Liberal Party, then said, “This Liberal government regrettably concedes that it would be desirable if we could do that. If we had the money to do that, we could. But we realise that it is a luxury that we cannot afford.” Mr Stefaniak then goes on to say, “I think Mr Humphries should be commended”—in the context of the Liberal Party’s proposal to close 27 schools—“for the very hard”—

Mrs Dunne: Fifteen years is a long time. It was the wrong thing then and it is the wrong thing now.

MR STANHOPE: This is what the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Bill Stefaniak, is on the record as saying in relation to school closures and the Liberal Party’s real position in relation to school closures. This is his real position on school closures. This is not a position concocted for this stunt of a motion. This is Bill Stefaniak’s real position. These are his words.

Mr Stefaniak says, “I think Mr Humphries,”—the then Liberal minister for education—“should be commended for the very hard, agonising and difficult decisions he has had to take—and, indeed” that the Liberal government “has had to take. No one likes closing schools,” Mr Stefaniak says. “It would be lovely if we could keep the system,” Mr Stefaniak says. “Unfortunately, we cannot keep it,” Mr Stefaniak says. “We are standing on our own two feet now and, unfortunately, just as in the rest of Australia - just

as ... those Labor States ... recognise the same problem ... rationalisation has to take place,” Mr Stefaniak concedes.

“Mr Humphries”—the Liberal minister for education—is doing that and “doing all he can to ensure that that is as painless as possible and that the excellence of the education system remains.” Those are Bill Stefaniak’s honest thoughts in relation to school closures. That is what Mr Stefaniak is on the record as saying about school closures.

Then we heard today from the shadow minister for education, a one-time staffer of the then minister for education, Mr Humphries, whom she now of course disowns in relation to Mr Humphries’s principle position in relation to this particular issue. But we now have on the record the honest views and opinions of Mr Stefaniak, the leader of the Liberal Party in the ACT—the Leader of the Opposition—on school closures.

That is the honest, real position of the Liberal Party—not the confected nonsense, the confected outrage and interest that we see presented by the shadow minister for education today in relation to this particular proposal. We have there, from the mouth of the Leader of the Opposition, the basis and the rationale for their approach in government. Of course, it is eerily similar, is it not, to the essential position being put by the government today. The difference is, of course, that the then minister for education lost the support of his cabinet and wobbled. He fell over. The job was too hard. He could not do it. The policy fell by the wayside.

Mr Humphries is now on the record as urging those who came after him not to fall in the way that he did. Post the decision by his cabinet and his ministerial colleagues to no longer support him in his efforts in relation to a renewal of education within the territory, he urged all those who came after him—any subsequent minister for education—not to allow the fate that befell him to befall them.

Those are the urgings of Mr Humphries in relation to this particular matter—that it is important that anybody that followed showed the steel, courage and integrity to do the right thing by the children of the ACT in relation to the development of a sustainable education system that optimises our capacity to ensure that every child in this territory has access to the highest possible quality education. That, of course, is what the government’s education policy—*Towards 2020*—seeks to ensure.

It is simply not sustainable and not possible for us to guarantee into the future the quality educational outcomes which we seek for our children in a system running at less than 30 per cent of capacity. The inefficiencies inherent in seeking to prop up a system at 30 per cent less than capacity seriously impacts on our obligation to ensure optimal educational outcomes for the children of the Australian Capital Territory. We cannot do it. As a small jurisdiction with a narrow revenue base, we simply cannot continue to provide government services less than optimally or efficiently.

Turning to spare capacity within our system, there are 18,000 spare places. This is the issue, to a lesser extent, which the Liberal Party sought to address in government, which Mr Stefaniak is on the record as stoutly defending. Mr Humphries’s attempts ultimately failed. Post the failure of his attempts to implement a similar policy, he urged all future governments and ministers for education not to wilt and not to allow the policy not to be

progressed, because, obviously, of the oppositionist position that oppositions will take or the desire of the community to engage in a vigorous and open discussion or debate.

To suggest that through 600 meetings which the minister and his department conducted to consult with this community there has not been a genuine effort at consultation or a general engagement in relation to the social, economic and other aspects of this particular proposal is sheer nonsense, and you know it. You cannot stand there with any credibility and suggest that a government that has sought to pursue a conversation with the community to the extent that this government and this minister have, has absolutely no credibility. In my eight years in this place, I know of not a single other example of a minister meeting on more than 60 occasions with a constituency in relation to any issue—let alone a department.

Mr Barr: It is about 80.

MR STANHOPE: The minister has had 80 separate meetings with school communities in relation to school closures. I have been here for eight years. I do not know of a single example—and I challenge anybody to raise it—of any other minister in this place meeting on 80 separate occasions with a constituency in relation to any issue. On top of that, the department has had an additional 500 meetings and the consultation has only been going for half of its determined length.

For anybody to stand in this place and say that this minister and this government are not genuine, are not open and do not seek to be accountable in relation to *Towards 2020* and our educational hopes and the educational outcomes we seek—a genuine, open discussion around the implications for every child in the system—would be simply making a political point. It has no credibility and it deserves no credibility.

An enormous effort has gone into this particular proposal—to explain and maximise the educational opportunities it presents, to seek and embrace the feedback from parents and school communities in relation to how to better advantage their children, to provide better educational opportunities. That has been at the heart of the entire debate, which has now been going for three months and has three months yet to run.

That is the level and extent of the commitment to genuine consultation—backed up, of course, by our absolute commitment to ensure that, in this community, through our government education system, we provide what is essentially our fundamental philosophy and our driving force as a government: that no person in this community—most particularly no child in this community—does not have an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of society and to participate equally within society.

It is my belief and this government's belief that that is best achieved through equality of access to quality education. That is what is driving this government. That is what is driving this process: an absolute determination by this government that every child in this community will have equality of access to the highest possible quality education we as a government can produce.

We cannot keep that promise or that undertaking in a system that is not operating optimally, that has a 30 per cent excess capacity. That excess capacity is costing the community, through the department of education and our funding of education, millions

of dollars that it does not need to cost us. We could be investing that into education and government service delivery, but most notably into education.

To suggest that we, through the arrangements that apply, are not meeting our obligation to ensure that every child has access to the best quality education that we can possibly provide is simply not credible. Those that oppose this policy need to come to the table with an alternative policy. They need to step up and say what they would do. There has been no attempt, through this debate, to do that. Neither the Greens nor the Liberals have said, “This is what we would do.”

Mr Gentleman: Or “this is how much money we would spend”.

MR STANHOPE: “This is how much money we would spend. This is how we would spend it. These are the outcomes we would seek to achieve.” They are simply stoppers and spoilers seeking political advantage through stunts reflected in motions of this sort.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR STANHOPE: We all do it. It is the business we are in. But be honest about it. You will be revealed for the opportunists that you are in relation to this issue. We see that most notably, of course, when we reflect on the words of the Leader of the Opposition—the leader of the Liberal Party—in relation to his attitude to his then government’s proposal to close schools and his hypocrisy, and the hypocrisy of the Liberal Party and the Greens, is exposed.

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (11.10): I heard the word “hypocrisy”. It certainly cuts both ways. I have not heard such dribble for quite some time. It is rich to hear the Chief Minister say, “It is all right to close 39 schools. This is essential for our budget. It is essential for the future.” Until after 13 April this year, this government showed no inclination it was going to take this draconian step. One only has to go back to that document signed by Katy Gallagher, *The Way Forward*, which talked about six public forums, none of which remotely mentioned closing schools, let alone closing 39 schools.

This quite clearly is a policy that the government has come up with some time between 13 April and 6 June, when it launched its decision. You only have to look at the *Towards 2020* document to see a document that was cobbled together quickly and a document that tries to justify what the government is doing by coming up with about eight different varieties of schooling—it was cobbled together probably on a Sunday afternoon—some of them so terribly, terribly illogical. The community has seen right through that.

I thank the Chief Minister for the history lesson. He might also remember, if he delves into history, in 1995, when we became the government and were so for seven years, we went to the electorate with a policy of not closing any schools except as a matter of last resort and not until after talking extensively with the community. The facts speak for themselves. The economic situation we inherited in 1995 was far worse than what you have now. We had a useless, defunct federal Labor government. We inherited a huge deficit from you lot. It took us four budgets to get our house in order. Now you are squandering that. You have the temerity to say that you are doing this responsibly, realising just how bad the budget is. I find that quite amazing.

We have said this before: if you want to see how to go about consulting with the community, take a leaf out of history. Let us wind back the clock to 1999-2000 and have a look at that document which my colleague Mrs Dunne attempted to get into legislation here in May. It has stood the test of time. Good documents usually do. We ended up with your consultation model which you are now going through after the event. Ours walked school communities through these difficult decisions. And, ladies and gentlemen, it worked.

It worked in the case of Melba and Spence. That school community went through an extensive consultation period, about a 12-month period, and the Spence campus amalgamated into the Melba campus. There were six parents who were not happy with that. You would expect that out of a school community of about 300 people. You lot then were even sceptical about that. You lot even then were bleating about how Melba should not close. At least that was a document which enabled school communities to go through it in a logical, sensible way before the event. I remind you again, while we are talking history, of Rivett and Duffy. They are both closing, are they not, Mrs Dunne, under this lot's proposal?

Mrs Dunne: No, only Rivett.

MR STEFANIAK: Right. Rivett and Duffy almost got to that stage but by about step 4 they decided, "We will not go ahead." That was fine. We accepted it. That is a case of a school community going down that track, baulking and not going ahead. Again, it was talking to people, enabling the school community to be taken into our confidence, to be working with them, not against them.

We support Dr Foskey's moratorium. Mrs Dunne has some sensible amendments which enhance this particular proposal. This is not a "stunt". You people should be in a circus, the number of times you have used that word. This is a genuine attempt to have a serious look at the issue of school closures, not to engage in a sham consultation up to early December and then have an absolute mad rush, which is going to be devastating for families and school communities in terms of what they do after they find out whether or not their school is closing. We have no indication from this government that they are not going to go ahead and close all 39. There will be absolute pandemonium and chaos in December, whatever happens here. This moratorium gives that a chance to be at least stopped, put on hold and done in a logical way. The illogicality of what you are proposing is there for all to see.

I have mentioned the *Towards 2020* document and one aspect of it. The other aspect is—and the community is asking this, and Mrs Dunne and I get it from Mr Seselja, Mr Mulcahy, Mrs Burke, no doubt Ms Porter, Ms MacDonald and you, Mr Speaker—what is the real reason for this? Is it the real estate value? Maybe it is. Let us have a look. There is a very good chunk there. I hate to be a cynic, but that is probably highly likely.

You only have to look at what schools are being chosen. Let us take north Belconnen as an example. We start with Kaleen. We have got two schools there, Kaleen primary and Maribyrnong primary. We now move to Giralang, a model suburb. Seventy per cent of the kids in Giralang go to Giralang primary. It is a school with a great record. It is a school where they walk to school. You, Mr Speaker, know that. Surely we want to

encourage our kids to be active and healthy. It is a school which has seen the Labor government shut up shop there. There are no shops there. It is a school which has lost and will lose all its facilities as a result of this, except the oval. I assume you are not digging that up and putting units on it.

Giralang Primary School, an excellent school, has got heritage value as well. It is slated for closure. How illogical! If you close that, which it seems you are hell-bent on doing, you go to McKellar. There has never been a school there. We have got two schools in one suburb. There is going to be no school in the next two suburbs.

We come to Evatt. We have got two schools there. Then we come to Melba. Spence, as I said in my history lesson to you, already has been amalgamated into Melba, but Melba is for the chop. So is Flynn, an excellent school. You are causing immense angst there. I was talking to some parents only the other day. They came to that suburb because of the quality of that school. They are scratching their heads now as to what on earth to do in relation to their kids. I was speaking to about four or five parents in the street. Again, Melba and Spence, no school. We come to Charnwood. Good, the school stays there. Dunlop does not have a school.

Where is the logic in ensuring that, even in that snapshot example of north Canberra, you have a couple of schools in one suburb, then you go to the next two suburbs and there are no schools? There are a couple of schools in the next suburb. In the next two suburbs, there are no schools at all. There is no logic in that, unless it is their great real estate value. Knowing those sites fairly well, I think that is probably the case.

We then come to some of the other schools you are closing. The ACT is basically a big city. But let us not forget our rural heritage. There are two wonderful small villages in the ACT. Hall is quite a big village, which has had a primary school since 1911 and which has quite a thriving little shopping community. Yes, students from across the border come there and are going to keep coming to ACT schools because the New South Wales government is not going to build another school in the region for them. I can give you the drum there. So they are going to keep coming into the ACT education system.

They are having trouble getting into schools. Guess why. Some of the schools that are not slated for closure simply do not have the accommodation. A lot of these kids are going to be put up in demountables, which defies logic. If you have to put up demountables, why are you closing these other schools in the first place? Hall has been going since 1911. The school at Tharwa takes in the biggest rural area of the ACT. Yes, it is a small school, but it is a small school that has been going since 1899. It is part of our heritage.

Go back to Hall. Those parents are prepared to pay more than they do at present if their school stays. The government said, "We are going to have to spend money on your school. We are going to have to spend \$149,000." That was the figure. The Hall parents said, "We will give you \$49,000 of that \$149,000." Why on earth do you not take up those offers from people who are prepared to put their money where their mouth is to keep their community school? No, it looks like it is slated for closure, like everything else.

You are destroying our heritage in those two rural schools. I throw Giralang in, too, simply because of its unique architectural design and the uniqueness of the suburb. Where is the thought there? The sad answer to that is that there is no thought; there is not any real thought. This has been something that has been knocked up very, very quickly. There was no indication on 13 April that this was likely to happen. On 6 June, D-day, just as surprisingly as the Allies landing at Omaha Beach probably was to the Germans—even though the parents here might have been expecting it, probably the Germans were expecting it a bit more than the ACT community—you suddenly announced the closure of 39 schools. Then you consult after the event.

Let me read from statements by three concerned parents on this issue. They are all from Giralang. These are concerned parents. It is interesting to see what they say and what the community says. The first one states:

The 2020 proposal is a farce. The cabinet has made the decision to axe services to cover up whatever the secret reason for the budget blowout is. 2020 is a bunch of BS—

that is what is written—

made up on the fly to attempt to put a positive spin on bulldozing schools to build flats. Perhaps 2020 is the next time the ALP will get back into government?

Another one states:

We have been in this suburb since 1975 and have been through many changes. We fought to get our shop, our children attended the local school and our grandchildren were to return as out of area enrolments in 2008. My children planted trees on the ovals and thrived in this close knit suburb. Now we see everything being taken from us. Our wonderful suburb is being degraded and we will soon be left with nothing. Soon the garage will go too simply through the lack of passing trade. What did we all do that was so wrong to deserve this?

This statement—and this has been sent to Minister Barr by one of the parents—continues:

1) Why can't the PEA for the suburbs of Crace, Lawson and McKellar be the Giralang schools?

Why not? How logical! Too logical for this lot! The statement continues:

2) Why was Giralang chosen over Maribyrnong Primary?
- A school with similar enrolment numbers
- A school that allegedly costs more per student to educate
- A school in need of repair (our school in fantastic condition)
- A school in a suburb that has 2 other schools.

3) Why Giralang schools, when both our neighbouring suburbs (Evatt and Kaleen) have three schools?

I assume they mean the private school as well. The statement continues:

There seems to be no consideration given to the demise of our suburb.

4) Has Mr Barr actually gone to see Maribyrnong Primary for himself? In particular the “fishbowl” environment for children with special needs. There is no comparison between the two schools.

5) Does the government find it acceptable to place our children in demountables? This is exactly what will occur should the majority of parents choose to send their children to Kaleen Primary. After all, we are within our rights to choose this option.

6) Has the government actually looked at how many young families are living in the suburb? There are a lot of preschool aged children in the community and unfortunately the census figures won't help us in time.

7) Finally, why should the parents (lay people) of our community be burdened with having to write submissions, try to make political decisions and basically come up with reasons and ways to “fix” this Government's blunders?

“School closures” and “Budget” are two issues that should never have been combined. Stanhope's actions have been a disgrace and I believe he has totally underestimated the impact the impending school closures will have on all involved.

Then there is rates! Then there is pay-parking at hospitals!

That is how that one finishes. The final one states:

I have grave concerns for the future of public education in Belconnen as a resident, parent and teacher. The government's attempt to cover their budgetary incompetence with such kneejerk reactions as closing schools and preschools and cutting teaching positions in high schools shows absolutely no foresight or valuing of education.

They are the words of three families in the Giralang area. It shows the concern. It shows the angst and the anger at the stupidity of the government's decision.

Despite the fact that you have the numbers in this place, the Liberal Party will continue to work with the community. We have announced already that we will be trying to take the community with us. We will be looking at steps to take education forward over the next 25 years to ensure that our system, which is still, despite the efforts you lot seem to be making, the best in the country, remains and continues to be the best in the country, by talking to people, by involving the community and by taking the community with us—not arbitrarily announcing 39 school closures and then trying to justify it. That simply is not working. The community are not buying it.

For that reason, Dr Foskey's bill is worth supporting. The amendments proposed by Mrs Dunne are sensible, and I urge you to support them.

MR SESELJA (Molonglo) (11.25): The Chief Minister in his speech identified the word “integrity”. That is at the heart of this debate. It is about integrity. It is an issue that you

raised in an opinion piece some time ago about political integrity being important in this debate. We have to go back to prior to the last election, when the ACT Labor Party went to the electorate promising to close no schools, promising that there would be no school closures under this government. We had a spokesperson for Katy Gallagher in the *Canberra Times* on 12 August saying there will be no school closures.

We look at the ACT Stanhope Labor education policy going into the 2004 election. Remember this is an election when we were told not to fear a Stanhope majority government. I am looking for the part where it says, "We will gut the education system." I am looking for the part where it says, "We will close 40 schools." It is not there. All we had was a spokesperson for the education minister saying, "We will not close schools." That was all they said about school closures.

They talk about preschool education. This is how they back up what Katy Gallagher said. This is Labor's commitment to public education and preschools: we have kept preschools with low enrolments open for families to access when the Liberals would have closed them. It is the Liberals! How many preschools are closing? Twenty-two preschools! We had the Labor Party going to the last election saying, "We are not going to close any schools. The Liberals would have closed all the preschools. You can be sure of that."

What do we have from the Labor Party after the election? Forty school closures. There is not a word of it in their education policy. There is a flat denial when they are asked about it in the media; it is the Liberals who would have closed them. "We have kept them open. Trust us. Trust the Labor Party." That is what they said. This is an absolute sham. Look at the other bits. They promised to cut CIT fees for year 12 students. Have they done that? I think it is still \$1,000 in up-front fees. No, they have not done that either.

This education policy, which was a major part of the Labor Party's platform for the 2004 election, at which they got a majority, is a sham. The people of the ACT were deceived. They were misled. We are now seeing the true colours of this government. When the Chief Minister said, "Do not fear a majority Labor government," no-one could have known how wrong he was and how much of a deception of the people of the ACT that was.

There is a lot of talk here about consultation. Mr Barr talks about his 550,000-odd meetings that he has had with various officials and the like, but it needs to be said that, in our democratic system, there is only one real, proper, complete consultation and that is called an election. At the election, they did not consult with the people. They withheld what they were going to do. They withheld their true plans for the ACT education system because they could not bear to face the electorate on the basis of gutting the education system and closing 40 schools.

People all across my electorate have been deceived by the ACT Labor Party. The people of Rivett were deceived; the people of Dickson were deceived. I have had parents from Gungahlin who send their kids to the Woden Special School, which is going to merge, coming to see me. They were deceived. The people of Weston Creek were deceived. We have a government that talks about integrity. It tries to take the high moral ground on this issue and say, "We are making the hard decisions. We are making the hard decisions for the good of the community." Yet they could not bring themselves to be honest with the

people of the ACT prior to the election and say what they were going to do with the ACT education system.

When we look at this bill from Dr Foskey, which we are supporting, and the amendments which have been flagged by Mrs Dunne, it needs to be said that it is important that we take a deep breath and have a look at what we are doing here, have a look at the reasons and have a look at whether this is going to be a good policy.

Apart from not taking things to the election, as I have outlined before, if you were fair dinkum you would not rush it through. You would not announce on budget day, "We are closing 40 schools and more than half of those schools will be closed by the end of the year." If you were serious, if *Towards 2020* had any meaning and if you were going to go to the people and say, "We have a plan, we have a vision for the next 15-odd years of education and beyond in *Towards 2020*," would you not take a bit of time to consider it? You would not get a new minister, who has just come into the job and got his marching orders from Mr Costello and the Treasurer: "You go and close schools." That is not how you would do it. You would take some time to consider why there is such a drift from the government sector to the non-government sector. That is the first thing you would do. You would look at the reasons.

There has been no analysis by this government of the reasons. Until we know why the people of the ACT are consistently choosing to pay for something that they could otherwise get for free, until we have the answer to that question, we cannot begin to form a comprehensive plan for reforming and improving the public education system. If you do not know why people are leaving, you cannot know what you have to do to keep them there. Tell us.

We have not heard a comprehensive statement from Mr Barr: "This is our comprehensive analysis. This has been our analysis. Now this is what we are going to do about it." We have a cobbled together policy that was put together with undue haste, which did not consider these issues which Mrs Dunne has in her amendment, which would improve this process. Then the ACT Labor Party could regain the trust of the electorate by saying, "Yes, we deceived you in 2004, but now we are going to say, 'Okay, we should have told you before 2004 what our plans were; now we are going to take some time to develop a proper policy,' rather than just what Mr Costello said, 'We have to close 40 schools; so now we are closing 40 schools.'"

That is at the heart of where we are at. That is why Dr Foskey has brought this bill forward. That is why we are supporting it but seeking to improve it. I read some of the words of the proposed amendment. We would look at:

- (i) a comprehensive survey of, and evaluation of the reasons for, the drift in enrolments from government schools to non-government schools;

That is absolutely at the heart of the matter. I continue:

- (ii) a long-term demographic analysis of the demand for school places;
- (iii) a long-term analysis of the future use of surplus school land and buildings;

Mr Barr: I think (ii) is more important than (i), actually.

MR SESELJA: It is interesting that Mr Barr interjects and says that paragraph (ii) is more important. Hopefully, he will be supporting this amendment then. Perhaps he would like to consider some of these things in a comprehensive way, rather than rushing out, gutting the education system and closing 40 schools. Why would you not take the time to get this right? We know why. We know the answer. It goes back to integrity.

They need to close all of the schools as quickly as they can, in the vain hope that, come 2008, somehow the people of the ACT will have forgotten what they have done, will have forgotten that they were deceived in 2004 by this government and will have forgotten that Katy Gallagher and her spokesperson said there would be no school closures, and then they closed 40. If they take a bit of time and close schools closer to the election, they are afraid of the electoral backlash. That is at the heart of this debate.

Mr Barr: That is the Liberal Party policy?

MR SESELJA: Mr Barr can interject all he likes. It is like the argument we had yesterday over the economy. The proposition put by Mr Gentleman and the Chief Minister was: "If you had stuffed things up as badly as we have, what would you now do?" This is what Mr Barr is putting to us: "If we had gone to the 2004 election and deceived the people and then were looking to gut the education system, would you do things the same?" No, we would not. We would not have gone to the people of the ACT and deceived them and would not be gutting the education system in the way that this government is proposing to do. It is a moot interjection and is the kind of thing we have been getting from, not just Mr Barr but also from the Treasurer yesterday.

We know why there is a rush. We know that they do not want to do this in a considered and comprehensive way and in a way that will improve educational outcomes. We know that they have not done a comprehensive analysis of why there is a drift from the government sector to the non-government sector. We know why they want to rush it through. They want to rush it through because they want people to forget. People are not going to forget. We will remind them. We will remind them what this minister has done. We will remind them that they can never trust the ACT Labor Party. They cannot trust them on anything. They certainly cannot trust them on education. This education policy is an absolute sham. There is nothing in there about 40 schools to close. All they do is say, "The Liberal Party would have closed all the preschools."

We know who is closing the preschools. It is the ACT Labor Party. We know who is gutting the education system. It is the ACT Labor Party. We know who is in a desperate, desperate rush to close these schools far enough out from the next election that they can avoid political damage. This is not about integrity; this is not about doing what is best for the education system. This is about trying to get away with an outrageous gutting of the ACT education system and get away with it far enough out from the next election that they do not get voted out of office.

MRS BURKE (Molonglo) (11.37): Mr Stanhope talks in this place about honesty. Mr Seselja has talked about integrity. Deception, another word used by my colleague, is clearly what is being shown throughout this whole process. People have been deceived. It is a terrific insult to the Canberra community, an absolute insult.

Let us have a look at Dr Foskey's bill. We support this bill. Let us note part of it. It reflects the expressed desires of the ACT Parents and Citizens Council and the Canberra Preschool Society. It is being supported by the ACT branch of the Australian Education Union and the Save Our Schools Coalition. It is quite clear then, is it not, that the government is choosing to ignore the majority of the ACT population. How arrogant is this? They talk about consultation. The meetings I have been to have simply been dictated from the department via the minister who has been shoved out there like some fleece. Mr Barr talked about arbitrary delay. I thought the government were all about consultation. Why the rush? What is the problem? Why all of a sudden?

We will support Dr Foskey's bill. We would like to ramp it up, if we are allowed to in this place, and firm up that very fine bill that she has put forward today.

Mr Stanhope talked yesterday of 60 meetings. The Chief Minister said yesterday they were firstly directed to the special and culturally sensitive needs of indigenous students. I have, direct from the community, words that would absolutely, totally say that is incorrect. He also referred to students with a disability. We all saw the knee-jerk response, did we not, when it was raised in this place: "We will let the schools stay open, yes, for another term." What a disgrace! For those people most vulnerable in our community, this is the best that we can do!

I do not consider any of the meetings to have been consultative. I do not consider any of this shambolic mess to have been well organised, well constructed and well delivered. When I asked about individual plans for students—and I include students with a disability and students from indigenous and sensitively cultural backgrounds—on 23 August this year Mr Barr told me:

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

Much has been made about planning for students, but I see no evidence. I doubt that we ever will, because the minister is telling us they are private. How do we know that they exist? We only have the minister's word for that. I will not go into that. I will not go into it because Mr Barr will have the chance to respond and table in this place the construct of those individual plans. I do not want names.

Mr Barr: I cannot; they are individuals.

MRS BURKE: Are they? I see. But I would like to see the evidence, you guys. As far as I can see, there is no mention of indigenous families in the *Towards 2020* plan or on the web site. I am told by the community and a prominent indigenous family that there has been no separate consultation at all. Maybe you are playing catch-up now and are being very selective again. Let us have a look at a particular case. I do not intend to speak long and often on this—perhaps I should speak long and often.

Mr Hargreaves: You do.

MRS BURKE: And I do, Mr Hargreaves, because the community deserves to know. Unlike the government, the opposition will speak long and loud about this. This is

a deplorable situation and one that the government has seen fit to laugh about in this place. It beggars belief. Obviously the Stanhope government—pardon this expression—have not done their homework when it comes to school closures.

Let us have a look at a school in question in my electorate, Narrabundah primary school. No wonder there is widespread community resistance to the government's proposal to merge Narrabundah primary school with Red Hill. Mr Speaker, you may remember this. People have seen this all before. It was not pleasant. In 1992 Narrabundah primary school merged with Griffith primary school, up the road. In early 1993, what happened? Griffith closed because it was no longer viable.

How can we be sure that these mergers are not going to have this impact? Thirty-nine schools have been named; 39 schools are out there. People are racing around trying to garner support: "Get people to come to my school, enrol at my school." What a deplorable situation we have put the community in. It is a disgrace. At the beginning of 1991, Griffith, with 213 students, was much bigger than Narrabundah. By the time it closed in 1993, there were just 32 students left. It should sound warning bells for the government.

I believe, in a forthright manner, that all members of this Assembly should be courageous enough to stand behind the central tenet of Dr Foskey's bill, and that is to aid the Stanhope government in making the right decision, not a hasty decision. We need to have significant investigation into the closure of an enormous amount of schools. That is already having an enormous impact upon the community.

I know you are having to tough this out, minister. I know you are having to sit there and take all this. Cannot you do anything? You are the minister. Surely you have the power. Do you have the sway in cabinet or do you not? Or are you all of the one mind, even those people who disagreed with it and now all of a sudden are flip-flopping and agreeing with it? What a mess! What an awful place for those people, who did not want this to go ahead, to be in—those Labor members who have had to stand up and say in one place, "No, we do not want it to happen," but in this place have to say, "We have got to go with the flow; it has got to happen." I am very, very sad for those people.

This moratorium is designed to allow sufficient time frames to be set and proper investigation of all the options. That will in turn allow for better education outcomes for Canberra's children. I am absolutely perplexed by the rush and race. I have been told by one principal, or two or more, that they were told about this on the afternoon of the budget and then were told by parents, "We saw it in the paper." How charming is that? Are we really thinking about children? It beggars belief.

The Liberal opposition is simply calling upon the government to take a sensible approach to conducting more comprehensive inquiries into school closures. The government says that the opposition wants to delay things. If it means a delay, it means a darn delay. But let us get this right. Let us make absolutely sure. Let us make it more public, open and transparent—the lovely words you like to use. Show people why you are doing what you are doing. Show people what you are doing.

Mr Hargreaves: Meet them more often!

MRS BURKE: Mr Hargreaves continues to make buffoonish remarks. Settle down. This is a serious issue, Mr Hargreaves. Opposition members will stand by any decision taken by this government that will improve outcomes. I will say that again: opposition members will stand by any decision taken by this government that will improve outgoings and, when necessary, will find innovative ways to inject funds into areas where they are most needed—target the funding—rather than let it be squandered. We have an obligation, as members of this Assembly, to stop and take stock of the current state of the government education system in the ACT. That is unquestionable. Why is the drift happening? We cannot be told. Nobody is telling us. What investigations have you done to find out the reasons for the drift? What have you done?

Mr Barr: It is more than just a drift, Mrs Burke.

MRS BURKE: It is more than just something, something, something.

Mr Barr: There is an overall decline in the number of people under 15.

MRS BURKE: Is there? Any excuse will do at this stage. We have an obligation, as members of this Assembly, to stop and take stock of the current state of the government education system in the ACT. In order to do so, it would seem all too apparent that we seek further input from the community. Surely this is a fair and reasonable thing to do.

Mrs Dunne: People are willing to shell out \$4,000 a year.

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mrs Dunne! Your colleague is having difficulty getting her message across.

MRS BURKE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In order to do so, it would seem all too apparent that we seek further input from the community.

Mr Barr: There is a lot of money going into private education lately.

Mr Seselja: Not in the ACT.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Mr Seselja and Mr Barr, discontinue your conversation. Mrs Burke has the floor.

MRS BURKE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Relevant organisations must be brought into the picture more. You are keeping people at a distance. You are pushing people away because you do not want to properly consult. That is clear. You want to hear what you want to hear and no more. You are not listening to the heart of what people are trying to tell you. People want to help. You are simply refusing to help.

Mr Barr, you have to sit there, under the direction of your department, and be the little puppet that has to deliver the hard message. You are the minister. You should take more control of what is going on and speak to people one-on-one. Speak to these groups like you have done.

Such an approach would give this government the chance to deliver comprehensive findings via a proper reporting process, thereby ensuring any decisions taken to close earmarked schools is done with supported evidence. A comprehensive study of demographics is certainly required. It would be difficult for the current government, intent on closing some 39 schools—over 20 of those being preschools—to ignore the distinct need to be absolutely certain that there are sufficient educational resources allocated to the school campuses where there is identified need.

If the ACT and, I might add, all the families that are affected by the impending school closures are not sufficiently informed about the reasons for closure of each individual school campus, it would be reasonable to expect these same families and their children to ask the hard questions about the need for such closures. What is it? What does this government get? Why can you not give people the information? People would then go away satisfied or otherwise. But you are keeping everything so close to your chest. Confusion and chaos in the community are ever likely.

The government has not provided adequate evidence, documented support or any distinct political reason for the number of school closures. If we are faced with a longer term significant drift that sees children being enrolled in non-government schools, we have to tackle the reasons why this is occurring and prepare accordingly for the shift of student population away from the government education system.

The opposition supports steps to analyse the demand or lack thereof for government school places. It is a responsible approach. It should be a mandatory step adopted to ensure that the education budget is expanded in the most efficient and effective manner. This is what I would expect the ACT taxpayers would demand of any government of the day. Once this step is taken, a clear picture will naturally eventuate whereby the government will then see where surplus land and school building stock exists and will act accordingly. The government has all this information and has had it for a long time. Even the Chief Minister may have alluded to some remark on the ABC about there being a land issue.

Mr Barr can sit there and say, “I am not going to say, ‘Close schools and sell off the land.’” No, you might not, Mr Barr. As I said before, the planning minister might, and so might the Chief Minister. It is all about money. When push comes to shove in this place, it is not about the educational outcomes. Do not be hypocritical. Stand up and say what Mr Stanhope said. Be honest. He used that word.

It would be certainly enlightening if this Assembly were allowed the opportunity by this majority government to debate quite obvious and sensible points that could assist this government in making the tough decisions, which no-one disputes. Tough decisions have to be made. Nobody is denying that. But I have no doubt that all members of this Assembly in time will be disappointed by the lack of foresight and the implementation of ill-thought-out policy in this circumstance.

It is a real pity that we have not had fuller engagement with the community. Those consultations have been an absolute joke. I do not know how you can sit there. How embarrassing! You came up with the same things, the same rhetoric, at every meeting that you attended. It was not consultation. Admit it. It was not consultation; it was

a pre-delivered speech. It was just: “We will tell you what we think is good for you.” Let us take a step back. Let us try to take a breath. It is not too late. It would take a bigger step back to reverse this than it would to keep going forward. Going forward is easy. We will continue to march on and say: take stock of what is happening; do not be so hasty.

We support Dr Foskey’s bill today. We hope the government and certainly those members of the Labor Party who have already said that they do not agree with what is going on in regard to school closures—you being one of them, sir—will and that we can somehow stop, take a look and really sit down and do this thing properly. The Canberra community deserves no less.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (11.52): Mr Speaker, I thought the Labor Party would take the opportunity to speak on this bill. Instead, there is a thundering silence. Where are Ms MacDonald and Mr Gentleman, who have been out there campaigning, or so they say, for the schools? Why are they not here today giving encouragement to Dr Foskey’s well thought out amendment bill? Mr Hargreaves, why are you not up on your feet speaking about this issue, defending your schools in your area? There is a vacuum, a thundering silence by the government. Some members of the governing party have expressed their sympathy and their concerns for the schools in their electorates, but they have not got the guts to stand up here today and represent their schools. There is a thundering silence from the other side. Let that be noted.

Mrs Dunne: Ms MacDonald is not there.

MR PRATT: Indeed. The government’s program to close 39 schools over a 12-month time frame without any appropriate consultation is an obscenity. This is knee-jerk, panic campaigning by the government. This is badly thought through, last-minute planning, last-minute implementation of school closures after a number of years of absolute silence.

I support Dr Foskey’s amendment bill. There is clearly a need now to simply stop the rot, to put a spoke in the wheels of the government, to pull things up, to take the breathing space required, to look at why the government need to close these schools, the manner in which they are going to close these schools, the number of schools that really need to be closed and then to recommence the entire consultation process in order to consult more fairly with the families of the ACT and provide adequate warning that they will need to make decisions. They cannot do that under your current plan because this telescoped program gives no-one any chance to think rationally about, firstly, the decisions that need to be made about closing down or amalgamating schools and, secondly, the decisions that families need to make that are in the best interests of their kids. This is where you are failing and this is why I commend Dr Foskey’s amendment bill.

This is another failure by the Stanhope government to consult. If the government had decided that there were 39 or 22 or 25 schools to be closed and that process had to commence in early 2007 then this government had a duty to commence that consultation process in early 2005. They did not come out of the last election with a strategic plan to do something about rationalising schools and to commence a consultation process with school communities and broader communities in early 1995 to determine a rational program which might commence two years later. They did not do that.

The government were silent through 2005. Why was there no mention in 2005 that there might be a need to commence a school closures program? It is because they did not think about it. There was no strategic analysis or decision made to do something about rationalising schools. Instead, the Costello review came along. Costello said, "Government, you are in deep doggy doo-doo. There is a need to rationalise quickly. There is a need to save money. You need to find capital somewhere. Perhaps you might start looking at closing schools rapidly. Perhaps you might need to start selling the land on which those schools sit to collect the revenue that you need for your Iemma-style 2008 Stanhope war chest to try and retain government." Is that how Mr Stanhope was inspired to create the next election war chest?

Members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! Mr Pratt, direct your comments through the chair. Members will cease interjecting.

Mr Barr: A bit like the Goward-style preselection.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Barr, that includes you.

MR PRATT: I have asked the question here. Mrs Dunne has asked the question here. Dr Foskey has asked the question here and in estimates. Where is the funding that you have set aside to maintain the closed schools? Minister, what have you allocated in the TAMS budget to secure and maintain the 39 schools that you will be closing? We cannot ever get an answer.

The education minister was not able to tell me in estimates or in this place what amount of money the government, in its governance role, might set aside to maintain and secure those closed schools. Certainly the Minister for Territory and Municipal Services, who would be the custodian of that budget, is unable to tell us. He cannot quantify what would be required to secure and maintain the schools that the government decides to close.

Why is that? That is deeply suspicious. One has to ask: why are they unable to quantify the dollars set aside? It is because they are going to sell at least some of those schools. The driving motivation for this school closures program is to find assets and resources and to sell and to gain revenue. Is that not so, minister? You can sit there looking a bit loopy, but we understand why. This is very, very sad. This is a crass, jump through your backside, jump through hoops, last-minute panic, knee-jerk reaction—

Mr Hargreaves: Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. I think Mr Pratt just used unparliamentary language. I ask him to withdraw it.

MR PRATT: Mr Speaker, I withdraw. I apologise to the gallery and to my colleagues.

The fact that no funding has been identified really undermines the government's case for their so-called rationalisation program. The government is about gathering revenue, and schools are simply assets. Schools no longer are institutions where we might develop our

youth and get them ready to run this territory and this country. The human factor is entirely missing. This is purely a resource gain.

I have spoken to quite a few school groups in my own electorate about the closure program. There are some pretty sad cases. One of the saddest examples that I see is the Kambah area. In the Kambah area we stand to see a high school and at least two primary schools closed. There is a high likelihood that a very significant number of the schools serving Kambah will close. That will cause great detriment. It will gut the Kambah community. I want to read out a letter that Johnno, a concerned student from Kambah high school, has written to me. He says:

Dear Steve,

I am writing this letter to you in regards to the proposed closure of Kambah High School in 2007 under the ACT government's "Towards 2020" plan on behalf of the Kambah High School SOS group.

Mr Hargreaves: Did you write this one yourself?

MR PRATT: He is up there, minister.

Mrs Burke: He is in the public gallery.

MR PRATT: You can go and ask him. Go up there and ask him, minister.

Mr Hargreaves: Oh, that Johnno!

MR PRATT: Unlike you, minister, I do not mislead you or anybody else. Minister, this is what he had to say:

The "Towards 2020" plan leaves many in the community feeling betrayed by the current government. There is an obvious need to rationalise schools in the ACT—

Here is a rational, thinking young man who understands the needs of the community. He goes on to say:

... but we feel that there is an adequate amount of high schools and colleges to meet the needs of the ACT community.

There has been obviously little thought behind the proposal as many statistics presented in the brochure leave room for debate, for example ...

He goes on to highlight some very interesting points. He says:

In the brochure it claims Kambah High has a capacity of 722 and with 296 students is operating at 41 percent capacity, will Wanniassa school senior site is the same design and age as Kambah High and yet that school has a current capacity of 836 and an enrolment of 353 and the school only has 57 more students than KHS. When does 57 students tip this kind of scale?

He goes on to say:

And in a conversation I had with Andrew Barr I asked "If all current students of KHS went to Wanniasa High tomorrow could they all fit", He answered "Yes". When Kambah High, Wanniasa High and Wanniasa primary have a combined enrolment of exactly 900, the Wanniasa High building would be overfilled by the government's statistics by 44 students. (It is my understanding it is planned to move the Wanniasa junior campus into the senior building).

That is my understanding, too. He goes on to say:

This proves that the statistics are false and are so to try and sell this disturbing proposal to the people of Canberra.

The letter is quite long and the last point that I will quote is this:

Though we could debate many aspects of this proposal for years to come the main focus of the Kambah High School SOS group is the need for grades 7-10 in the suburb. As Kambah has a low socio-economic population the need for a local school is evident. If we are to convince students to continue higher education, we must not make it harder for them to access it.

That is a very good point. We want to retain our kids in these schools and when we take a school like this out of a community, we make it that much harder, particularly for kids who might have difficulties.

I want to talk about Tharwa primary school. Tharwa primary school is a small school, with perhaps 29 students, but it is a quality school. It has proven to be a quality school with excellent outcomes. It is a special case school in an isolated community. You are not assessing these schools on a case-by-case basis. You are drawing a plimsoll line and saying that any school with an enrolment below the line is automatically on the closure list.

The Stanhope government is ruining Tharwa. You are going to take their primary school away from them and their bridge is not going to be replaced for a very long time. There is no money in the budget for at least three years to replace that bridge. You also failed to ensure that people were travelling on that bridge safely. The government really is pushing Tharwa right out of the equation. Your failure to help defend that community during the 2003 fires reinforced your attitude.

Gilmore primary school is a perfectly good structure with a pretty reasonable enrolment rate. What is the motive behind closing Gilmore?

Mrs Dunne: Sweeping views.

MR PRATT: Is it the sweeping views of the Brindabellas? Is it high real estate value? Isabella primary school falls very much into the category of smaller primary school in Kambah. It is a school in a low socioeconomic area and it needs to retain its kids.

The last point I would make is that, while Dr Foskey's amendment bill is a very good bill and worth supporting, we believe that there needs to be value added to that bill. I therefore support Mrs Dunne's amendments which seek to build on that bill and lay down the marker that something needs to be done to identify why the drift is occurring from public to private schools. The government does not have the answer. You have to find the answer if you are to arrest the exodus. The government's priority should be to add value to our schools. This government has failed the community and it has failed the schools. They have not consulted, and that is a disgrace.

MR SPEAKER: At this juncture I acknowledge the students and teachers from year 6 of St Thomas the Apostle at Kambah. Welcome.

Members: Hear, hear!

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (12.07), in reply: I want to thank the opposition for supporting my bill. I believe the government will deeply regret its decision to oppose it. I believe that the community backlash that they will see after this so-called period of consultation is over and a decision is made will be devastating. Frankly, I expected a lot more of a Labor government than this budget, in particular this process, and I am reflecting a whole community that is still trying to work out what happened.

How could this have been done differently? The Chief Minister keeps asking the opposition and the Greens, "How would you do it? Where are your answers?" I am only one member of this Assembly, but I have worked in education. I have worked in a variety of roles. I care about schools. I use the government schools here. I watch what is happening. I believe that I have something to offer this debate. This bill was put forward in the spirit of taking a chance to do better.

I have been told that the government is going to oppose the bill and I am disappointed. I am disappointed that I have not heard the backbenchers speak. But that is the government's decision. I believe that this whole process has been based on political expediency and no doubt that is why we are not hearing from the same people who supported the motion that was put to the Labor Party conference.

Let us go back to how this could have been done differently. We had the functional review. It is handed down, but it is bad news! The functional review says that we have to make some savings. Where? We will not do too much to health. Health is a politically dangerous area to touch because that affects everybody. But government schools affect a diminishing percentage of the community, so we are told, so let us go there. It will affect the families, the kids and the teachers. But we might get through. They still would not vote Liberal, would they?

So we get the review and we are shocked. The money situation is not good. The territory finances are not good. What do we do? I think that what the government should have done then was make that document, or at least those parts of it with the greatest impact on the community, public. Why not bring them in? It is an intelligent community. It is the most highly educated city, proportionally, in Australia. Let us treat them with the respect that they deserve.

Mr Stanhope has said that it will be at least two years until we start making the savings from this devastating process. That means we have time. We could pass my moratorium bill today and it would not matter in terms of those things that the government is talking about. The government could take the consultation process to the community, which is what I advocate in my bill. The government could say, "We have to make a 10 per cent cut to education. Can you find some savings in your school?"

That is what those 39 schools are doing right now. They are working their guts out to find those savings, to bring in money to the education department. But they are doing it with a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. This process is Machiavellian. It is about dividing schools against each other. We all know that works really well in politics. That is how the Liberals play it. It is how Labor plays it. But it is not the right way to go about this process because every school matters. Every school community matters and it is not good that we are hearing, "Why is our school for closure when that one is not?" They are fair enough questions because the community cannot see the sense, but it means that it is a really bad process.

We can go to the community and say, "Let us put public education as the bottom line. It has got to be good because that is how it has always been in Canberra." In Canberra, people are our strength and the more highly educated they are, the better our economic advantage. That is what we have got. We do not have industry. We do not have agriculture to the extent that it can support our economy. What we do have is land sales. We have become increasingly reliant upon land sales. We are told that and the government is trying to move away from that. Our biggest asset is our people, all of them, whether they go to private schools or public schools. So let us show that we care about them. Let us show that we value them.

So we have got the school communities looking at how they can make savings without threats of closures over their heads at that point. Then we look at the processes the department already has under way. We know there was a 2010 process under way, and from the little bit that has been made public it looked as though it was a very promising process and quite a way along the consultative process. With a little bit of addition to the terms of reference, it could have continued. It did not have to become this drastic 2020 process.

We would look at the work that the department is doing on curriculum renewal and on programs for kids at risk, including indigenous kids. I agree with the ACT Chief Minister that we are doing a damn good job there. But this 2020 strategy is not good for kids who are at risk in our system, and we all know that. Even if you are not a teacher, you know that.

We would look at how these processes can be strengthened. We would harness the considerable resources of our education department, who are committed to public education. I do not think they are committed to school closures. I will bet they do not like it. At the same time, they are losing 90 of their own staff. So let us bring them along, instead of just telling them that they have to do the work of the government. And let us not forget negotiations with teachers at the same time. We would talk to other departments and we would seek advice from our own expert bodies, like the government school education council. We would engage with them. We would not reject their advice,

as has happened here. We would talk to indigenous groups, the P&C council, ACTCOSS and NAPCAN.

Who would we talk to from the students? Is there a student body advisory board? There should be. We do not even have the Commissioner for Children and Young People in place yet, but her or his job would have been to advocate and represent young people and make sure their interests are preserved. We would talk to the Australian Education Union and we would talk to principals. That is not an exhaustive list, but if you do not have those people along with you, then you are in trouble. Then we would set a time line that suits the current school year. We would not announce it in June, which would mean that the six months would end when the school year ends. There has been enough said about that. I do not want to say things I have already said because there are so many new things to say.

We would set up criteria and targets. We have not seen any of those in this process. The schools do not know under what criteria they were chosen. It appears to differ from school to school, but no-one has been able to really establish what it is. We would set up targets. We would set up bottom lines to make sure that certain things are not harmed by any cost reductions that take place. We might end this consultation in March or April next year. That seems to me to be a fairer time than December, and that is what our bill is about.

Then we would do new research. We all know that the statistical stuff was either old or wrong and that lots of communities have come up with newer figures that are more accurate. Yes, it is important to know why enrolments are falling, but it is also important to know if they are rising, and they appear to be. Let us not forget that public education is our safety net. Go and read the World Bank stuff. We are not yet World Bank material here, but when the cost of living rises, a lot more people will need a good public education system.

At the moment there is some discretionary funding that enables a group of people to move out of our system. I do not think this process is increasing their faith in our system, but it is important that we have a good system and realise that there is only a certain number of people who can ever move into the private system and there is only a certain number the private system can take. We cannot rely upon that and we cannot use it as an excuse for doing what this process does.

We should look at different models of organising schools. There is room for small and large schools in our system. People should not have to go to a really large school. People should have choices. Some students do not do well in large schools. Some students do better in small schools where everybody knows them. We should look at where the educational holes and the needs are. Sometimes it looks like there is a big map of Canberra and the minister puts on a blindfold and stands in front of it with a pin and that is the one that goes.

I believe that the focus on why students are being moved into private schools is actually a bit of a furphy. The ACT has a record of, and a responsibility to maintain, a high quality public education system. We need to consider the impact on schools that are not closing. One of the problems with this process is that the schools that are targeted have been left to speak for themselves, but increasingly the schools are going to be impacted

with increased numbers speaking out, because they are realising that the quality that they value in their school is going to be compromised.

Look at Kaleen primary school, for instance, which is concerned that if an increasing number of Giralang kids go there, they can no longer have their gifted and talented program which draws in kids from a wider area because of the responsibility to take in area enrolments first. I do not think these things have been considered. I am raising them here and I do not think I should need to. I think we should have all this on the table.

We need to consider the ecological impacts of changes. Will more car use be required? Yes, it will. But what of the people who do not have cars and what about our commitment to really doing something about climate change? I was not here for question time yesterday but I did read what was said about what we are doing about climate change.

Mr Hargreaves: Why were not you here? Were you in the building?

DR FOSKEY: I was at Giralang primary school. How will school closures impact on neighbourhood centres? We know that the nature of planning in Canberra, which is what makes us famous, was about the social necessity for local centres and local schools. The social impact is of key importance.

Can schools be extended to fulfil the function of lifelong learning? We have had a demographic change. We have an older society and maybe schools can be adjusted to take into account the fact that they want opportunities too. What about providing venues for the sea change centres which the government has just given \$5,000 to the Nature and Society Forum to develop and which is looking to have bases in all the suburbs? Can we have bases for CIT? Can we expand the range of educational opportunities? Can we have specialties like schools with a focus on theatres, schools with a focus on dance, circus and art? These things exist in other cities and if we are talking about diversity, then let us really do it.

School communities are doing an amazing amount of work and there are a lot of ideas out there. But they should not have to do all the work with a sword of Damocles over their head. They really should be working in partnership with the government and not against the government because too often the government is so busy defending itself that it fails to recognise the pain that school communities are going through. Maybe that is, in the end, the hardest thing for people to take. All we hear is denial. When statistics are wrong, we hear, "No, no, no." When people are hurting or need counselling, we hear, "No, no." The government should recognise that and work with communities. A meeting where the minister says the same thing over and over again is not consultation. Consultation is about listening. It is about showing that you have heard and are taking on what you have heard.

Mr Barr: You have been to about three of my meetings, Dr Foskey. You are in no position to make any comment. You are in no position to make that statement.

DR FOSKEY: Even now, you cannot listen. Letters should be replied to in a timely way. That is something that has not been done. Finally, the social impacts of these

closures are far reaching—town planners have said that to me—and they are unconsidered.

MR SPEAKER: The member's time has expired.

Question put:

That the bill be agreed to in principle.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 6

Noes 7

Mrs Dunne
Dr Foskey
Mr Pratt
Mr Seseljja

Mr Smyth
Mr Stefaniak

Mr Barr
Mr Berry
Mr Gentleman
Mr Hargreaves

Ms MacDonald
Ms Porter
Mr Stanhope

Question so resolved in the negative.

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

Sitting suspended from 12.26 to 2.30 pm.

Ministerial arrangements

MR STANHOPE: The Attorney-General and Minister for Planning is not available to take questions today as a result of a personal issue. I am happy to seek to respond or to assist members that may have questions for Mr Corbell in his capacities.

Questions without notice Rhodium Asset Solutions Ltd

MR STEFANIAK: In light of the recent findings brought down by the Auditor General's report on Rhodium Asset Solutions Ltd and the fact that these findings, as quoted in page 3 of the report, "are relevant not just to Rhodium Asset Solutions Ltd, but also to other Territory Owned Corporations and statutory bodies and to the ACT public sector as a whole", can you assure the Assembly and the people of Canberra that the proper procedures and financial controls are in place to guarantee responsible governance and accountability in all other territory-owned corporations, statutory bodies and the ACT public service as a whole?

MR STANHOPE: It is a very important question. These are fundamental issues in relation to governance and accountability, and the capacity of governments to have confidence in territory-owned corporations, and indeed in government departments and other agencies and for the community to have similarly a level of confidence in the operations of government-owned organisations, and government instrumentalities and departments.

It is appropriate that we ensure not only that the responsibilities of managers and senior managers are understood but also that appropriate arrangements are in place; that there are systems of procedures, checks and balances; and that there is a culture that exists that ensures that some of the shortcomings that have been revealed by the Auditor General in the Rhodium report are prevented—to the extent that they can be prevented—and are avoided.

Having said that, it is my intention to ensure that the findings consistent with the recommendations of the Auditor General are disseminated and that all chief executives and heads of agencies are aware of their responsibilities. I have already initiated that process with letters to government-owned corporations in relation to ensuring that they have in place appropriate protocols and policies in relation to the sorts of issues that were being investigated by the Auditor General.

I wrote that letter and sought those assurances prior to the Auditor General completing her investigation. I have begun a process of ensuring—in the first instance in relation to the other territory-owned corporations, which I believe the opposition mentioned—that there are appropriate processes and protocols in place.

Let me assure members that I will insist that the report and its findings are implemented to the extent—in the context of the scoping study and the potential sale of Rhodium—that it is appropriate that they be implemented and that the ACT government service, in all of its guises, is aware of and responds appropriately to the report and its recommendations.

To the extent that the Leader of the Opposition asks whether I can give a guarantee that all officers within the ACT government service or all officers within ACT and territory-owned corporations are not behaving in the way or in some of the ways that have been reported by the Auditor General, of course I cannot give that undertaking. It is not an undertaking that anybody could ever give in any circumstance.

The chairman of the board of Rhodium, in the board's response to the Auditor General's report, states unequivocally that the board was misled; that in relation to issues that they were engaged in—conversation or consultation—with senior management, they were misled.

There is an element of risk inherent in any management relationship. At one point nobody—no Chief Minister, Treasurer, Leader of the Opposition, shadow minister or minister—can ever stand up and give an absolute assurance of things simply beyond his or her knowledge and not within his or her capacity to know. At the end of the day, that is a significant risk in relation to all management arrangements or relationships. We trust—each of us does. I, as Chief Minister, trust my chief executives; my chief executives trust their executives.

Mr Smyth: Oh, you are not responsible?

MR STANHOPE: I am responsible. I trust my chief executives, my chief executives trust their executives, and their executives trust their staff. In order to reduce the risks in relation to management streams and relationships, it is appropriate that there be in place

the full range of appropriate systems and processes to ensure that that trust that we invest in those around us is honoured. That is the commitment I give in relation to the report. We will ensure that such processes are in place.

MR STEFANIAK: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Chief Minister, are you aware of any other government agencies where there may well be or are similar problems in relation to procedures and financial controls?

MR STANHOPE: No, I am not aware of any other issues of the same order or ilk as have been revealed in the Auditor General's report into Rhodium.

ACTION bus service

MS MacDONALD: Mr Speaker, my question, through you, is to Mr Hargreaves as Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services. Could the minister inform the Assembly of the work taking place in developing a new ACTION bus network for the people of Canberra?

MR HARGREAVES: I thank Ms MacDonald for her question. The changes that we are making across the territory and municipal services department include services that we are providing through ACTION. We are proposing network changes. This is a network for all Canberrans.

Some of the improvements that we propose include increased frequency of intertown route 300. Now it is every 15 minutes on weekends, an increase from every 20 minutes. We are going to have more peak hour Xpressos and the use of articulated buses to increase passenger capacity. For example, for Xpresso 703, it is proposed to have an articulated bus on the 6.54 am and 7.35 am services and an additional trip at 7.23 am, as well as continuing the 8.05 am service. In the pm, an additional trip has been added at 5.15 from the city.

For Xpresso 701, there will be an additional service at 5.20 pm from the city. We will be utilising articulated buses where possible on these routes. Xpresso 702 has improved time adjustments to better meet travel demand. Articulated buses will also be used on these routes where possible.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order, members! You are interrupting Mr Hargreaves.

MR HARGREAVES: Thank you very much. We are having easier to remember timetables. Off peak and weekend services will depart at the same time each hour.

First route 300 from Tuggeranong to the city is extended through to Belconnen so that workers can get to Calvary Hospital for the start of their shift. There will be improved connections between intertown and evening/weekend services, between routes 35 and 38 from Manuka to Fyshwick, and morning services to Canberra railway station. There will be services to the Canberra Eye Hospital.

We will have new services to Harrison. Currently there are 10 weekday services passing through Harrison in each direction, from the city and Gungahlin Marketplace. This will increase to 22 services in each direction, with the addition of route 58 during the day. Currently there are no weekend bus services passing through Harrison. New route 58 will provide 16 services each way on Saturday and 11 each way on Sunday.

There will be a return to route evening services, which will replace Flexibus. This will mean there is no need to ring to book a bus from the suburbs and more surety for passengers waiting at the stop.

There will be a new route 55 from Gungahlin Marketplace via Harrison, connecting in the city with route 300 at 6.32 am to Woden and Tuggeranong. The request was for a service from Gungahlin to arrive at Woden before 7 o'clock in the morning, and we are trying to satisfy that. There will be an additional route 15 from Theodore to Tuggeranong interchange at 5.54 am. All pm routes 85 and 87 will be with articulated buses to increase capacity. We will be having additional school services from Gungahlin to Copland college and an additional school service from Dunlop to Fraser primary.

These additional services are just that—additional services. Any suggestion that there will be a lessening of the service does not take these particular initiatives into account. I express my appreciation to the staff of ACTION for the work that they have put in in developing these new services.

MS MacDONALD: Mr Speaker, I ask a supplementary question. Minister, with regard to ACTION services, what implications were there for the travelling public stemming from the lack of ACTION services this morning?

MR HARGREAVES: Mr Speaker, it was with extreme disappointment and dismay that the government found out at 7.30 pm last night that the services were going to be withdrawn from 6 am to 8.30 am this morning and that the only routes that would be conducted would be those, after the request from the government, for special needs children. There was, we believe, no need for such a lightning action. All it would serve to do would be to disadvantage further the most disadvantaged in our community.

We know, for example, that there were 10,000 school kids expecting to be picked up by buses that did not arrive. Many of those children were trying to get to school for their year 11 exam but there was not sufficient notice for us to let them know. The last two occasions on which a stop-work action was taken the government supported the stop-work meetings and was able to give sufficient advice to enable the travelling public to make alternative arrangements. Furthermore, the school bus runs were not affected.

Mr Speaker, 25,000 commuters thought buses were going to turn up. Indeed, we were contacted by a lady from Yass who, as was their habit and practice, was dropped off at Belconnen interchange by her husband because that is the quickest way for her to get into Civic. However, this morning she had no way of contacting her husband to say that she was stranded at the intersection. One fellow who was in some distress rang in to talk-back radio and said that he was attempting to get to his doctor to have a medication script reissued. He indicated—

Mr Smyth: Well, why are you causing these problems?

MR HARGREAVES: Have some compassion, you people.

Mr Smyth: You should. What are you doing to fix it?

Mrs Burke: Don't blame us.

MR HARGREAVES: I know it is something new to you. I will try to arrange for an introduction to compassion for you people. It is something that you just have not been introduced to. Mr Speaker, this gentleman could not get to his doctor. He could not afford a taxi and he believes he has to wait for a week before he can get another appointment. If he had received enough notice it would have been okay.

A gentleman arrived in the Assembly this morning in a state of enormous distress and anger because he was not able to get to his very low paying job in Fyshwick. As a result he will lose a day's pay. This would not have happened if we had been able to give notice, as happened on the other two occasions.

This government does not object to responsible action being taken on the part of the union movement if they feel that there is an issue in contention. But what we really find difficult is that these disruptions affect the most disadvantaged in our community. There was no need for this. On radio this morning the union apologised for the inconvenience. One, it was after the event and a bit late and, two, it was hollow. And I, for one, do not accept that apology.

Mr Mulcahy: What do your colleagues think about that?

MR HARGREAVES: Mr Mulcahy, you would not know what it is like to get on a bus, so just be quiet. Mr Speaker, what we would like to see happen is when action like this has to be taken, and in the view of the union it must happen, sufficient notice is allowed to be given to those people who would be adversely affected. And in this case it was not. I really do feel for the school kids and for the elderly who were not able to get to their medical appointments. We could do absolutely nothing about it. I just wish for once in this place that those opposite, especially the shadow minister, would have a little bit of compassion for these people, instead trying to make political capital out of somebody else's pain.

Rhodium Asset Solutions Ltd

MR SESELJA: My question is to the Chief Minister. Yesterday, the Speaker tabled a damning report on the Auditor-General's investigation into Rhodium Asset Solutions Ltd's financial practices. That report found that tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of taxpayers' dollars had been spent inappropriately. It was also noted in the report that the shareholders had failed to lay down benchmarks for accountability. Chief Minister, as one of the two shareholders, why were you not across this agency's finances and why did your government allow such practices to occur without the appropriate checks and balances?

MR STANHOPE: As the auditor has found and as we have discussed, there has been a range of very serious shortcomings in the management of Rhodium Asset Solutions. That is a matter of enormous regret to me, a matter of great disappointment to me personally and indeed to the chairman, Bob Samarcq, and members of the board of Rhodium Asset Solutions.

The government created Rhodium consistent with the Corporations Law. It appointed a board of directors headed by Bob Samarcq, a very significant and widely respected Canberra manager—an incredibly senior and experienced board, including Ian Meikle and Margaret Coaldrake, directors of unparalleled reputation and capacity. The chairman and the board of directors are, consistent with their obligations under the corporations legislation and with their charter as chairman and board members, charged with responsibility for the management of Rhodium. In that context, they appointed a chief executive officer who appointed senior management and staff to run Rhodium Asset, a fleet business.

It is consistent, of course, and entirely appropriate that, as a shareholder, I responded to the board. I responded through its annual reports and its statutory reporting requirements. I approved its statement of corporate intent, along with my fellow shareholder, and I took periodic reports from and held periodic meetings with the chairman and the board. At no stage until this affair developed earlier this year was I as a shareholder or either of the shareholders informed of the events that were occurring within Rhodium. To the extent that the board was not aware of any of these things prior to around February of this year, as I understand it, it is fanciful, absolutely fanciful, to suggest that a shareholder would be aware of the day-to-day management issues.

Mrs Dunne: No, the auditor said the shareholders failed to lay down directions.

MR STANHOPE: No, it is—

Mr Smyth: So the auditor is wrong.

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mr Smyth!

Mr Smyth: Page 3.

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mr Smyth!

MR STANHOPE: It is absolutely fanciful, if not nonsensical, to suggest that the shareholder of a company appropriately constituted and over which there is a chairman and a board of directors would be expected to or would appropriately involve himself in the day-to-day management of the company. That is fanciful. It is not just fanciful; it is entirely inappropriate, it is inappropriate in the extreme, to suggest that a shareholder would override or supersede the responsibility of a board of directors and involve himself in the day-to-day management of a company. That is fanciful and absurd. I do not, and have never, involve myself in the day-to-day management of Actew. I have not, and will never, involve myself in the day-to-day management of the TAB.

Mr Smyth: But you did give directions.

MR SPEAKER: I warn you, Mr Smyth. That is the third time I have called you to order.

MR STANHOPE: I did not and will never involve myself in the day-to-day management of Rhodium. It would be entirely inappropriate for me to do so. If I were to involve myself in the day-to-day management of ACTTAB, if I were to involve myself in the day-to-day management of Actew, if I were to involve myself in the day-to-day management of Rhodium Asset, you would be the first to condemn me.

Rhodium Asset Solutions Ltd

MRS BURKE: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Deputy Chief Minister. Ms Gallagher, in the Auditor-General's report into Rhodium Asset Solutions, the Auditor-General says the following about you, as one of the government shareholders:

In Rhodium's case, it seems evident that the lack of clear strategic direction from the Shareholders created uncertainty and made it difficult for Rhodium to prove and commit to appropriate long term strategic planning to achieve its business objectives.

Deputy Chief Minister, have you been derelict in your duty?

MS GALLAGHER: Thank you, Mr Speaker. For the information of members, I have been a shareholder of Rhodium Asset Solutions Ltd since March this year. A large part of the inquiry preceded my term as a shareholder but I support the comments the Chief Minister has made. The Auditor-General's report largely finds that the actions of senior management, in particular the chief executive, misled the board. Those are the origins of the issues that faced the company and some of the issues we have been talking about today.

No, I have not been derelict in my duties. I take my duties as a shareholder of ACTEW, Rhodium and ACTTAB very seriously. But I think you will find that the large part of the investigation predated my term as a shareholder of that company.

MRS BURKE: Deputy Chief Minister, what steps have you, as one of the government shareholders, now taken to provide a clear, strategic direction to Rhodium Asset Solutions?

MS GALLAGHER: I think the actions of the government in referring a lot of the recommendations and findings of the report to the federal police indicate the seriousness with which we have taken the Auditor-General's report. We are doing a scoping study to look at whether it is appropriate that the government actually be in the business that Rhodium engages in as a company. We have taken a number of measures as a government to ensure we have acted appropriately on all the information that has been made available through the Auditor-General's report.

Women—summit

DR FOSKEY: My question is to the Minister for Women. It relates to the first ACT women's summit. According to a media release put out by the minister, on

30 August the minister held the first women's summit, which we are told will be a biennial event. The media release says that members of the ACT Ministerial Advisory Council on Women and representatives of peak women's organisations discussed a range of issues that impact on the lives of women in the ACT, with a particular focus on affordable housing and domestic violence.

Would the minister advise the Assembly which peak groups were invited and how they were selected and explain why the Women's Electoral Lobby was not considered to be one of these?

MS GALLAGHER: The representation at the women's summit was a matter for the ministerial council on women. They hosted the forum. I attended the forum, but they did it as the ministerial council. The council determined the invitation list. I met with the council, I think three days before the summit, to go through the agenda. That was the first time that I had any idea who the attendees were. I have to say that the council, through the chair, Hilary Russell, did an excellent job in selecting a range of organisations to attend the first summit.

This was the first summit. The council decided that, in the first instance, we needed a fairly small group of organisations so that the summit did not get lost in how many people attended, so that we could have a focus and so that everyone could have the opportunity to participate. The summit was of only three hours duration. From memory, there was a range of organisations there, and I am happy to give Dr Foskey the full list.

There were a number of women's specific organisations that were not invited. I can probably give Dr Foskey a list of them as well. We tried to get a selection of organisations that cover key areas of the ACT women's plan, such as women's safety. There were a number of organisations that work in the area of domestic violence. ACT Shelter was focusing on affordable housing and homelessness. I am trying to remember who else was there.

The representation was pretty much half and half. I think all the chief executives from the service delivery agencies in the ACT government attended, so you can see that it was treated very seriously at that level. A number of members of the ministerial council on women, but not all of them, attended. I know that there is always someone that does not get an invite who feels that they should have got an invite. It was an attempt in the first instance to have a fairly focused group spend three hours determining priorities for the government in relation to services for women.

It was a positive event, and it should not be turned into anything other than a positive event that clearly will provide the government with key advice on areas where further work is needed to enable it to target policies and strategies to support women in the community. I was fortunate enough to be able to stay for the whole time. I found it a very productive meeting, and part of that was because there were probably around 20 participants.

DR FOSKEY: I ask a supplementary question. Would the minister outline how the meeting's discussion of the impact of the shortage of affordable housing on women will be fed into current government efforts to address the issue?

MS GALLAGHER: We are currently putting together all the issues that were raised at the summit. We will be providing that to all participants, but I cannot see why we would not provide it more broadly.

One of the issues that came up at the women's summit was that the organisations felt that the government is not so good at articulating all the different things that it is doing in the area of support for women. One of those areas was housing. A lot of work is going on with women's organisations to improve women's access to crisis accommodation. In fact, over Christmas last year, DCHS and the Domestic Violence Crisis Service worked together to deliver 1,000 additional bed days for women and children.

It was suggested that we need more exits from crisis into more permanent accommodation. Part of that will be delivered through the budget initiative of transitional housing, which will provide around \$4 million worth of properties—around 20 properties—to be used by people, largely women, exiting crisis accommodation and going into more permanent accommodation. There is more to be done, and the feedback from the summit in terms of key areas of pressure centred on the need for affordable housing and exit from crisis accommodation. There is a view that not all women leaving domestic violence want or need to go to a refuge, so we are looking at how we meet their needs.

The other area that came out as needing continued and further attention was domestic violence. All of the organisations agreed that the single biggest issue affecting women in the territory is family violence that occurs in the home. It is not just housing that is needed as a response to that.

I am happy to make the information available to members of the Assembly once we have collated it. The summit was a way of providing the government, through the ministerial council, with advice on where we need to do further work in line with the ACT women's plan. Those two areas of housing and domestic violence were the key areas that came up on the day.

Tharwa bridge

MR PRATT: My question is to the Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Mr Hargreaves. Why have you been allowing people to use the Tharwa bridge when it now appears that the bridge has been ordered to be immediately closed by New South Wales authorities and engineers due to risk of collapse? Why has your ACT department failed to recognise the significant danger that the bridge posed to motorists, and why have you allowed this debacle to continue?

MR HARGREAVES: I advise the Assembly that Mr Pratt has, once again, got it wrong. I am happy to correct the record. The issue about the Tharwa bridge has been something that the government has been addressing its mind to for some time, in the context of the bridge itself, in the context of its heritage and usage, in the context of that particular access across the Murrumbidgee as the gateway to the Namadgi National Park and in the context of the economic and social viability of Tharwa village.

It has been our reluctance to close the bridge hitherto—whilst investigating what we can do about the bridge, whether to replace it or repair it or what—that has led us to rent a Bailey bridge support system. That was enough, in fact, to allow traffic across that bridge of the type of weight that the bridge could carry, as indicated by the sign across it. What has been happening? We understand there have been a number of vehicles well over the 5-tonne limit going across that bridge. They have, through this activity, significantly weakened it.

Since the time of its original closing, the bridge has received a monthly visit by the bridge experts from the Road Traffic Authority of New South Wales. A month ago, the bridge was still in such a condition as would support that particular type of traffic—traffic under 5 tonnes. When it was brought to our attention that vehicles over that weight were using the bridge, we developed a strategy to prevent that. In fact, we had intended to put up some structure at the beginning of the bridge which would not allow vehicles of a certain type or width to pass through that barrier.

In the meantime, however, the inspectors inspected the bridge and found that it had twisted, was now unusable and, in fact, was in serious danger of collapse, notwithstanding the presence of the Bailey bridge supports. The department's advice to me was that, under the delegation carried by them and not by me, the bridge should be closed. Their advice was based on that technical assessment. They sought my agreement to exercise that delegation. I gave it instantly.

I was very concerned that people—schoolchildren, for example—would be accessing that bridge on a school bus which was under that 5-tonne limit. I was concerned that people—cyclists, anybody using that bridge—would be doing so in extreme danger. I had no alternative but to close that bridge. I advised the department that I agreed with their exercise of their delegation.

Mr Pratt is trying to blow up some image that we have neglected the bridge. We have been in constant conversation with the people of Tharwa. We have been in constant conversation with the Heritage Council regarding the heritage aspects of that bridge. It is the only four-span Allan truss bridge in New South Wales. It has a significance in the history of that village that we could not ignore.

All of these have meant that the investigations into what should happen about access across the Murrumbidgee River would need to be taken with a lot of consideration. When the options were developed at first pass, before the advice from the Heritage Council that, indeed, it had a significance that we should not ignore, we found that the options available to us were about nine and that they ranged in price at that particular time from \$9 million through to about \$30 million. Thirty million dollars is a very big figure to go to cabinet and seek without substantial justification.

My undertaking that we would be in conversation with the people of Tharwa has been honoured. We continue to do so. In fact, the night before its closure, the operator of the store at Tharwa, who is one of our contacts in that village, was notified of the imminent closure before we did so. I reject all of the notions being put forward by Mr Pratt.

MR PRATT: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Minister, what are you doing to immediately ensure that a temporary low-level crossing is built across the Murrumbidgee River into Tharwa, given that Point Hut Crossing is somewhat distant and considered to be somewhat dangerous for commuters when using that road in a general commuting fashion? What are your plans?

MR HARGREAVES: There are two things. Firstly, Mr Pratt clearly does not listen when Mr Gentleman talks to this. In terms of inconvenience to the people of Tharwa, of course the government regret the inconvenience caused, as we did the last time it was closed. There are a number of issues. I will go to the low-level crossing in a minute.

Firstly, Mr Gentleman actually did a road test using those particular parts of the road which the people of Tharwa would be using and which the people going to Tharwa would be using. He found, without breaking the law or the speed limit, that there was in fact a three-minute time difference. The disruption to the people of Tharwa is a three-minute one. We acknowledge that the road between Tharwa and Tuggeranong-Lanyon Valley via Point Hut Crossing is not the best road under the sun—we accept that—so we proceed with the development of proposals to continue access across the Murrumbidgee where the current bridge is.

In respect of the low-level crossing, Mr Pratt would have us believe that all you have to do is rock up there with a cement truck, put a couple of pipes down, whack the cement across the top, and away you go. It just shows that Mr Pratt has to do a fair amount of work on his ignorance. He has done a superb job. He has done a wonderful job. If he had not, he would know that such a low-level crossing would cost somewhere in the order of \$800,000 to a million dollars.

Mr Pratt: That is rubbish.

MR HARGREAVES: Do your homework, sunshine. Mr Speaker, the other thing he would know is that to put anything across the Murrumbidgee at that particular point requires an environmental impact statement, it requires heritage council approval and it requires a development application.

Mr Pratt: Here we go: red tape, bureaucracy, expenditure, road funds.

MR HARGREAVES: Now Mr Pratt is encouraging the government to break the law. I do not propose to break the law, Mr Speaker. It takes an enormous amount of time to get those impact statements done and those development applications through.

Mr Pratt: It seems you do not need encouragement!

MR HARGREAVES: Mr Pratt treats the plight of the people of Tharwa with some frivolity. Obviously he is quite amused at their plight. We, on the other hand, have been working on a number of proposals for quite some time in conversation with the people there. I also make the point that, when I had my conversations some months ago at a public meeting with the people of Tharwa, Mr Pratt was not there. He would not know what was actually undertaken. He would not know what the feeling of the people of the

Tharwa region is. His suggestion that you can just put a low-level crossing across there is ludicrous at this point in time.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR HARGREAVES: I was just waiting for him—and, in fact, his colleague interjected—to talk about the flooding. The Point Hut Crossing has in fact been known to flood, but we also know that there has not been a deal of rain lately. There has not been enough rain to make the Murrumbidgee flood at Tharwa. In fact, I believe that it is a 100-year event at Tharwa, in any event. So there is a certain degree of risk analysis in this. However, we seek a permanent solution for the gateway to Namadgi National Park, a permanent solution for the people of the village and a permanent solution for the economic viability of the village. I can advise the chamber that, in the next wee while, I will be taking a submission to cabinet on the issue.

Rhodium Asset Solutions Ltd

MR SMYTH: My question is to the Chief Minister and Treasurer. Page 3 of the Auditor-General's report on Rhodium states:

In Rhodium's case, it seems evident that the lack of clear strategic direction from the Shareholders created uncertainty and made it difficult for Rhodium to provide and commit to appropriate long-term strategic planning to achieve its business objectives.

Chief Minister, over the life of Rhodium while you have been a voting shareholder you have devoted your efforts to Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Terry Hicks, the Elgin marbles, whaling and other issues totally unrelated to your ministerial responsibilities, yet you have failed to meet your responsibilities on this issue related to your duties to the ACT. Chief Minister, as one of the voting shareholders of Rhodium, why didn't you give clear strategic direction to the board of Rhodium?

MR STANHOPE: I did, Mr Speaker. I approved the statement of corporate intent. The statutory direction to the board in relation to the government's expectations is the statement of corporate intent. Any suggestion from the words quoted in relation to a lack of strategic direction that this in some way stemmed from a lack of strategic direction by the shareholders is absolutely absurd, it is nonsensical.

Mr Smyth: So the auditor is wrong.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Order! Mr Smyth is on a warning and I know that he is going to sit there silently and listen to the answer to his question, otherwise he will not get to hear it from inside. The remainder of the opposition will cease interjecting.

MR STANHOPE: The Auditor-General did not find in the report that the management deficiencies at Rhodium which she identified were in any way a result of a lack of strategic direction by the shareholders. There is absolutely no nexus between the findings of the Auditor-General, her recommendations, and the statement being quoted on page 3.

The statement on page 3 is a gratuitous comment in relation to a decision which the government had taken around the sale of Rhodium.

Point me to the recommendation, point me to the page in the report, which substantiates an assertion that any of the shortcomings or management deficiencies that the Auditor-General identifies were as a result of a so-called lack of strategic direction by the shareholders. It is a gratuitous, throwaway remark by the Auditor-General in the foreword to the report. I have to say at one level I have absolutely no idea what the Auditor-General is talking about, because I have looked in the report, I have looked through the text, I have sought out a recommendation or a finding in relation to this matter and found none. So it is an interesting question: what exactly did the Auditor-General mean? Why is the statement there? What does it mean?

I have no idea, essentially, what it means because there is absolutely no script within the report in relation to the matter. There is no recommendation in relation to the matter. There is no connection between any of the findings in the audit report and the shareholders—absolutely none. It is fanciful and dishonest to suggest that there is. If there is, point it out. Okay, you have mentioned one line on page 3 in the Auditor-General's foreword. Take me through the report now, find the recommendation, cite the page number, give me the paragraph and the page on which the issue is discussed.

MR SPEAKER: Direct your comments through the chair.

MR STANHOPE: Point me to the discussion, let alone the recommendation. There was an issue for the board of Rhodium in terms of its future long-term strategic plan. That issue was a very strong feeling within the shareholders that the business should be sold. It was a position of the shareholders of which the board had been aware for some time that the business should be sold.

In the context of the shareholders having begun an active discussion around the sale of the business, I would imagine that there would be some difficulty perhaps in agreeing on a long-term strategic direction when the shareholders are actively discussing the sale of the business. But the annual statement of corporate intent is the expression of the shareholders' expectations of the business. Don't give me the nonsense around a connection between the findings of the report and the shareholders, because there is none, and any suggestion that there is is wrong, is false and is not included within the report. You are simply making it up.

If we want to go to the decisions and the issues which the shareholders have faced in relation to Rhodium, we need to go back to Totalcare. We need to go back to the mess which we inherited on coming to government: a Totalcare under the management of Mr Smyth and others which at the time that we assumed responsibility for Totalcare had assumed accumulated losses over three years of \$21 million and a range of other costs not met in relation to superannuation. That was before the saga we know of the Williamsdale quarry, the \$5.6 million we lost on Williamsdale.

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

MR SMYTH: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. If it would help the Chief Minister, it is also on page 8 of the report:

Rhodium has been facing uncertainty since its establishment due to a lack of clear strategic direction from the Shareholders.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Come to the question.

MR SMYTH: Minister, why did you make it difficult for Rhodium to provide and commit to appropriate long-term strategic planning by your failure to provide clear direction?

MR STANHOPE: Because we gave Rhodium advice that we were considering selling it. It is difficult—in an environment where shareholders had imagined that they would sell a business—for the directors perhaps to commit to long-term plans in relation to that business. Why were we considering selling it? We were considering selling it because of the dysfunction represented in not just its structure but also the structure of all those businesses that we inherited from Totalcare.

It needs to be understood—in the historical context of Rhodium and its associated businesses, that was of course what we inherited from Mr Smyth and his colleagues when we assumed government—that, in the previous three years, that business had accumulated losses of \$21 million, not counting as I understand it its venture in relation to the Williamsdale quarry and a range of dysfunctional management arrangements.

If you go to the responses by Bob Samarcq on behalf of the board to the Auditor-General's report you will see the concerns and issues that they faced as a result of the management structures and the culture that were incorporated into Rhodium on its establishment.

It has not been done; it cannot be done. At no stage—anywhere in this report or in any discussion—has the Auditor sought to draw any conclusions around the adverse findings she makes, and the role and the responsibility of the shareholders, even to the extent that neither I nor any other shareholder was interviewed by the Auditor-General; neither I nor any other shareholder was asked to make a submission to the inquiry; neither I nor any other shareholder was given an opportunity to respond to what might, in the view of the Liberal Party, be regarded as an adverse suggestion.

Is it seriously being suggested by Mr Smyth and the Liberal Party that the Auditor-General would make an adverse finding against shareholders without the basic commitment to natural justice or to due process? Is this the allegation: that the Auditor-General has failed in her responsibility; that she would make an adverse finding without asking for a submission, without suggesting that there was an issue that needed to be responded to?

The Auditor-General's comment, I assume—and I can only assume it because it is not explained; it is one line—relates to the decision that the shareholders advised the board of: that they proposed to sell the business. It was in our active consideration. The board was informed of that. I would imagine that, in that circumstance, a lack of long-term strategic direction could be interpreted within the context of a decision to sell the business.

Focus on Business 2006

MS PORTER: Mr Speaker, my question, through you, is to the Minister for Business and Economic Development and Chief Minister. Could you report to the Assembly on the recent success of the biennial Canberra and regional Focus on Business 2006 and its importance to the ACT business community?

MR STANHOPE: Thank you, Ms Porter.

Mrs Dunne: On a point of order, Mr Speaker: my understanding is that Focus on Business is not a government-initiated initiative. Therefore, I am questioning the possibility that the minister does not have the right to answer the question because it is not an issue of his ministerial responsibility, as I understand it.

MR SPEAKER: He is Minister for Business and Economic Development.

Mrs Dunne: Yes, but my point is that he may be the Minister for Business and Economic Development but he is not the minister responsible for the Focus on Business forum; it is a private endeavour by ACT businesses.

MR SPEAKER: The Chief Minister is entitled to comment on business matters.

Mrs Dunne: He is entitled to comment on business matters but not on the establishment of something for which he does not have ministerial responsibility.

MR SPEAKER: He has ministerial responsibility as Minister for Business and Economic Development.

MR STANHOPE: The immediate thing I need to say is: why is it that Mrs Dunne and the Liberal Party do not want me to talk about this?

MR SPEAKER: Never mind, Chief Minister, I have ruled on it.

MR STANHOPE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In speaking about business and Focus on Business, which I am very pleased to do—I am very pleased to be associated with Focus on Business, this particular event, and the report on it—one is concerned that, in reporting on it, the Liberal Party do not want me to talk on Focus on Business, a very significant biennial event on the calendar of the ACT and an event which they boycott, as well as not wishing us to speak about or me to inform the Assembly on. This was and is the most significant business-related event in the ACT, which the ACT government is proud to support and which I have been pleased to open and launch for three successive events.

It is a pity that it was boycotted by the Liberal Party. It is a pity that the Liberal Party do not care about business. It is a pity that the Liberal Party does not even want me, as minister responsible for business, to report on the most significant business event in the ACT calendar.

It is consistent with other attacks which the Liberal Party makes on business. Yesterday, in this place, Mr Seselja or Mr Pratt referred to the management of the Gungahlin Drive extension as an absolute disgrace—a reference to Ross Barrett and Woden Contractors. I must say that I wonder what Mr Barrett would think about the claim that his stewardship and his construction of the Gungahlin Drive extension was a disgrace. We know of Mrs Dunne's hatred of Mr Terry Snow.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Come back to the question.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Members of the opposition, be quiet.

Mr Pratt: We were talking about your governance of it.

MR SPEAKER: Including you, Mr Pratt.

MR STANHOPE: It was a very significant event, and the government is particularly pleased at the strength of its partnership with representative business constituent organisations in the ACT and our strong partnership with the Canberra Business Council in the delivery of Focus on Business. It is a relationship that I am sure is the envy of the Liberal Party in this place. I am very pleased at the strength of the relationship. It is consistent with the strength of that particular partnership between the ACT government and the business community, particularly the Canberra Business Council, that the Focus on business conference theme this year was partnerships for growth. That is what Focus on Business is about. It is about ensuring that we capitalise on our strengths and create partnerships, as a community very dependent on a vibrant and growing private sector.

This particular Focus on Business showed, in the view of the Canberra Business Council and other significant business entrepreneurs within the territory—particularly those entrepreneurs within the IT and the biotechnology sectors that were visible at Focus on Business—the vibrancy and the dynamic nature of the burgeoning private sector. That was on show and was showcased to over 200 business representatives from around Australia and, most significantly, major business delegations from the United States, Ireland and Hong Kong.

It is in that context that we repeat our concern and regret that the Liberal Party thought that this was an appropriate event to boycott and that, again, they do not wish it reported on here today by the minister responsible for this particular matter.

MS PORTER: I ask a supplementary question. Chief Minister, can you elaborate on the increasing recognition of the local wine industry, both here and overseas?

Mrs Dunne: On a point of order, Mr Speaker: that question is definitely out of order. There was no reference in the first part of the question to the wine industry.

MR SPEAKER: The question referred to industry.

Mrs Dunne: Mr Speaker, there are clear rules about supplementary questions. They have to relate to the principal question. Ms Porter is asking the Chief Minister to give an exposition on the wine industry because she happened to mention Focus on Business in the first part of the question. It is clearly out of order.

MR SPEAKER: I would be surprised if the wine industry was not represented at the Focus on Business event.

MR STANHOPE: The wine was particularly represented. A Canberra region wine company, Klonakilla, was a recipient of one of the Chief Minister's export awards for agribusiness. This was a significant event at the focus on business event this year.

The export awards were one of the most significant of the many events that the Liberal Party boycotted. It was a great pleasure for me to announce the export awards and to present to Tim Kirk of Klonakilla the award for the major agribusiness exporter of the ACT. Tim told me in conversation that he now sells more Klonakilla wine in New York than he does in Canberra.

It is relevant to any discussion on business and the strengthening of our economy and the broadening of our revenue base to talk about all of the opportunities that present. One of the great opportunities that this region needs to grasp is the potential that the wine industry presents. But the Liberal party has a position of opposition. We saw this just yesterday when Mrs Dunne once again refused to grant a pair to an ACT government minister to enable the minister to attend the significant launch of the—

Mrs Dunne: He was not here. I offered a pair and I was told that no government member was attending.

MR STANHOPE: Because the refusal of a pair to a government member to attend the riesling challenge launch—

Mrs Dunne: That is a lie. I said, "Does anyone else want the pair?" Mr Barr was not here. That is not true.

MR SPEAKER: Order! Mrs Dunne, control yourself.

Mrs Dunne: That is your fault.

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mrs Dunne!

Mr Barr: I do not know that it is, actually.

MR SPEAKER: Order, Mr Barr!

MR STANHOPE: It is a matter of major concern to the government that it was not able to attend the riesling challenge launch yesterday because of the refusal of the Liberal Party to provide a pair to the government. It was commented on by those that were there. Mr Smyth, who wandered along, was approached and asked on what basis he was there in a circumstance in which the government was refused attendance. This is the

level of opposition's support for local industry. They are now refusing pairs to government ministers to attend business development events and then slinking off—

Mrs Dunne: That is not true. He was sick and I said, "Do you want to take the pair?"

MR SPEAKER: Chief Minister, resume your seat. Mrs Dunne, I warn you. I call the Chief Minister.

MR STANHOPE: In the context of our determination to grow the wine industry in this region, it is a major concern that the opposition whip, Mrs Dunne, refused the government a pair to allow it to be represented at the launch of a major wine show, the riesling challenge, in the ACT.

Mrs Burke: That is not true. You talk about honesty. Be honest.

MR STANHOPE: It is true. The opposition's complicity in refusing the government a pair to attend and then having one of their own slink along to pretend that the opposition is interested in the industry is appalling

Mrs Burke: Mr Speaker, I do not know what point of order to raise here. The Chief Minister is totally out of order. Will you make a ruling, Mr Speaker?

MR SPEAKER: The reason you cannot think of a point of order to raise on this matter is because I do not think there is one.

Mrs Burke: It is dishonest.

MR SPEAKER: Withdraw that comment.

Mrs Burke: He knows it.

MR SPEAKER: Mrs Burke, you are not allowed to make those sorts of claims. They are completely unparliamentary. Withdraw it.

Mrs Burke: Mr Speaker, I withdraw that remark. If the gestapo can be honest in his approach—

MR SPEAKER: Mrs Burke, do not force me. Withdraw that.

Mrs Burke: I withdraw.

MR STANHOPE: It is a significant industry for this region. It is a growing industry and a very significant industry, as represented through the success of companies such as Klonakilla now exporting more than it sells within Australia. It is important in the context of the riesling challenge, which the government was unable to attend yesterday as a result of the actions of the opposition.

That event is now recognised as the most significant riesling wine show in Australia and one of the most significant and emerging riesling shows anywhere in the world. There was a 40 per cent increase in entries in this year's show, with entries growing from four

to nine countries in the space of the last year. It is a significant recognition of how important this particular variety is to this region's winegrowers and of this event's capacity to showcase the Canberra region and to add a very significant additional attractor to investors and people in this region.

Arts—local venues and performances

MR MULCAHY: My question is to the Minister for the Arts. In light of accusations made by Richard Evans, General Manager of the Australian Ballet, that the Canberra theatre is too small and ill-equipped to host full-scale productions and that the Canberra Symphony Orchestra is too expensive to use and not up to scratch, what has your government done to defend our local arts venues and performers against such outrageous criticism?

MR STANHOPE: I raised both issues in conversation with Mr Evans at a recent Australian Ballet performance at the Canberra theatre. The conversation commenced with a request by me of Mr Evans for information as to why the full company was no longer visiting the ACT. Mr Evans explained to me then that the essential issue of concern to the Australian Ballet was the configuration of the stage, not so much its area but its height. He explained to me the implications of that for the ballet company.

I then pursued that issue with Mr David Whitney and sought a formal briefing from him on the technical aspects of the stage. He conceded that there is an issue with the Canberra theatre stage. I understand from later comments reported in the *Canberra Times* that the Australian Ballet also suggested that they had some concern about the capacity of the Canberra theatre, but that was not an issue that was raised with me in conversation with Mr Evans.

The issue of the stage and its configuration, most particularly its height, was an issue of concern to the Australian Ballet, and that is something that is accepted, at least in principle, by the Cultural Facilities Corporation and the managers of the Canberra theatre. So I cannot say that this is an outrageous slur on the Canberra theatre when there is a suggestion that perhaps the Australian Ballet has a point.

My concern is that it seems to me from discussions I have had that the point is, to some extent, pedantic and may be overcome with goodwill on the part of all, and we are seeking to work our way through that issue. I have, nevertheless, asked for formal briefings on issues of capacity and the technical requirements of the Australian Ballet for a full ballet, and I am still awaiting that particular report.

In relation to the Canberra Symphony Orchestra, I do accept the thrust of your question, that the slur on the Canberra Symphony Orchestra is simply unacceptable and not justified. I do not disagree with the essential assertion as to the offensive nature of some of the imputations in relation to the Canberra Symphony Orchestra.

As a result of the conversation I had with Mr Evans at the ballet, in which he also raised issues around the Canberra Symphony Orchestra, I have also sought briefings from Arts ACT and arranged a meeting with Mr McLean, which I arranged prior to the issue being publicised in recent weeks. I am meeting Mr McLean, I believe next week, for discussions in relation to issues affecting the Canberra Symphony Orchestra.

The unfairness of the criticism, I think, goes to the lack of funding, particularly commonwealth funding, for the Canberra Symphony Orchestra. The Canberra Symphony Orchestra has been receiving \$100,000. The Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra receives \$6 million. The Sydney Symphony Orchestra receives \$8 million.

Mr Smyth: What have you done about it?

MR STANHOPE: Mr Smyth says, “What have you done about it?” In an environment where until this year the commonwealth funded the Canberra Symphony Orchestra to the tune of \$100,000—it is now going to \$200,000—and in an environment where the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra receives \$6.8 million, I think, and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra receives from the commonwealth somewhere between \$8 million and \$9 million, you have the temerity to ask me what I am doing about that. What are you doing about that? What are the Liberal Party and its confreres doing about the Canberra Symphony Orchestra?

Be that as it may, it is a bit rich to be damming the level of funding available for the Canberra Symphony Orchestra when the commonwealth funds other orchestras around Australia to the tune of \$6 million, \$8 million or \$10 million while funding the Canberra Symphony Orchestra to the tune of \$100,000.

The Canberra Symphony Orchestra is a part-time orchestra and it has received limited funds. I would have to be corrected, but I think that, to date, the Canberra Labor Club has provided the same level of funding to the Canberra Symphony Orchestra as the commonwealth government has. But for the Canberra Labor Club, a club that I know is very much in the hearts of members, the Canberra Symphony Orchestra would struggle far more than it does.

MR MULCAHY: I ask a supplementary question. Are there any specific redevelopment plans being contemplated to expand the Canberra theatre, other than hoping for a possible centenary gift from the commonwealth government for the 2013 celebrations?

MR STANHOPE: Not at this stage. But, as I indicated, I have asked for a briefing from the Cultural Facilities Corporation and artsACT on the issues around the technical requirements of the Australian Ballet and, of course, the likely or potential cost of meeting what the Australian Ballet would insist were its technical needs in relation to the Canberra theatre. So I have asked for an appropriate briefing on both the implications of changes and the cost. Of course, in the absence of that basic info, the government will not be making any decisions. But we are seeking to inform ourselves in the first instance of the technical requirements of the Australian Ballet and, in the second instance, I am interested in the implications for the Canberra theatre—whether it could be extended and, if it were able to be extended, how much it would cost.

Nevertheless, I think one of the quite worthy aims we should consider through the celebration of the centenary of Canberra is the possibility of perhaps pursuing a performing arts centre in a true sense, or at least a replacement Canberra theatre. We should not shy away from the possibility of what it is that we might achieve if we set our minds to it. But, in the first instance, I have sought advice and I have sought costings.

Indeed, since you have raised the centenary of the establishment of the capital, we are, through that process, very minded to maintain a dialogue, most particularly with the commonwealth, in relation to the possibility of the commonwealth considering the establishment of a performing arts centre as essentially a centenary gift by the people of Australia, through the commonwealth, to the people of the ACT, the national capital. I say significantly “the national capital”. I think it is an issue over and above the needs of our community that, in the view of the national ballet company, the national capital of Australia, Canberra, does not have a theatre or a space able to allow a performance of the full company. I think that reflects on Canberra as the great national capital of a great country committed to the arts as a true and full expression of being an Australian. It is an issue—a significant issue—that, in the view of the national ballet, we do not have the facilities that allow it to perform in its national capital, and I think that is a pity.

ACTION bus service

MRS DUNNE: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services. Minister, in last night’s adjournment debate in relation to ACTION, your colleague Mr Gentleman said, “I am glad to report that the management and the unions are working closely and quickly to provide solutions that meet our financial requirements and will minimise any disruption to transport services and ACTION.” I think he said this at about half-past five yesterday afternoon, yet this morning ACTION drivers were on strike, taking almost all its services off the road and severely disrupting commuters. Minister, how can your government say that it is working quickly and closely to resolve these problems when this is clearly not the case? Or do you distance yourself from the comments made by Mr Gentleman yesterday evening?

MR HARGREAVES: I thank Mrs Dunne for the opportunity to reiterate what Mr Gentleman said yesterday. In fact, when the changes for ACTION were first developed, I indicated—in fact, to this house in a conversation—that the changes would be developed and introduced in partnership with the work force. That meant with the unions, as well as with non-union labour. We talked about the Transport Workers Union, the AMWU and the CPSU—and there was a miscellaneous workers union in there somewhere.

The range of initiatives which were considered by the joint union management task force which was applying itself to the work at ACTION is a very extensive list. There are quite a number of issues to do with workshop practices, administrative practices, bus route changes—a whole raft of them. I have forgotten the exact number, but a dozen or more different initiatives have been discussed and developed. In fact, a couple of them were advanced by the Transport Workers Union, for which we are quite happy to express an appreciation.

The process has been one of open and transparent consultation, operating with the work force and with the management imperatives we face. It has been a good process. But in any kind of change process there will from time to time be one or two issues on which management and unions will disagree. The union membership, particularly that of the TWU, who cover the bus drivers, are not always available to receive this information because of their shift arrangements. Indeed, as a show of good faith, the government was

quite happy to go along with the Transport Workers Union and allow two significant meetings of the work force. These occurred, in fact. The relationship is sound.

We have come across a position at the moment where the Transport Workers Union disagrees particularly strongly with one of the issues on the table. I am of the view that this is just one of those issues on which from time to time a resolution may very well need to be made, either by an independent umpire or it will come about through negotiation. The sad part about this particular instance today was the notice that was given. If the notice had been more reasonable, the government would have taken a particularly different position at the moment.

What Mr Gentleman said yesterday about the relationship between management, the staff, the unions and the government is absolutely true. I congratulate him on bringing it forward to the Assembly. I am also quite happy to indicate to the Assembly my appreciation to Mr Gentleman for some of the insights into the needs the Transport Workers Union might bring to the table. His association with the Transport Workers Union goes back over many years. One needs to be particularly careful. I advise the Assembly and the community at large: be very careful of what the opposition say, because they will misconstrue support any time they can.

Mr Gentleman is in the fortunate position of being able to advocate positions and to be the bearer of information from both sides of an argument, and I am grateful for that position. We will not put up with accusations from over there about Mr Gentleman. I believe that what he said yesterday was spot on the money and I am very glad that he did.

MRS DUNNE: Mr Speaker, I have a supplementary question. Minister, when will you be able to sort out the mess that is creating such concern and such disruption to both the drivers and the community?

MR HARGREAVES: Mr Speaker, the process of conversation with the Transport Workers Union is ongoing. They are part of a wider group of people having conversations about the changes that must ensue to make ACTION an even better service than it is today. The answer to Mrs Dunne's question is: day by day and constantly.

Education—funding

MR GENTLEMAN: My question is to the minister for education. As part of the 2006-07 budget, the government announced a record capital injection into education. Can the minister please inform the Assembly what benefits schools can expect from this funding?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Gentleman for his question and for his longstanding interest in and support for our public education system. The Stanhope government has invested heavily in education since being elected in 2001, with increases in the order of 30 per cent in education expenditure since then. The 2006-07 budget continued that investment and contained a record \$90 million for capital upgrades to our public schools. That was on top of the regular \$11.3 million that the government invests every year in capital upgrades for schools. The \$90 million will greatly increase the quality of teaching and learning environments for ACT teachers and students.

The government has recently gone to tender for project managers for the works to be undertaken this financial year. These works include improvements to specialist teaching and learning areas, such as science labs, home science areas, art rooms and sporting areas, as well as upgrades to play equipment, new landscaping, new paint, new carpets, new glazing, and upgrades to staffrooms and canteens. There will also be some much-needed work in the areas of heating, plumbing and electrical connections, as well as works to increase accessibility for students with special needs.

This financial year there will be 223 separate projects undertaken to improve more than 72 schools across the territory. Over 72 schools will benefit from having new play areas, new specialist teaching and learning areas, improved heating and electrical systems, new windows, new external painting and new landscaping. This initiative has been well received by school communities. Certainly no-one has suggested to me in over 80 meetings that I have had with school communities and the 60 or so school visits I have undertaken since becoming minister that this investment was not welcome and that investing in our schools was not welcome. So it was very much of concern to hear this morning the opposition's spokesperson on education, Mrs Dunne, describe this funding injection as throwing good money after bad. It was a revealing statement of what we would see if the opposition ever got into government. It was a quite extraordinary statement from a would-be education minister.

In the electorate of Ginninderra, the electorate that Mrs Dunne purports to represent, 19 schools are to undergo some upgrades: Aranda primary school, Belconnen high school, Charnwood primary school, Copland college, Evatt primary school, Florey primary school, Fraser primary school, Hawker college, Kaleen primary, Kaleen high, Lake Ginninderra college, Latham primary school, Macgregor primary school, Macquarie primary school, Maribyrnong primary school, Melba high school, Miles Franklin primary school, Southern Cross primary school and Weetangera primary school.

I ask those opposite to explain to those school communities, to the parents of students in their own electorate, how the government's investment is throwing good money after bad. Take Fraser primary school as an example. It is undergoing four separate projects for capital upgrades, including external painting, upgrades to heating and ventilation, landscaping and playground upgrades, and the replacement of carpet in parts of the school building. How do Mrs Dunne and the opposition see that as throwing good money after bad?

The answer is that they do not see investing record amounts of money in public education as important. They do not see education as important enough a matter even to have a policy position in this major debate about the largest reform of public education in the history of ACT self-government. They do not have any credibility when it comes to this issue and the people of the ACT can see right through them.

The government's record investment in education contained in the 2006-07 budget is delivering real and tangible benefits to students in ACT government schools and is increasing the quality of teaching and learning environments for our teachers and students across the territory. The government is getting on with the job of investing in our education system.

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

Supplementary answer to question without notice Health—public system

MS GALLAGHER: Yesterday in question time Mr Smyth asked me a question about specialists performing EEG tests in the hospital. I can confirm that the technician is away for two weeks and there are very few skilled people in Australia available to perform these tests. Bookings are arranged around the leave of the technician. An EEG is not normally an urgent test. It is not usual for EEGs to be used for emergency clinical diagnosis, but if an EEG is required, no technician is available and it is urgent, the patient would need to be referred interstate. My advice from ACT Health is that we have been very lucky in successfully attracting and recruiting a trainee to undertake training in order to have two available to perform these tests at the hospital in the future.

Personal explanation

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra): Mr Speaker, I seek to make a personal explanation under standing order 46.

MR SPEAKER: Do you claim to have been misrepresented?

MRS DUNNE: Yes. In question time today the Chief Minister said that the government was not represented at the launch of the riesling challenge yesterday because the opposition had refused to provide a pair for the minister. That is not the case. There has been ongoing negotiation between the government and the opposition about matters relating to committees, and the opposition advised the government, advised the government whip and advised the government whip's staff on a number of occasions that it would provide pairs—two pairs were asked for this week—and that they were approved contingent upon the outcome of a caucus meeting.

That position was flagged to the government before we rose after the last sittings and to my understanding there were at least three caucus meetings when this matter was supposed to be discussed. I gather it was finally discussed on Tuesday morning. On a number of occasions during that period I was asked by Ms MacDonald and her staff about approving these pairs. I said that they were contingently approved, Mr Barr's pair and another pair.

On Tuesday morning Ms MacDonald rang me to say that Mr Barr was ill and asked whether he could have a pair for the day because he was ill, with which I complied, as I always do, as we did with Mr Corbell, who was ill, and with Ms Gallagher, who had to attend a doctors appointment today. That is our practice. When Ms MacDonald raised this issue with me on Tuesday morning I immediately said to her, "In that case, if Mr Barr is not able to attend the riesling challenge, who will be attending in his place?" He could not attend the riesling challenge because he was ill in bed.

Knowing what the requests for pairs were, I actually asked Ms MacDonald who would be attending the riesling challenge in his stead because we had contingently approved this pair. We have never changed our mind. That has been our position all along.

Ms MacDonald said to me, "I do not think the government will be represented." I said, "Once this other matter is resolved, if you want a pair it will be provided." At no stage did the opposition change its mind. We have had the same position since the matter arose during the last sittings. The pairs were approved contingently. Ms MacDonald was offered the opportunity to provide another name for me to provide a pair for so that the government could be represented at the riesling challenge yesterday.

Leave of absence

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

That leave of absence be given to Mr Corbell (Attorney-General) for this sitting.

Bushfires

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (4.01): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes with concern:

(a) the Government's lack of progress in finalising the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan (SBMP) Version 2;

(b) the lack of:

(i) tangible and definitive goals, targets and directions in the current version of the SBMP; and

(ii) specific bushfire operational plans for risk areas throughout the ACT.

(2) calls on the Government to expedite the completion of SBMP version 2 so that it addresses the deficiencies of the current plan.

My motion today raises a very important issue, an issue that is of prime importance with the coming bushfire season to begin on 1 October, less than two weeks away. The Stanhope government have been extremely lax when it comes to ensuring that everything has been done to ensure that the ACT community is fully protected, to the extent of the government's ability, in the event of another bushfire.

This government promised the community that, in line with McLeod's 2003 findings, they would expedite the introduction of a strategic bushfire management plan, or SBMP for short. They brought in version 1 of this document, the SBMP, in January 2005 and then, given the draft nature of this document, they promised version 2, a final document that would be much more detailed, which was supposed to be released in July 2005. We were then told by the Stanhope government that the final version of the SBMP would not be ready until July this year, 2006, but we still have not seen it and there has been no word as to when the final version will be produced.

In answer to question on notice No 584, Mr Hargreaves said that version 1 of the SBMP was issued "to meet immediate government and public expectations for bushfire

management prior to the 2004-05 bushfire season”—to meet the immediate needs. It might have been sufficient as a stopgap in 2004-05, and we were happy enough to see that draft version as at least a first step, but this version of the SBMP falls well short of public expectations, falls well short of the community’s needs, and does not adequately prepare the ACT for a serious bushfire threat the likes of which we saw in 2003.

Why all the fuss about seeing a final, concrete SBMP? It is because McLeod found that, under the ESB and JACS structures in place in 2002-03, bushfire prevention, planning, and operational contingencies had been too loose, too haphazard, a make your own arrangements approach to preparing for and then responding to bushfire emergencies. Good work was done by individual fire agencies—there is no question that they were doing their best—but at the strategic level overarching our bushfire services the planning of JACS and the ESB was found wanting. Experienced firefighters, former bushfire council members, scientists like Phil Cheney and long-term landed families who have lived here for decades and decades had agreed with that perspective.

Mr Benton’s audit report in 2003 of the “dysfunctional” ESB touched on this raw nerve that planning had been haphazard. Many of the lessons listed by the emergency services in the wake of the December 2001 bushfire, the one that gutted our forest industry, pointed to haphazard planning. That was the fault of a number of successive governments, but no government before 2001 had faced the dramatically serious drought index that the Stanhope government did right through 2002 in the wake of the wake-up call fire of December 2001.

During 2003, everybody of experience knew that we badly needed proper strategic planning governing the implementation of concrete preventative programs. Much of the evidence submitted to the Doogan coronial inquiry has highlighted this fundamental deficiency. So it was at least encouraging to see the government introduce a draft version 1 of the SBMP. Yes, it lacked authority and clarity, but it was at least a pretty good and useful guide for preventative planning. The opposition notes that it was better than anything seen before, better than what was being provided before. The Emergencies Act 2004, which was the governing act, laid down useful guidelines as a foundation for preparing an SBMP, but the act too lacked concrete benchmarks. You will remember, Madam Temporary Deputy Speaker Burke the opposition sought to toughen up the act, but to no avail.

Going back to the SBMP as we currently see it, the SBMP is intended to set out all of the requirements for bushfire prevention and management in the ACT and is a requirement under the Emergencies Act 2004. Currently, the SBMP remains in a seriously inadequate form, despite promises by the former emergency services minister, John Hargreaves, to have version 2 in place by July last year. I will now explain its deficiencies in more detail.

Version 1 falls well short of the mark in terms of what such a plan should detail. The SBMP should be an action plan with clear directions and tasking for emergency services staff, government and private land managers, and the general community with respect to bushfire prevention and emergency responses. It should also detail, suburb by suburb, how to deal with and mitigate another bushfire emergency. Unfortunately, these elements were lacking in version 1 of the plan.

The excuse by the former minister that land management decisions in relation to ACT Forests were to blame for the delays is unacceptable. Why would you neglect the urban edge in terms of having an SBMP that details protection measures for that urban edge for the sake of a piece of forest for which land management details are still being refined? Given that this was last year's excuse, surely these land management issues should have been resolved by now anyway.

The question of managing forests can be written into the SBMP at a later date in the form of an appendix, but, for goodness sake, let's get version 2 of the plan in place, let's make sure it is concrete and let's make sure it carries authority so that the community can be assured of better protection against bushfire disasters or at least a mitigation of them, a minimising of the threat, and the authorities can have something comprehensive to work with.

The detailed plans that should be included in the final version of the SBMP have to be propagated in winter so that land managers can be given instructions to commence preparatory programs before the bushfire season and also know those programs that they need to continue through the bushfire season. Given the way that this government is going, we obviously have no hope of seeing the final version of an SBMP until the next fire season, if we are lucky.

It is outrageous that 3½ years after the fire disaster which exposed massive shortcomings in the ACT's emergency management system we do not have a final version of the SBMP in place. The minister needs to come clean on why the Emergency Services Authority is dragging the chain again and again on producing a revised version, a final version, a concrete version and is leaving the ACT community at unnecessary risk in terms of bushfire management and prevention.

There are lots of good people doing lots of good work right now to try to prevent or minimise the bushfire risk, but when you have the sort of strategic planning that we have in place which is in draft form, too loose, lacks authority and has holes that you could drive a damn truck through, there are too many things that can fall through the cracks. You cannot afford to fiddle around with bushfire preventative planning, but that is the problem with the SBMP that we currently have. So, given the way this government is going, we obviously have no hope of seeing the final version of the SBMP until the next fire season, if we are lucky.

There are many other questions arising out of the whole SBMP debacle and also around this government's management, or lack of, of bushfire operational plans, a major component of any overall bushfire management plan. In fact, BOPs should be annexes to the SBMP and should fall under its overarching strategy. That leads to a number of other concerns that I now wish to raise.

Firstly, what are the real powers of the commissioner or his delegates, the chief officers of the fire brigade and the RFS, to demand—I stress “demand”; I do not mean encourage—that land clearances and fire prevention activities are carried out under this government's legislation? Secondly, what are the real obligations of land managers to undertake fire prevention under this government's legislation? I put it to the Assembly

that, while there are strong encouragements in the act and the plan, we do not have concrete requirements to ensure that land managers meet obligations.

Thirdly, what are the concrete requirements stating when draft BOPs must be submitted, as opposed to saying that it would be nice to have them under this government? Fourthly, who are the land managers? We have urban services, environment, et cetera, but who are the specific land managers within those agencies under the current government? Are they the senior executives? Are they tasked with individual areas of responsibility? Fifthly, who are the private land managers under this government for the purpose of combating the strategic bushfire threats in the ACT? I am talking about any land managers, private or public, who are seen to own land in areas which are strategically important to the bushfire prevention plan for the ACT. I would argue that those are questions that, if we had a second, more detailed and more authoritative version of the SBMP, would be answered if this government had taken the issue of bushfire management prevention seriously.

In terms of what should be included in the SBMP, some of the points I am about to make may help the emergency services minister, Mr Corbell, do his job when he gets around to finalising the SBMP. We throw these on the table and we ask the government to steal them and use them now for the sake of this community. The first point is that the minister, the bushfire council, commissioners, et cetera, must identify all land managers, both public and private, for the purpose of bushfire prevention. They must convey to land managers what their obligations are and when they must complete them, when tasks such as bushfire operational plans, specific land clearing and hazard reduction have to be completed. But that is not being done adequately under this government.

Secondly, the chief officers of the RFS and the fire brigade, or their delegates, must audit the land managers' areas. Land managers who are identified as owning lands embracing strategic areas must have their tasking audited. They must be able to be directed to undertake certain duties if either the RFS or the fire brigade believe that such action needs to be taken to aid in the prevention and mitigation of bushfires.

Thirdly, the BOPs must cover responsibilities, but they must also designate those vulnerable areas—Chapman, Duffy and Tharwa—that need to have specific fire prevention and response plans in place. I would argue that perhaps every vulnerable suburb needs one. Others would argue that we should at least have a BOP for each mini-region, maybe a mini-region of two to three suburbs. We do not even have that at this stage. In fact, we do not even know what we have. The last understanding I had was that we had probably three or four BOPs at most for the entire territory. If that has changed, I would welcome an update, but we have never been told and we keep asking.

Plans must be flexible, which is the next point that I would ask Mr Corbell to pick up and run with, as the nature of a fire is not always predictable. Various actions should be required, depending on, for example, the direction a fire might come from, south-west versus north-west. Finally—and I would ask Mr Corbell to grab this one and run with it—plans must also cover the need for residential evacuation in specific suburbs and in vulnerable areas.

Speaking of vulnerable areas, I seek leave to table a map that highlights the ACT's urban bushfire threat. It is not perfect. It is what the *Canberra Times* ran from a map that I gave

them. There are three or four vulnerable corridors missing, but it is a starting point. Perhaps the minister would like to look at that.

Leave granted.

MR PRATT: I table the following paper:

Bushfire vulnerable areas—Map published in the *Canberra Sunday Times*, 10 September 2006.

Let's get back to the government's bible of bushfire management, the SBMP. In response to many of my concerns and the community's concerns about long grass, the government often argues that fuel hazards are being managed in accordance with the SBMP. However, it is interesting to reflect on something that the then commissioner of the Emergency Services Authority, Peter Dunn, said on 25 October 2004 in an ABC online news grab relating to the coronial inquest into the 2003 fires. He said:

We're heading down a path, as you can see from the strategic bushfire management plan, that says we're moving on and you then have to say to yourself what if these are findings that would require us to significantly change direction.

That, to me, is an admission that the SBMP is not all it is cracked up to be. The ESA commissioner then basically questioned whether a complete change of direction might be needed and the current version of the SBMP may be completely wrong. Is it because the coronial inquest has been delayed? We are concerned that the plan needs tightening.

MADAM TEMPORARY DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Burke): The member's time has expired.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (4.17): I would like to do two things. Firstly, I would like to move the amendment circulated in my name. I move:

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

"(1) notes the Government's progress in finalising the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan (SBMP); and

(2) notes the following initiatives have occurred since the January 2003 bushfires that clearly demonstrate that the ACT is so much better prepared for the 2006/2007 bushfire season than was the case four years earlier:

- (a) development of and implementation of the *Emergencies Act 2004*;
- (b) development of a CBRN Plan for the ACT;
- (c) development of a Pandemic Plan for the ACT;
- (d) development of an Evacuation Plan for the ACT;
- (e) purchased new vehicles for the Authority, ACT State Emergency Service, ACT Rural Fire Service, ACT Ambulance Service, ACT Fire Brigade, including:

- (i) a special Operations Support Unit for the ACT Ambulance Service;
 - (ii) six new world class ICP ambulances;
 - (iii) four compressed air foam system (CAFS) tankers for the ACT Fire Brigade and six CAFS tankers for the ACT Rural Fire Service, the first of their kind in Australia;
 - (iv) two new fire pumpers for the ACT Fire Brigade, one new tanker and two light units for the ACT Rural Fire Service;
 - (v) ordered a new hazardous materials incident support vehicle for the ACT Fire Brigade, delivery expected September 2006;
 - (vi) six new command units for the ACT State Emergency Service; and
 - (vii) 22 'slip on' fire fighting units supplied to rural lessees through the ACT Rural Fire Service;
- (f) purchased new equipment for the ACT Ambulance Service, including:
- (i) new stretchers; and
 - (ii) new cardiac monitors;
- (g) implementation of a third Comcen Operator for the ACT Ambulance Service;
- (h) implemented a world class computer aided dispatch system (Fortek Vision), which is also the first application of the Geocoded National Address File in the country;
- (i) established and implemented a trunked digital radio network for all the services, implementing a world class technology, which is being expanded to include other key ACT Government agencies;
- (j) performed a recruitment drive for all four services, and:
- (i) recruited an additional 20 ACTAS staff;
 - (ii) recruited an additional 61 full-time firefighters for the Territory;
 - (iii) recruited an additional 110 rural firefighting volunteers to maintain active firefighter numbers in the ACT;
 - (iv) recruited 40 State Emergency Service volunteers; and
 - (v) recruited four full-time staff for the ACT State Emergency Service;
- (k) established 28 community fire units, specific to householders in high bushfire risk areas. There are now 750 registered volunteer members, 550 are fully trained, with equipment and personal protection clothing;

- (l) built, in conjunction with the BOM, an automatic weather station on Mount Ginini for more accurate weather information for mountain fire fighting;
- (m) joined the National Aerial Firefighting Centre scheme, which includes support for the basing of one medium-sized helicopter in the Territory and one light helicopter during the bushfire season and gives the ACT access to many more firefighting aircraft in an emergency;
- (n) entered into agreement with NSW RFS to have both NAFC aircraft available for 12 weeks minimum in the ACT compared to six weeks previously;
- (o) created an Operational Atlas for ensuring a consistent operations map for all agencies involved in any emergency situation in the future;
- (p) signed memoranda of understanding with the NSW RFS, NSW Fire Brigade and NSW State Emergency Service for guaranteed cross-border co-operation;
- (q) signed memoranda of understanding with the ACT media;
- (r) signed memoranda of understanding between ACTAS and ACTFB;
- (s) established memoranda of understanding with NSW NPWS to provide mutual aid for emergency response in bushfire control;
- (t) established a consistent Government Land Access agreement with all Territory land managers to allow emergency access to all lands;
- (u) created the FireWise Program, a travelling public education resource, which has been teaching the ACT about bushfires for three years;
- (v) extended the Bush FireWise Program to a Farm FireWise Program to engage all ACT leaseholders in a targeted bushfire risk management program to protect their properties and the Canberra community from bushfire;
- (w) created and distributed a public bushfire education supplement called 'Bushfires in the Bush Capital';
- (x) implemented a Standard Early Warning System for the Territory, ensuring a timely warning in an emergency, distributed throughout the Territory at media outlets, shopping centres, sports grounds, etc;
- (y) implemented revised AIIMS training for ACT RFS senior officers, including Incident Controller, Operations Officer and Planning Officer to meet national competency standards;
- (z) created a Yellow Pages information section for improved public awareness during an emergency;
- (aa) created a full-time community relations and media liaison unit;

- (ab) established an Emergency Co-ordination Centre for incident response co-ordination and planning;
- (ac) established a new Incident Control Centre as part of the RFS Headquarters at Fairbairn which can provide purpose-built incident management facilities for all agencies separate from the ECC;
- (ad) created and published a Strategic Bushfire Management Plan, which gives a ten-year forward view of bushfire management activities, including establishing a Bushfire Abatement Zone;
- (ae) developed Bushfire Operational Plans for all Government-managed lands to implement the strategies identified in the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan;
- (af) established and undertaken annual audits of the Bushfire Operational Plans to ensure risks are effectively managed by GLM in the Territory;
- (ag) created and distributed to all households an All Hazards Guide covering a range of different emergencies; and
- (ah) created an All Hazards Warning System for the ACT, which has already been used in emergency situations.”.

Rather than trying to do anything else, I shall speak to the substantive motion and the amendment in one go to save the confusion of members thinking I might like to have two or three bites at the same cherry, which I am not entitled to do.

The strategic bushfire management plan was released in early 2005. At the time of its release it was envisaged that a revised version could be produced before the legislative revision in 2010, so jumping up and down looking for version before 2010 is being a little pre-emptive. However, I think the record should be clear that the current plan is a very well constructed and coherent document that provides sound strategic direction for the preparation of bushfire operational plans across the territory.

The plan is a series of guidelines which are already effective in helping the departments and landowners within the ACT to develop bushfire operational plans, or BOPs, for the areas for which they are responsible. These detailed bushfire operational plans lead to very comprehensive bushfire mitigation works being undertaken on an annual basis.

We should be wary of rushing too quickly into revising the SBMP. Remember, the government has only recently determined the new land management arrangements for the territory and the government has only recently made a final decision on land use for the lower Cotter catchment. Both of these issues are significant in terms of revision of the SBMP. The report on the coroner’s inquiry into the 2003 bushfires will be published in the near future. It may well contain recommendations related to the SBMP. That is another issue of significance as to why we should not rush to revise the plan until the findings of the coroner are known.

The current strategic bushfire management plan incorporates all land tenures across the ACT, and you will not find that in other states of Australia. It is already a very

comprehensive, advanced and forward-thinking document. Further, the bushfire operational plans stemming from the SBMP are audited on an annual basis to ensure that they achieve the guidelines that are set out. This ensures that the benchmarks set out in the SBMP are achieved. These audits are carried out at both desktop and field level, with both quarterly and annual reports being submitted to the commissioner of the ESA and land management agencies.

Prevention activities such as fuel management and fire trail works are targeted to effectively address pre-identified bushfire risk strategic areas and to ensure that the works undertaken provide the most effective means to reduce this risk. A critical component of this work is to ensure that across the territory there are strategic areas surrounding properties and assets from which firefighters and residents can protect their homes. This work is undertaken around the urban interface adjacent to critical assets and back fences of properties, as well as along rural and arterial roads.

It is a totally unrealistic expectation that every blade of grass behind every ACT fence will be slashed on a continuing basis through the summer. This is simply impractical. However, the strategic bushfire management plan guidelines and the bushfire operational plans ensure that all urban edge areas of the territory that are vulnerable to bushfire are identified and treated according to their level of risk and vulnerability. Canberra's urban interface is managed in this way.

It is also inevitable that there will be areas where long grass or other bushfire hazards cannot be fully cleared due to rocky or steep slopes that prevent the safe use of mechanical slashers. The land managers, either by reshaping the land or using hand tools or burning, are systematically reducing hazards in these difficult areas. Critical slashing work is complemented by the prescribed burning of grassland areas and roadsides over the summer months to provide strategic breaks across the landscape as well as reducing fuel adjacent to back fences. This is the first time in many years this burning has been undertaken in the ACT and it not only provides increased protection but also is a critical means of training our firefighters.

This government takes a long-term strategic and landscape level view of the bushfire threat based on a sound historical understanding of fire behaviour. There is far more to bushfire management than just managing grass at the back fence. Ensuring the safety of communities from the threat of bushfire is a complex task and there is no single, simple solution to it. It is critical to ensure the community is educated and resilient to bushfires and that people know what to do when bushfires occur. This government has put in place a range of strategies to ensure home owners are more aware of and more resilient to the impacts of fires.

The government has instituted the all hazards warning system that provides a staged process for warning the public of impending threat from bushfire or, indeed, other hazards. At the same time, advice was provided on how householders can prepare for bushfires to make their homes more capable of withstanding bushfires. There is a saying in the business that people protect houses and houses protect people. The government has acted to ensure these concepts are understood and applied. The ESA has been applying these guidelines to evacuation strategies and they have been published in *Bushfires and the bush capital* and the all hazards guide.

Finally, our emergency service response agencies are equipped with additional tankers using the most advanced firefighting technology available. Six rural compressed air foam, or CAF, tankers are operational in the ACT, providing the ability to rapidly lay down foam to protect assets. Two helicopters are deployed to the ACT over the critical period of the fire season.

Training of bushfire fighters has elevated significantly in recent years with the adoption of national standards for firefighters. The ACT has led an Australasian Fire Authorities Council project to develop best practice for training in Australasian interagency incident management systems and has high levels of training in incident management as well as front-line response.

Clear objectives are set for the protection of assets in the ACT based on a range of factors, such as the length and direction of fire runs to the interface, the slope and aspect of the land, the type and flammability of vegetation, the land management objectives and adjacent land use. From a sound understanding of these issues, a flexible approach to asset protection is achieved. As clearly stated in the strategic bushfire management plan, asset protection zones are defined. This can be found in the appendices to the plan. The zone consists of three parts—the house asset protection zone, the inner asset protection zone and the outer asset protection zone.

Based on the modelling of fire paths and past history, the urban interface has been classified into three classes that reflect the level of exposure to bushfires. For example, bushfire threat to a north-west facing property on the interface is significantly greater than to a south-east facing property in inner Canberra. These exposure classes, not guesswork, determine the width of fuel management within a zone and their priority in the overall territory context.

Homeowners too must do their part to ensure their yards and buildings are defensible. This is vital in the house asset protection zone, and extensive advice has been provided to the community to assist in achieving effective outcomes. This is where shared responsibility comes in. Bushfire protection is the responsibility of all, not just of government agencies.

The inner asset protection zone, which can be up to 30 metres wide, is intensively managed for fuel reduction. This zone provides firefighters and homeowners with an effective defensible space in which they can fight a fire safely and effectively by reducing the flame height and intensity. The outer asset protection zone—30 metres out and beyond—is designed to reduce the intensity of the approaching fire and, critically, it reduces the intensity of ember attack. As shown by the January 2003 fires, as well as other fires, ember attack is the major contributor to house loss, with over 90 per cent of properties lost through ember attack, rather than direct flame contact. The outer zone aims to manage this component through managing fuels sometimes up to 300 metres from the primary interface in an attempt to mitigate ember attack.

The differing widths of these zones are based on sound science to reflect the appropriate measure to reduce bushfire threat. They are based on work undertaken by the CSIRO and experts on fire behaviour. They also reflect reality, not just a figure plucked out of the air. The location of zones and exposure classes were considered and determined by

people with a long history and sound understanding of bushfire in the ACT. The zones, and their application, were discussed at length for a good reason—to demonstrate the complexity of fire management.

The strategic bushfire management plan remains at the forefront of fire management planning in Australia in that it encompasses fire management across tenure and management responsibility in one document. The ACT is extremely fortunate to be able to achieve and implement the strategies contained in such a document. This document was produced after very extensive public consultation and represents the views of science, the urban community, rural lessees and land managers.

The ACT is undertaking the most effective fire management possible, not just in relation to fuel management or fire trails but also in ensuring that the community is prepared and resilient and that emergency responders are ready to fight fire effectively, efficiently and safely. The strategic bushfire management plan brings together all of these elements in one document, a situation that did not previously exist in the ACT, where the cornerstones of prevention, preparedness and response were bound up in a range of separate documents across different agencies.

The strategic bushfire management plan provides strategies and guidance for bushfire management to the community and to the government. The achievements of the territory in reducing the threat of bushfire is testimony to the strength of the plan. Even those agencies which do not manage significant land areas, such as housing, community services and education, are in the process of developing bushfire operational plans. Commonwealth agencies that are not technically required to produce bushfire operational plans, such as defence, are also preparing bushfire operational plans for their areas.

That all of these agencies are preparing plans that are consistent with the strategic bushfire management plan clearly demonstrates that the SBMP is a strong document that is driving bushfire management in the ACT. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the bushfire operational plans are an effective means of delivering the strategies of the strategic bushfire management plan.

To ensure that the work is being done, there is a rigorous audit and compliance program which assesses the works against those in the bushfire operational plans and the standards in the strategic bushfire management plan. This is a program by which an independent auditor, the ESA, can review the activities of a landholder, be they public or private, and report on the standard of work that is being achieved. These audits are continuous and ongoing as I speak.

These audits are critical. They ensure that standards are being achieved and that appropriate steps are undertaken to meet these objectives. They provide the community with the confidence that works are being achieved in a timely, consistent and cost-effective manner. Finally, they make the plan live. They are not just a list of actions sitting on a shelf. They make the plan live and a living document. All of this planning and all of this physical activity will not prevent bushfires from occurring, but it will minimise the risk from bushfires. Canberrans can all share the responsibility of minimising that risk, and this is being achieved very well.

Moving the amendment that I have moved has allowed me to put on record a very long list of activities of the Emergency Services Authority and others in response to bushfire threat in the ACT. I commend the Emergency Services Authority for the activities that they have undertaken over the last few years. I remember from my time as minister that bunch of committed people doing things that the rest of Australia could only dream of. I commend them for that and I commend the amendment to the Assembly.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (4.30): Mr Speaker, the Greens will join Mr Pratt in noting with concern the lack of progress in finalising the strategic bushfire management plan, version 2. However, I will not be supporting paragraph (b) of part (1) of the motion moved by Mr Pratt. I am not entirely comfortable with the point about addressing the deficiencies in the existing plan, in part because the deficiencies as Mr Pratt sees them are not as I would, and in part because it seems that the implementation is the problem rather than this first stage of planning.

I flag now that I will be proposing an amendment, which has been circulated, to draw attention to a major impediment to the implementation of planning, and the proper finalisation of planning, through cuts to the former environment agencies. I now know that the government also plans to amend the motion, so obviously I will be moving my amendment a little later in this debate.

The strategic bushfire management plan was supposed to have been released in two stages. Stage 1, or version 1, was released in January 2005. In the words of the then minister's foreword, version 1 was to "set the scene and provide clear objectives, strategies and actions for bushfire management". Version 2 was supposed to have provided some more detailed plans on some of the more complex issues. Again quoting the minister:

Further analysis and investigation will be conducted until 1 July 2005 when version 2 will be finalised and formalised.

That was 14 months ago. It seems that the more complex issues are proving a challenge. But exactly why the delay and what issues are holding up the plan are a mystery as we had not heard from the minister on this subject until the debate today, and I am not even sure that we heard about it today. It is important to get the work right.

More recently the government has also fundamentally rearranged the responsible Emergency Services Authority. We have lost the commissioner and two assistant commissioners. Then there has been a major restructure of and cuts to the land management agencies who need to both develop and implement more specific operational plans. And we have had a change of minister. So working out what are the priorities and where is the expertise is very difficult in this situation. This does not account for the delays over the previous 12 months or so but it does mean that we are not in a good position to expedite anything with confidence.

Meanwhile, the activities that have been carried out are not necessarily being done in a strategic way. It seems that some are being done in a hurry to make it look as though there was strong action—fire trail locations and some clearing, for example. This is not the place to go into detail on this point but there is a lot of scientific knowledge about

how to go about reducing hazards in ways that respect the ecological integrity of parks. The haste to get things done and the way that actions like clearing and fire trails are bandied about makes these attractive actions when they may not in fact be the best way forward for fire protection and biodiversity.

On the whole, most people in the community, while fearful of bushfire, are not informed on the hazards and the best means of prevention. Try as the government will, you can give people information but you cannot make them read it; and if they do read it, you cannot make them understand it. With due respect, I suspect that Mr Pratt may be someone who is not an expert on this topic. We are all aware that it is very attractive for governments to be seen to be doing something, whether it is doing burn-offs, where they do not actually protect anything, or cutting down standing trees that look as though they might burn one day. I might add that where there is a lack of scientific and practical knowledge, it has often been handy to target conservation-minded people. So we need to see the next stage of the strategic plan.

I would like to refer to the lack of tangible and definitive goals, targets and directions. It is clearly of concern that we have not had the outcomes from the important informed joint planning process which was to be done to develop version 2 of the strategic bushfire management plan. However, I do not agree that the fault is in this original plan. It is in the putting it into action that we have run into trouble. The disruptions to the ESA and now to the land managers of the ACT can only make this worse in the short term, though some of the changes to the land managers could result in improvements in the long run.

There is a range of specific actions listed under each strategy, such as, on page 42, the strategy to reduce bushfire fuel hazard appropriately. For the purpose of fire trails, bushfire operational plans are intended to identify a two-year works program and site-specific plans. These are not fleshed out here but it is the job of the next phase to do this work. The motion already has us noting this delay with concern. Urban edge preparation is important and householder preparation is an essential part of reducing the risks of fire to life and property, and that is why there are specific actions and goals in the plan along these lines.

Mr Pratt's motion refers to high risk areas without spelling out what those areas are. The strategic plan sets out methods for assessing risk and identifies high risk and difficult areas, among others. Mr Pratt, however, has taken it upon himself to identify high risk suburbs and, indeed, as we heard in this place in March, to write to people living in those places and tell them he thinks they are in danger. The *Canberra Sunday Times* of 10 September included a map prepared by Mr Pratt. I am uncomfortable supporting this part of the motion because, despite his obvious enthusiasm, I do not believe, as I said earlier, that Mr Pratt is an expert in the area. In the debate on 29 March I said that we must also recognise that different approaches are required for different areas and that regular burning, slashing and road building are unacceptable and impractical for areas such as nature parks and other places with high biodiversity or other high ecological values.

Furthermore, I would like to point to the partnership role of individual householders and government land managers on the urban edge. I remind the Assembly that more than 50 per cent of the house losses in the January 2003 fires were due to fire attack from suburban fuels. We know that the ACT Planning and Land Authority is currently

investigating construction standards for bushfire protection in the ACT, and I think stage 2 should shift us further down that path. We have concerns that the government has been slow in developing and communicating building design and setting out requirements at the urban edge. Perhaps the urban edge is a place where there does need to be specific fire prevention in house design. There is the issue of specific bushfire operational plans and I am not sure that they are in place everywhere they should be.

The government's amendment—I expect that this is the only chance I will have to address it—contains an interesting and informative list of the government's activities. However, it does not address the lack of progress in finalising the SBMP, version 2, so we will not be supporting it. The problem from our perspective of only having the first stage of the plan is that it is too broad. There are still significant shortcomings within it and it is too open to interpretation. There is a lot of good scientific, ecologically based work around that understands fire as part of ecology but it is only when that plan moves to a more detailed stage—stage 2, which we are waiting for—that people responsible for delivering the plan will be able to access the science. So, for example, areas where there is said to be a high fuel load really need to be understood in terms of the nature of the plants, the environment in which they are found, the fire behaviour that would result if there were a lightning strike and so on. It is, indeed, impossible to accurately estimate the resource needs for fire protection in different areas if that science work is not incorporated into the detailed stage for the plan.

The capacity of government agencies is reflected in the amendment that I will seek to move later in the debate. The issue of collaboration between leaseholders and government is another matter. I do not know how Val Jeffrey at Tharwa or the rural leaseholders struggling for a reasonable payout from their Molonglo Valley leases feel about working cooperatively with the territory's land managers. I hope some of that distrust is being mended. I believe that resourcing local area voluntary firefighters would help.

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (4.40): The motion moved today by Mr Pratt is an important and timely one, given that we are fast approaching another bushfire season. As one gets older it seems that they come around with increasing rapidity. We already know that unless the weather patterns change significantly we will face the possibility of a very difficult bushfire season. We have already seen fires in the Kosciusko National Park and surrounding areas as a result of normal and usual rural burn-offs at this time of the year. These fires are already causing problems. When standard burn-offs are causing problems in the first month of spring we know that we will have a difficult time ahead of us in the upcoming bushfire season.

Mr Pratt needs to be congratulated on his vigilance in this matter and on his preparedness to speak forcefully and authoritatively on the problems facing the management of bushfires in the ACT. The ACT does not have a great history in relation to the area that I would like to concentrate on, which is bushfire fuel management. Bushfire fuel management is only one part of the strategic bushfire management plan but it is one area where we have been lax for over more than a decade.

The issues related to bushfire fuel management came to my attention back in 1994 when, under the administration of the then minister for the environment, Mr Wood, the McBeth report came to light. The report was essentially leaked because the authorities in the ACT

government in 1994 were trying to cover up the recommendations made by Mr McBeth in relation to the need to improve our bushfire fuel management. When my erstwhile boss, Gary Humphries, became the minister for emergency services and the minister for the environment in 1995 he set out to implement many of the recommendations of the McBeth report and to establish for the first time in the ACT a bushfire fuel management plan. That was a work in progress and, with the benefit of hindsight, I think that more effort should have been put into it.

One of the things that we find is that some of the people charged with the responsibility of reducing fuel often have a bit of a conflict of interest. Often they are people who are trained as conservationists. They are trained in environmental sciences and things like that. They have a slightly different approach and their training is so sufficiently different that they do not see hazard reduction as part of their core business. We have many rangers who are highly skilled and who are well trained but they see their job as protecting biodiversity and looking after the cute furry animals and the interesting fauna and flora that we have in the ACT.

I put it to you, Mr Speaker, that one of the most important jobs that people in this territory have as land managers is to ensure that the hazard for bushfires is reduced as much as possible. If we fail to do that we will fail to protect our biodiversity; we will fail to protect our fauna and flora. We have seen this over and over again. One of the interesting things that came out in the discussions after the disastrous 2003 bushfires was the number of people from national parks associations, national parks organisations and environmental groups who said, “No, we cannot do hazard reduction burning in these places.”

We should look at what the fire experts say. For example, we kept being told that we could not do hazard reduction burning around and through mountain ashes in the Kosciusko and Namadgi parks—the alpine parks—because if you did so these trees would die. Well, that is not true. If you put a light fire through them and reduce the hazard, they do not die. And even if it were a problem, surely if you cannot reduce the hazard in them you would build a ring of defences to reduce the hazard around them. But no, we did not do any of those things and, as I have been wont to say in my more poetic phases, the mountain ashes became mountains of ash.

We have conservationists who on a regular basis say, “We can’t do hazard reduction. It is not compatible with maintaining national park places that are designed to support biodiversity.” One of the things that really gets under my skin is the number of conservation-minded people who get into a complete lather every time somebody wants to build a fire trail. One of the problems we encountered in 2003 was that the fire trails had been either let go or were in a terrible state of repair. The people charged with the responsibility of maintaining the biodiversity in our parks did not do basic maintenance. They turned fire trails over to the bush and, as a result, we could not get trucks into places where we needed them. That was a failing of successive governments.

As an adviser to a previous government, I know how much we smarted every time we attempted to build a fire trail. It was agony to build a fire trail. But I will never, ever criticise a government for planning and appropriately building fire trails to maintain the safety of our community. Mind you, when these issues arose back in 1997 and there were issues about fire trails on Black Mountain and elsewhere, the Labor Party crucified the

then minister for the environment for having the temerity to build fire trials. I will never do that while I am the spokesman for the environment in this place. Fire trails must be built and must be maintained. This needs to be done sensitively, of course, but there will never be any criticism from me of sensible approaches to hazard reduction. From time to time that will require a fire. Sometimes you have to fight fire with fire. You have small cold burns over areas to make sure that you reduce the hazard.

My concern, which is shared by Mr Pratt, is that there are not enough fire operational plans and that the plans that we have do not go to the heart of really reducing the hazards in some of our more vulnerable places. I have acknowledged that a lot of work has been done. I will acknowledge that the principle underlying putting all the land managers together in the one place is a good one. I said that during the budget debate and I say it here again. But if they are under-resourced and they are not given the appropriate riding instructions, it will be a wasted opportunity.

I think Mr Hargreaves is really a little bit sensitive here. He is saying that bushfire protection is the responsibility of all, not just government agencies, and I would agree with that. But government agencies have to lead by example and it has to be good example. I will give just one example of the atrocious management that I saw during the last bushfire season in relation to Percival Hill behind Nicholls. I was approached by a number of lessees who had basically taken over part of the government land beyond their fences. They maintained the land. They cut the grass and planted and grew lots of very green deciduous trees as a buffer to fires. The ground was clean and there was little or no possibility of ember strike. But the parks and conservation people came through and took out the trees. They raised what had been planted and left the land bare. However, across the road they left waist-high phalaris and Paterson's curse, which all had been cured and had almost no moisture content. In the height of summer a barrier against fire had been taken away by the conservation agencies while hazard reduction had not been carried out some 10 feet away across the road. This is misplaced management. The government needs to lead by example. It needs to have a better, more consultative approach with the community and thereby encourage people to reduce their fire risk.

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (4.50): Mr Speaker, I will be supporting Minister Hargreaves's amendment to Mr Pratt's motion. This government has provided a greater level of coordinated preparedness against bushfires in the ACT than has ever existed previously. Under the strategic bushfire management plan a comprehensive range of strategies has been developed to manage bushfire fuel levels across all tenures and to better prepare both the community and the emergency services. A researched, scientific approach to the principles of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery are embedded in the bushfire management framework.

Since the approval of the SBMP in early 2005 the ACT government has concentrated its attentions and efforts on translating these strategies into action to deliver clear outcomes on the ground that protect the community of the ACT. The implementation of the SBMP has proven to be a challenging job for all land managers and the Rural Fire Service because the SBMP seeks to develop and implement a robust scientific way of managing bushfire risk. The bushfire operational plans provide the process by which this provision has delivered more effective risk management outcomes.

It is worth while reflecting upon the massive amount of work that has been undertaken by the ACT Rural Fire Service and the ACT government land managers to achieve this outcome. The process has required a considerable revision of how things are done and a reassessment of the reasons for doing things that we have traditionally expected to be done to reduce bushfire risk. For example, the SBMP requires the creation and improvement of communication products for stakeholders and the Rural Fire Service has responded to achieve this. This includes identifying key data gaps such as fire trail location and the application of new classification systems that identify the suitability of each trail for particular vehicle types. The mapping of fire history, the identification and mapping of infrastructure and asset location, as well as mapping the vegetation in the ACT will ensure that risk assessment modelling can truly reflect consequence.

In addition, data analysis has been required in relation to fire path and fire behaviour that more accurately reflects the lessons we have learnt from 2001 and 2003. The process for the collation and exchange of data has been identified and implemented to be consistent with national data standards, and the responsibility for data collection and providing data to these new defined standards has been assigned among emergency services, land managers and territory planning authorities.

Strategy 7 of the SBMP requires that responsible agencies reduce bushfire fuel hazards appropriately. This has required the revision of all hazard reduction programs across all land tenures, and through the bushfire operational plans a new set of standards and objectives has been defined. To assist this a new fuel hazard model has been developed covering all vegetation communities. This is now being incorporated into new research and new management products being produced by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, which will further strengthen bushfire planning in the ACT.

The program for reducing potential ignition sources and reducing hazards along roadsides has been a major program for this government. For example, the mowing programs conducted in 2005-06 treated some 250 hectares of grassland and woodland, but many areas have always been too rough to incorporate into the program. These areas have now been assessed and treated to allow them to be mowed when required, thus allowing contractors to provide continuous breaks in fuel loads to guard against the spread of fire. In some of these assessments it has been identified that hazard reduction may be more efficiently achieved by low intensity burning, and in 2005 the practice of hazard reduction burning on roadsides was reintroduced by the RFS with great success. This has proven to be a cost-effective tool for reducing risk and a valuable training tool for firefighters.

Building the capacity of the ACT community to deal with bushfires has been a key strategy in the SBMP and, with the support of the commonwealth working together program, there has been a focus on rural leaseholders. By assisting landholders to manage bushfire risk on their property and to integrate their actions with other landholders it is anticipated that the management of fire in these areas surrounding urban Canberra can be more effectively achieved during periods of high fire danger.

The SBMP requires that the ACT Rural Fire Service identifies its training and resource needs to deal with a major incident. In a major project, with the support of the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, the ESA has completed a review of the

requirements needed to adequately resource a major incident like 2003. This information has been used to develop a capability model for the RFS with a training plan and a model for implementing the Australasian interagency incident management system to deploy and manage these resources. This is the basis for the RFS renewed recruitment program and preparations for the coming bushfire season.

These outcomes, reviews and products are a small part of the huge effort undertaken by this government to implement the SBMP to date. They highlight the importance of gathering all the available information before we embark upon a detailed revision of the current plan and represent a prudent and sensible approach to risk management planning.

Minister Hargreaves's amendment to Mr Pratt's motion contains a host of initiatives created by this government. I counted 49 new initiatives since 2003, so I think it is incredible that Mr Pratt should suggest that nothing has been done on the SBMP. There are 49 new initiatives in a scientifically sound system of risk management. Where have you been, Mr Pratt, since 2003? Certainly not in Canberra, it seems.

MR SMYTH (Brindabella) (4.57): It is quite clear that Mr Gentleman has been given his marching orders. He has been handed his speech and, like a good trooper, he stood up and read the speech without any understanding of what it means. To stand up here and say, "I can count to 49, because there are 49 dots that John Hargreaves has put on a bit of paper. Aren't we good fellows," entirely misses the point of the motion.

We did not ask you what initiatives had occurred since January 2003 that demonstrate that we are much better prepared. The whole point of the motion is the progress of the strategic bushfire management plan.

Mr Gentleman: You are missing the amendment there.

MR SMYTH: No, I am not missing the amendment at all. I will go straight to the amendment. We see this all the time from the government. When you cannot answer with substance and with conviction the motion that is put in this place, you wipe out the whole motion.

If we wanted a motion calling on the government to list 49 things they have done since coming to office or since the January 2003 bushfires, that is what we would have put on the notice paper. But we did not have a motion saying, "Please outline the 49 initiatives that you have taken since January 2003 that clearly demonstrate that the ACT is so much better prepared." We did not ask that.

Both government speakers have ignored and have deliberately chosen not to answer our question about the lack of tangible and definite goals, targets and directions in the current version of the SBMP and the specific bushfire operational plans for risk areas throughout the ACT. Not a comment! They have not used those words; they have not addressed those targets; they have not spoken to the motion; they have not told us when they will expedite the completion of version 2.

Mr Hargreaves's answer is: "There will not be a version 2 because we have got a plan that runs from 2005 to 2010. We are working on the draft plan. We are doing other things under development." You can pick answer A, answer B or answer C from

Mr Hargreaves. And that is standard for Mr Hargreaves. Again, he does not answer the motion. They have got a whole department to write this stuff for them. All they have got to do is get up and read it. But they cannot even do that.

We have concern about the lack of progress. What Mr Hargreaves moves as an amendment is not a commentary on the progress of finalising the strategic bushfire management plan. And that is the problem.

We also do not get from those opposite the things that they have started to wind back. McLeod said, "Let us have a strategic bushfire management plan, with the operational plans that come underneath it." But we are already moving away from McLeod. McLeod said, "Set up the ESA." Now there is no independent ESA. McLeod said, "Set up a fuel management unit inside urban services." That has been gutted as well. We see this slow winding back.

We have inside the ESA an organisation that is waiting to get some strategic leadership because its budget and priorities have not been determined. They have not been told how many staff will be cut because of this government's and its ministers' financial ineptitude and mismanagement.

The problem at the heart of this is that the government has not driven this issue. It has not been driven genuinely since 2003. It was not driven by Mr Quinlan. It was not driven by Mr Wood. It was not driven by Mr Hargreaves. Now it is up to Mr Corbell who, unfortunately, is not here today.

The question is: when will we see a finalised version? The answer is that we cannot get an answer from the government. Depending on which answer you want to take from Mr Hargreaves, this thing is under development, is finished or will be in operation in 2010. That is the whole point. There is no clarity. There is no direction. You have got the shadow minister putting together maps showing the areas.

If we go back to the bushfire fuel management plan that I helped launch in 1998 because of the Labor Party ignoring the McBeth report, suppressing the McBeth report, hiding the McBeth report and certainly not acting on the McBeth report, we see a repeat of history. This is what is happening again now.

We heard in estimates that we do not have enough volunteers to run a category 1 fire for the required period of time. There just are not enough volunteers. "We are doing the work," says Mr Gentleman. "We are combining research with this, that and the other." But the reality is, according to what we were told in estimates—and you were there, Mr Gentleman; Mr Pratt was there—there are not enough volunteers in either the RFS or the SES to continue the work, should it be required.

The work will get done, Mr Speaker, and you know the work will get done, because the volunteers will keep coming back like they do every time. We had the wakeup call in December 2001, and it was absolutely ignored by the government.

There was a report with 109 recommendations. We had assurances from the then minister that they had all been implemented. The majority of them had not been implemented, not in a meaningful way, not in a way that improved operational

capability. They had not been implemented at all. That is partly the reason for the debacle of 2003. We had the wakeup call, and it was ignored. We suffered in January 2003.

Yes, there are a number of initiatives that the government has put in place. As I always do, I acknowledge good initiatives. Thanks for the CAFS tankers, thanks for the extra support vehicles for the SES which, again, the government initially resisted. When I, working with Glenn Parry and the CFMEU, got the first of those vehicles, we proved that it met operational needs. We used one for about two weeks and then had to fight the government to give it to them for nothing. That is the laggard response, the tardy response, that we see from the government all the time in this matter.

Mr Pratt points out the lack of progress. That has not been answered. He points out the lack of targets, goals and directions. That has not been answered. Instead of answering the question and giving an honest assurance to the people of the ACT that progress is being made and that it is getting better, we change the whole nature of the motion to a list. "Pat ourselves on the back. Aren't we good fellows? Well done." That does not answer the question, does not make it go away, does not make it better and does not make it right. The motion points out the failures of this government and establishes doubt.

One of the dot points on the last page of the amendment is: established an emergency coordination centre for incident response. We have got the new headquarters coming at Fairbairn. How much of that will go forward? I am sure Mr Pratt has got a few words to say on it when he finishes. Is there enough budget left for it to go ahead? What are the terms and conditions of the lease? Have they been determined yet? Given that the Emergency Services Authority has mismanaged its funding twice over the last two financial years and has come back for an additional \$5 million in each of the last two financial years because they could not cope, could not deliver and had not done the work under the previous leadership, there is serious doubt about their ability to deliver it in the coming season. I have got no doubt the paid workers of the RFS will do a great job; they are great people. They need the strategic direction and the support that the bushfire plans would give them.

We see it again today with Rhodium: shareholders' lack of interest. It is quite interesting. There is a pattern here. With Rhodium, the Auditor-General says that proper policies were not put in place so that they could be implemented. What do we find in the Emergency Services Authority? Proper financial controls were not put in place so that financial control could be implemented.

Have we got a pattern here? Both organisations were established by the Stanhope government; both organisations have not put in appropriate controls; both organisations have failed to deliver financial targets. We see this pattern where we cannot fund or complete our capital works and cannot set up new emergency headquarters because we do not have the funds. We have got staff who are concerned about their future because the budget has not been determined yet and they are not sure which staff will have to go. I am told that staff from the ESA will go.

It is like a big balloon. Let us look at the smoke and mirrors. It is a balloon. We huff and puff until the balloon gets so big that it bursts. That is not what the people of the ACT

need or want. It is not good financial management and is certainly not good preparation for an upcoming fire season where, in the middle of September, we are getting days where it is 25 degrees already. Is El Nino coming again? We will find out.

We are seeing the heat coming much earlier, which will lead to greater curing; we have had less rain; there is good growth out there; there has been good growth. I can assure you that fuel loads are up. But we do not have the plans that we were promised. We do not have a finalised strategic bushfire management plan. From that, based on other things that have happened inside the ESA and other things that have happened inside this government, the community does not get the confidence that they deserve.

What happened to the community fire units? How many, Mr Pratt?

Mr Pratt: Twenty-eight.

MR SMYTH: Out of how many, Mr Pratt?

Mr Pratt: We need at least 51.

MR SMYTH: Fifty-one. Where are they? Where is the commitment? They are coming—like the bushfire management plan. Where is the financial control for the ESA? It is not quite that bad in fact because it has been drawn back into the department. It is not even three years since McLeod, and McLeod is being dismantled. That is what is happening with the strategic bushfire management plan. It is being dismantled because it has not been completed; it has not been finalised; it has not been delivered to give Canberrans a certainty that they deserve.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (5.08): I seek leave to move the amendment circulated in my name.

Leave granted.

DR FOSKEY: I move:

Add:

“(3) calls on the Government to report to this Assembly by the end of the next sitting week on the effects of cuts to staff of the former Environment ACT and Parks and Conservation services upon the Parks Brigade’s capacity to conduct operational planning and to fight fires.”

This amendment anticipates that the government’s amendment will be successful and become the resolution and consequently adds point (3).

I reiterate that, if Mr Pratt’s motion gets up, I will support part (a), part (b) (2) and paragraph (ii) of that. But if the government’s amendment gets up, I would like to have added to it a part (3):

calls on the Government to report to this Assembly by the end of the next sitting week on the effects of cuts to staff of the former Environment ACT and Parks and Conservation services upon the Parks Brigade’s capacity to conduct operational planning and to fight fires.

This amendment asks the government to report back to the Assembly on the impact of budget cuts on the territory's capacity to fight fires effectively. Mr Hargreaves has told me informally that there will be no cuts to the parks brigade. However, that is not information that I have had available to me. We are all aware that there are cuts happening within TAMS. As far as I know, Environment ACT does not exist anymore. Apparently, there is flux around these issues. I believe that, at this point in time, in September, when any day that rain is forecast, the forecast is withdrawn. We have got the weather bureau withdrawing the forecast of rain for the ACT. I know that we have a community which has a great deal of concern about our preparedness for fire.

My own concern is that recent budget cuts to staff of the former Environment ACT and the Parks and Conservation Service and, in particular, cutting the number of rangers will mean a reduction in capacity of the parks brigade because the parks brigade is a fully professional rural fire fighting service. It is the first line of response. Because that is the job of its members, they are available all the time.

The volunteer brigades are an essential part of the response system but they cannot replace and should not be asked to replace the professional brigade. This part of the disruption to the development of operational plans, not to mention disruption to the capacity to respond, has not been explained by government and has not received much public attention.

Consequently, I have moved this amendment which calls on the government to explain the impacts to us. Quite possibly, I do not have to wait until the end of the next sitting week. Mr Hargreaves might do it in the next five minutes. However, in the panic of budget cuts, I have every reason to fear that the government has gone too far here. Mr Hargreaves's or Mr Corbell's report to the Assembly, should my amendment be passed, would at least show that the government has considered the effects of these cuts and make the links between land management, nature protection and fire prevention.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (5.12): I will talk to this amendment and then pick up on a couple of points made earlier by Dr Foskey. We will support this amendment. It adds value to our motion. It speaks quite sensibly, to try to tie the government down on getting back to the Assembly on what is happening with capability in Environment ACT and Parks and Conservation. It would be a very good thing to see the government come back and provide, chapter and verse, a situation report on what is happening with the parks brigade. We will support that amendment.

I go back to a couple of other points made earlier by Dr Foskey. She said, "This MLA here, Mr Steven Pratt, is not an expert in these areas." She is right. If I may comment on that, it is an important point to be addressed in this place, not only from the point of view of this debate but procedurally in terms of the roles of MLAs. I make the point, Dr Foskey, through you, Mr Speaker, that we are not experts. None of us are experts on too many areas at all, even within the governance areas of the administration of the ACT, but surely it is the responsibility of MLAs to draw expert opinion around them—be they in government, opposition or on the crossbench—and then make decisions to push issues and recommendations drawn from the discussions, with that expert opinion drawn in.

Surely, if we as MLAs are not willing or are not able to try to identify, for example, the areas in the ACT vulnerable to bushfire risk, then perhaps we should not be here. You do not need to be an expert to boldly—or you do not even need to be bold—stand up and make a comment about those issues. It is very important that we try.

Whilst we are on the issues raised by Dr Foskey about the environmental aspects of bushfire risk analysis and bushfire risk management, I have to say that it was the Greens' and environmental activists' inaction and downright obstructionism that really caused massive areas of south-eastern Australia, including the ACT, in the last six or seven years to be carrying unacceptably high fuel hazard tonnages per hectare as well as overgrown fire tracks and broken bridges. Please, please, Greens, do not lecture the Liberals about their willingness to take firm but sensible action to mitigate the bushfire risk.

I commend Mrs Dunne for the comments that she made about the conservationists' attitudes. She and Mr Smyth referred to the McBeth report, which was a hell of a wakeup call to all of us a good decade ago about the need to bushfire risk-analysis, set tasks, mitigate the fire risk and do something about these tonnages per hectare across New South Wales and ACT forests.

The mismanagement of New South Wales forests on our western border is very much our problem. The conservationists in New South Wales have much to answer for—for their failures to allow sensible people in bushfire management in that state to make the firm and slightly tough decisions that had to be made to address these issues. It is very important that we say that. I will leave it at that for now and see where we go. I will be supporting the amendment, despite my concerns on those other areas that I have just discussed.

MR HARGREAVES (Brindabella—Minister for the Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Housing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (5.16): The government will not be supporting the amendment. Firstly, I thank Mr Pratt for bringing the motion forward. One of the things that we need to recognise in this place—and it goes to what Mr Pratt was just talking about—is that whether we are experts or whether we are not experts matters in a funny sense, but not because we are in fact charged by our constituency, the people of the ACT, to bring in matters and discuss them in debate in this place. We should not merely abrogate our responsibilities because we are not experts in something.

I agree with Mr Pratt. People should consider their position. What is healthy about this place is that we are arguing about whether or not each of us is doing enough to look after the safety of the people of ACT. That is the issue really. The opposition are criticising the government for not doing enough, saying that we could do more in this area or that area. We argue about things like: "Tell us where we do not have to do something." We argue about whether our resources are being placed correctly or whether there are enough resources.

The fact is, though, that we are debating the safety of the people of the ACT. Sometimes we get carried away with the theatre of it, and people will think that we are at each other's throats for the sake of it, for the theatre and for the fun of it. Such is not the case

in this debate. I want the record to show that I treat the intention of Mr Pratt quite seriously. We disagree entirely with what he is putting forward, but that in a sense—

MR SPEAKER: You are supposed to be speaking to the Foskey amendment.

MR HARGREAVES: I am speaking to that amendment, Mr Speaker. The reasons that I have just advanced about the way we are approaching Mr Pratt's motion are exactly the same as the reasons I am using in my approach to the amendment from Dr Foskey. Firstly, we were speaking in the substantive motion and in my amendment about the global approach of strategic bushfire management planning and about the global provision of mitigation of services. Dr Foskey seeks to drill down and merely force the government to make decisions regarding the restructure of the territory's municipal services department almost on the run, according to the timing determined by the Greens.

The government rejects that entirely. The restructure of the Department of the Territory and Municipal Services is a very, very complex and difficult exercise and will be done in consultation with affected stakeholders, with the staff themselves and with the best application of the consultation process and minds that we can bring to the process. We will not be pressured by amendments like this to speed the process up.

This amendment is predicated on the premise that the parks brigade's capacity will be impaired, reduced or cut. I find no writings, utterances by ministers or pontifications by anybody to suggest that the parks brigade's capacity to conduct operational planning and fight fires this coming season is in fact so impaired. Let me assure the Assembly that the parks brigade will be fully resourced at the start of this bushfire season.

The underlying premise in Dr Foskey's amendment is not true. It says that the effects of cuts on the staff of the former Environment ACT and Parks and Conservation will do X, Y and Z. The assumption is that any changes or any adjustments to staffing will have an effect of reducing services. Such is not the case.

The reorganisation, the restructure or adjustment within territory and municipal services—with people coming into it, with their particular expertise and their particular imperatives; and people leaving and going somewhere else, with their particular imperatives and their particular processes—means that, in certain areas, in fact, the services will be heightened and enhanced. Other services will not. The whole premise that Dr Foskey bases her amendment on here, we totally and completely reject.

Mr Speaker, I can tell you that, in fact, the budget for bushfire operation plans for the territory and municipal services department has been quarantined from budget adjustments. Why is that? The reason for that is very, very simple. We take our responsibilities for bushfire mitigation particularly seriously.

The notion that Mr Smyth puts up about having the bushfire operational plan stage 2 put on the table really quickly, when everybody knows it is going to happen between now and 2010, is ludicrous. I shall treat his comments with the contempt that they are due. As I say, and I say it for the last time, I hope that we can proceed through to the closure of this debate very soon. We are not going to support Dr Foskey's amendment, even if she is not in the room. Again!

Dr Foskey's amendment to **Mr Hargreaves's** amendment negatived.

Question put:

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

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 8

Noes 7

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

Question so resolved in the affirmative.

MR SPEAKER: The question now is that Mr Pratt's motion, as amended, be agreed to. I call on Mr Pratt to close the debate.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (5.27) in reply: I shall close, Mr Speaker. The opposition could in no way support that amendment because it is a rubbish amendment, really. An amendment which talks about six new world-class ambulances in relation to a grave motion on strategic bushfire planning is an insult and a joke. The bulk of the amendments were a bit like that.

The minister said that he did not want to rush the finalisation of the SBMP. We know that because they have been dawdling on this for about three years. We think that is a terrible position to take. You need to finalise the strategic bushfire management plan. You need to turn it into a concrete action plan, and then you can review it. If you have a solid formalised document, which you might review every two years as you do with BOPs, then at least the plan is an authority. So far, you have failed to provide an authority. You have a very interesting and quite useful discussion document which gives people some guidance, but it is not an authority.

The minister said that, for example, BOPs are being put together. He said that federal departments—for example, defence agencies—are preparing BOPs now. Why were these BOPs not prepared two years ago—one year after the finalisation of the McLeod inquiry? Why are they still being talked about? Why are we still negotiating with various agencies and bodies around town to draft and prepare bushfire operational plans? That underlines the point we have made here: this government is just not fair dinkum about getting this thing moving.

How can we be confident that the hazard fuel reduction and bushfire fuel management policies that are currently in place are adequate when the minister has not been confident enough to make that plan final? The government has never answered the opposition's charges in estimates and annual reports that the document needs to be an uncompromising authority whereby the commissioner of the ESA has the power to compel land managers to finalise preventative tasks by certain pre-season and in-season milestones.

The problem with the Emergencies Act and the draft version of the SBMP is that it does not provide the commissioner of the ESA and his fire COs with the authority to make quick decisions to both lay down fuel hazard reduction tasks and to intervene either to direct land managers to fix unmet targets or to fix the problems themselves. Let us take but three examples of where they do not have this authority. We can see that by their actions.

The SBMP did not clearly, for example, give the authorities in December 2005 the power or the confidence to direct the CEO of urban services to properly prepare firebreaks in, around and behind the Yarralumla brickworks. Yes, there were some nice 30-metre mown firebreaks west and south-west of the brickworks at Yarralumla. But what about the 200 metres of uninterrupted waist-high cured grass running along the northern boundary of the brickworks and through its eastern ruins, right up to the back fences of residences? I remind you that five of those residences were damaged or destroyed because of a failure by land managers to reduce the fuel hazard load in those areas. Why did the authorities not have the authority via the SBMP to direct the CEO of urban services to broaden the lousy five-metre wide firebreak along the back fence lines of those residences?

Mr Barr: That is the standard.

MR PRATT: That is your standard, minister.

Mr Barr: No. It is the Australian standard.

MR PRATT: Why does the SBMP not lay down that benchmark? Why was this area not targeted within the SBMP and its annexed BOPs? In 2005-06, why were the many thousands of metres of five-metre firebreaks along the urban services area of responsibility—that is the urban edge—not targeted in the SBMP and BOPs? I talk about many areas in Gordon, Bonython and Kambah, where you had a mere five-metre firebreak between the back fence and the Murrumbidgee River. Mr Speaker, I seek leave to table these photographs showing the five-metre fire benchmark.

Leave granted.

MR PRATT: I present the following photographs:

Yarralumla bushfire—photograph (1).

Roads around Canberra—maps and photographs (2).

Why were ACT parks closely adjacent to the urban edge around Tharwa, Hall and the approaches to Black Mountain and the approaches to Mount Taylor not listed for hazard reduction and firebreak buffer zone tasks in the 2005-06 season? It is because the SBMP and its attendant bushfire operational plans were grossly inadequate. I suggest they still are now.

Things are not much better this year. In this year's budget, we see that the government has reduced spending in the ESA on fire preparedness and prevention by 25 per cent. Last year the government spent \$46.07 per head of population. This year that figure has

dropped to \$35.93. What is going on? The Emergencies Act really needs to be strengthened to ensure that the SBMP incorporates all of the necessary elements.

This is our solution. This is what we say the government must implement. Firstly, you must lay down stronger powers and obligations around fuel hazard reduction as a general rule across the territory. Give the commissioner and his chief officers the authority. Secondly, as a consequence of the previous point, lay down obligatory fuel reduction targets and the target dates, including preseason cold burns and intraseason tasks, such as mowing. Thirdly, lay down unequivocal standards for bushfire breaks along the urban edge, around specific vulnerable points and across differing regions. Fourthly, lay down the standard for acceptable levels of bushland and forest fuel tonnages allowed to remain generally as a rule and, more specifically, for each identified vulnerable area.

Fifthly, develop the arbitrary time lines by which the commissioner and his delegates are to recon and inspect the territory in order to identify all preventative action tasking which must be undertaken by land managers, owners, emergency services agencies, community fire units, police and other relevant government agencies. Sixthly, develop the arbitrary time lines by which all land manager-owner obligation actions must be completed. Number seven, develop guidelines by which the residents of vulnerable suburbs are kept informed about specifically identified perennial vulnerabilities and hazards relevant to their suburb, including new seasonal updates where new hazards are identified.

Number nine, direct the commissioner and his delegates to identify all BOPs required to be prepared as standard plans covering every individual vulnerable suburb, settlement and vulnerable point. Number 10, direct the commissioner and his delegates to identify the need for, and demand the preparation of, any seasonal or supplementary BOPs where the need may arise. Number 11, lay down the guidelines for the preparation and approval of BOPs, two-year reviews of existing BOPs, et cetera. Number 12, within BOPs, confirm suburban warning systems and methods of warning for each suburb, settlement and vulnerable point area. Number 13, within BOPs, identify evacuation plans and routes for each likely bushfire scenario that may confront each vulnerable suburb, settlement and vulnerable point. Number 14, within BOPs, identify all useful water points, tracks and routes which will be of use to fire units, support agencies and other authorities. Number 15, based on the SBMP and BOPs, promulgate a briefing brochure to all residents, including information specific to their suburbs; inform the community; and warn the community.

The benefits of these exercises would be to strengthen the SBMP to ensure it carries clear authority to empower the commissioner of the ESA to direct preventative action and to lay down clear benchmarks governing standards, clear responsibilities and tasking for emergency authorities, land managers, landowners and citizens. Unfortunately, by not ensuring that the preceding elements are a necessary adjunct to the SBMP, we have a community that is not as protected as it should be from future threat of bushfires. Therefore, in accordance with this motion which I have moved, I call on this government to expedite the SBMP version No 2 and to ensure its deficiencies are addressed.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Belconnen—40th anniversary

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (5.38): I move:

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

I would like to begin by taking members back in time and quote what author Eric Sparke stated in his book *Canberra Nineteen Fifty Four to Nineteen Eighty*. He stated:

Canberra's society in the mid-1960s reflected the changes taking place in the social mores of the nation—the age of telly, bikinis, the Pill, mini skirts, jet setting, the Beatles, flower power and hippies. Bob Brissenden raised a willy-willy when he challenged the prudish censorship laws by setting the banned novel *Lolita* in a literature course at the ANU. The Albert Hall (of all places) regaled patrons with “topless” films such as *Playgirls of Paris*. Women university students staged sit ins in the Hotel Civic's saloon bar, a previously segregated stronghold for men. Late in 1966, the commonwealth Government at last permitted married women to become permanent public servants. At the ANU, Bruce Hall, already a pace setter as the first “mixed” hall of residence in Australia, served wine with meals as a further civilised innovation, and, as the decade ended, the University Union gained permission to sell liquor on campus.

Just before we talk about celebration, I should note that Mr Sparke has not been well. I am sure you will all join with me in sending warmest wishes to him. His book, by the way, is a wonderful and comprehensive resource on the history of Canberra in the 20th century.

Belconnen was established at a time of change. Originally, the site set down for Belconnen was composed of several rural properties, including Strathnairn, Kama, Melrose, Belconnen and a few others. The naval transmitting station was established in 1939. There was no active church. Weetangera public school had not been used since the end of World War II. Access to the Belconnen area was via Weetangera Road, a gravel road originating from Dryandra Street in O'Connor. By the early sixties, Belconnen was well and truly in the planning pipeline. The electricity authority connected the area. There was water and sewerage and a new telephone exchange. A few of the arterial roads had been constructed, while the basic street layout for Aranda was almost in place.

On 23 June 1966 the then minister for the interior, the Hon. John Douglas Anthony, turned the first sod at the inauguration of Belconnen in Aranda. The commemorative stone is located at that site in Aranda next to the Aranda oval. I must say how happy I was when Mr Hargreaves organised, at my request, for the foundation stone to receive proper maintenance and upkeep in the middle of last year. There were a number of local residents who were also pleased that the then urban services undertook this work. I would like to thank the minister and urban services for that work.

Doug Anthony had notable connections to Canberra. He spent a great deal of his youth visiting here when his father, Larry, sat in parliament. There are stories of Doug as a child playing in Barton and enjoying unfettered access to every room of old Parliament House, including the Prime Minister's private office.

When Doug was eventually elected and became minister for the interior, he had responsibility for the development of Canberra. Much of what we know as Canberra today is owed to the work of Doug Anthony. Sir Robert Menzies was also a dedicated supporter of the development of Canberra—unlike the current Prime Minister, I might add. While I may not have agreed with much of Menzies’s policies and ideas, we can recognise his contribution to the Canberra we live in today. It was through his prime ministership that so much of that initial planning work occurred. I understand that he drove a large amount of it.

Going back to that day in 1966, it was a momentous day. Arthur Caldwell, the then Leader of the Opposition, had been shot a few days earlier in Sydney, so security was heightened even at this small, albeit significant, gathering. But even through that uncertainty, dignitaries and local residents gathered in Aranda. Doug Anthony told those gathered of his vision and hope for the newest part of Canberra. He took his silver spade and turned the first sod.

From then on, Belconnen grew at a distinctly rapid pace. In December 1967, John Gorton turned the first sod of the Canberra College of Advanced Education, now the University of Canberra. Early in November that year, Peter Dixon, the then minister for the interior, had a busy day. He opened the newly constructed Belconnen Way and then handed over the keys to the first government house built in Belconnen to a Mr and Mrs Bennie.

Belconnen went quite literally from fields to a population of 30,000 in little more than six years. The first residential leases for Aranda were offered for auction in March 1967. In June, both Aranda and Macquarie were gazetted. In that same year, detailed planning occurred and provision was made for the initial infrastructure of the Belconnen town centre. In 1968, Bruce, Higgins, Cook, Latham, Page and Scullin were also gazetted. The traditional owners of Belconnen, the Ngunnawal people, have great ties to the area. There are approximately 25 sites of Aboriginal significance in Belconnen. These include places of artefact scatterings, axe-grinding groves, pathways and a scarred tree.

Belconnen, like most of Canberra, has a wonderful sense of community. Those of us that live there know that. The Belconnen Community Festival, which will be the official celebration of the 40th anniversary of Belconnen later this year, is a perfect example of Belconnen’s community spirit. We all know that community is so much more than buildings and sod-turning. Community is about people. The festival is a wonderful example of the people of Belconnen working together to further build and develop that sense of community. The festival grows from strength to strength, as does the Charnwood Carnival, known fondly amongst us that live around there as the “charny carny”, another fine example of the life of the region.

Last year and early this year I spent time training with all of the community fire units in Belconnen and Hall. The CFUs are yet another example of Belconnen’s community spirit—people working together to help and support the rest of their community, through their training and their readiness in the event of a fire at the suburban edge. Through the time I have spent with the CFUs in Belconnen I have, once again, been very impressed by the way the people of Belconnen work together.

Many people in this place will be aware of the West Belconnen community health committee. This committee was formed in 2004 to develop a community cooperative health service for West Belconnen. You, Mr Speaker, other representatives from this place and the federal member for Fraser, Bob McMullan, are patrons of this committee. This committee is again an example of the power of the community in Belconnen. I am very proud of my involvement with that committee. I believe other members of this place are also proud of their involvement on that committee. I believe the progress they have made so far towards establishing a community health cooperative in West Belconnen and the decision they made at a meeting that Mrs Dunne and I attended early this morning—that is, to proceed with the project—deserve the congratulations of this Assembly.

There are many more examples of the wonderful things that happen in Belconnen and the wonderful work carried out by Belconnen residents for the development of our community. To name a few organisations, there is Kippax Uniting Care, Flynn neighbourhood watch, Belconnen Community Council, Belconnen regional community service, the University of Canberra students association, the Kippax task force, the local scout and guide movements, sporting clubs, and of course the various church congregations. They are only a few examples. I would like to publicly thank all of those and other organisations—I guess the list would be too long to mention here—and their very many members for their work in sustaining the Belconnen community.

Let us not forget the local business community and their strong contribution to the life of Belconnen. A good example of this is the Belconnen Fresh Food Markets. Open from Wednesday to Sunday, it is a hive of activity and lively exchange. It is a place where I see families and friends catch up with one another in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. It is a place where local musical talent is often showcased. As you know, I conduct one of my regular mobile offices at the markets on the first weekend of the month. I would like to acknowledge all those who work to make that such a vibrant place.

Before I finish, I need to thank some people. To begin with, I would like to thank Mr Eric Sparke, who took time to speak to my office about his book. Thanks as well go to Mr Seth Jordon of Belconnen Community Service, who points me in the right direction to find information about the history of Belconnen. I would also particularly like to thank Mr Bryan Rhynehart, a local resident of Charnwood, for his significant assistance. Mr Rhynehart was a veritable mountain of interesting facts and dates. I understand he actually attended the inauguration of Belconnen on 23 June 1966.

I also quickly remind members that all who are able should attend the official celebrations of Belconnen's 40th birthday, which will be held at the Belconnen Community Festival on 11 November. As many of us know, the Stanhope government is a keen supporter of the Belconnen Community Festival. The festival is a fantastic opportunity for the Belconnen community to join each other and to further build community. It is held in the centre of Belconnen, in Margaret Timpson Park. I believe that park is going to be refurbished in the near future, to make it a more vibrant and user-friendly park for the whole community.

I have lived in Belconnen for 16 years. I know it is a wonderful place to live. All my children and stepchildren have lived in Belconnen and my step-grandchildren now live

there with their parents, as does my stepson. It is a wonderful place for families and for community. I would like to wish Belconnen a very happy birthday.

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra—Leader of the Opposition) (5.50): I would echo Ms Porter's happy birthday message for Belconnen. In fact, I was in Canberra when Doug Anthony took that step back in 1966—perhaps a bit more about that shortly.

I do not want to take particular umbrage at anything Ms Porter said. She is a very positive member who does a great lot of work in the electorate of Belconnen. I certainly admire her for that, but I will just correct her on one point. She said that Prime Minister Menzies was a great advocate for the development of Canberra, unlike the present Prime Minister. Bob Menzies certainly was a great advocate for Canberra. Indeed, I think we owe a lot to him for the growth of the city. But I think it is a bit churlish to say “unlike the present Prime Minister”. In recent times, he has been behind great projects such as the National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum of Australia. In the last federal budget there were about an extra 7,000 federal public servants coming into Canberra. That will help our city immensely.

Getting back to Belconnen, it certainly has grown a lot since 1966. I can recall going to parties in Aranda, then a very new suburb, when I was still at school in about 1969 and in the early days when I was at university in 1970-71. I also recall, as a year 12 student, working on the Canberra College of Advanced Education. Indeed, in a way I suppose I am one of the foundation members, having dug some foundations and levelled off the floor area of building No 1 there. I certainly go back quite a long way with the area. I was delighted to have moved there in 1994. I lived in Flynn. I have lived in Macgregor—indeed, opposite Ms Porter's stepson—for 11½ years. You will probably have to take Shirley and me out of the place in a box.

It is a great place to live. I am pleased to have seen some good developments there. It concerns me, and it has since I have had the honour of representing Ginninderra, that in many ways Belconnen is often regarded as the ugly duckling or the poor cousin of other, more glamorous areas of Canberra—even, dare I say it, Tuggeranong. For those reasons, I have always been keen to push for and support any measures that will assist the Belconnen region. I was delighted to see such measures as a theatre at the community centre. There was not a huge amount of money spent there. I think it was \$200,000. I was delighted to be able to put that in a budget in 1997 or 1998. There was the saga of the old Belconnen swimming pool, which finally came to fruition in 2000 or 2001. That is a magnificent addition to Belconnen.

I urge the current government to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is kept up. My colleague Mrs Dunne—and I am not going to steal her thunder—will talk about one thing the government certainly is not doing. That is in relation to school closures. I am not going to delve into that in the short time available to me in this speech. She will most eloquently, I am sure, point out some of the problems there. But it is important to ensure that the infrastructure is kept up.

One other matter I would urge the government on is sporting grounds. I have been concerned to see the number of grounds just let go. I drive past Fraser primary school oval, for example. That is one of the low maintenance ovals that we brought back to full maintenance in the late nineties under a very innovative plan. That was one of the first

ovals to go in 2003, when the government ill-advisedly stopped watering them, even though it was pointed out by experts that you can still sensibly water ovals when we have stage 3 restrictions. There are quite a few other ovals that have been let go. I do not think Spence oval has existed for some time.

It is of real concern to see that some of the ovals around Kippax have gone—good district ovals where thousands of kids play and many senior teams train and play. It is of concern to see an area of Canberra that I love looking rather tacky. Just in recent times I have been talking to constituents who are concerned about bins being taken out of parks and residents being told that the parks will not be mown as much.

On a good note—and I congratulate the urban services minister on this; he is quick to respond to various problems I point out—I am pleased to see footpaths being marked for improvement. One in particular on which I made representations to him a couple of weeks ago between Charnwood and Dunlop has been promptly attended to. I think that, if the government can keep attending to those matters which are so important to people, that will be a good step in the right direction.

Belconnen has a wide range of great facilities. Being someone who does not mind the odd drink occasionally, I like frequenting some of the licensed establishments there, ranging from the Kippax Tavern to Moby Dick's in Kippax and, of course, the Magpies club.

I think one of the great secrets of Belconnen is the West Belconnen Leagues Club. You can be in the clubhouse there and watch excellent games of rugby league, and occasionally other sports as well, only metres away on the field. That is a great facility for the area. I know that you, Mr Speaker, have always been a great advocate of that particular facility and have done a lot to try to equip it. When you go to other facilities such as the Western Districts Rugby Club—there are two soccer clubs there—one can see on that side the spirit of community.

Ms Porter mentioned the West Belconnen medical committee. She has done a lot of work on that, as have all members who are in this chamber now from Ginninderra. I have been to a few meetings, as has my colleague Mrs Dunne. That is a great innovation, as is the “charny carny”. My children have gone to that because they are at one of the relevant schools. I have worked on the sausage sizzles there. I missed one, unfortunately, because of a wedding. That was a pretty good excuse—my stepdaughter getting married in Wollongong—but I have been to others. They are great events to engender a sense of community. I think the more we can do that the better. And the more we can do that throughout Canberra the better off we will be as a community.

Belconnen has produced some magnificent football teams. Whilst I hate to say it in a way, although my stepson and my youngest son have played in juniors with the Western Districts Rugby Club, I remember them more for getting my head kicked in, being rucked and things like that in the 1970s when I was playing rules and union. They were very strong, but not so much in the 1980s. We managed to get revenge and won a few grand finals against them, including some of the blokes I played against in 1974 and 1975. What a magnificent club. It won all five senior grades last year, repeating it this year. It is a credit to the area as, indeed, is the Belconnen Soccer Club. They were

basically on their own bat after the Cosmos got the heave-ho from the national league competition.

The Belconnen Soccer Club got behind the Blue Devils, which attracted players throughout Canberra—it was not just players who played with Belconnen United. For five years they participated in the New South Wales competitions. In their first year they did not make the semi finals. Every other year they made the semi finals. They were premiers one year. They won the home and away and the club championship, but narrowly lost a grand final that year. What a magnificent effort from, basically, a group of people in Belconnen supporting what was effectively the Canberra team that did so well in a major competition.

The arts are not neglected in Belconnen, although, unlike Tuggeranong and other areas of Canberra, apart from the Hawker college theatre, which is quite a good one and was renovated in 1996 or so—and the one I mentioned at the Belconnen Community Centre—we are yet to see a Belconnen arts centre. I think that is still in the budget. I know a fair bit of work has been done on that. That is an essential project that needs to go ahead, because Belconnen is a region of close on 90,000 people. Every other area in Canberra, including Tuggeranong, has an arts centre. Tuggeranong, of course, has Erindale plus the dedicated arts centre on Lake Tuggeranong. That is one link in the chain that is missing for Belconnen. I have already mentioned the sporting facilities. I think they are adequate, although more work needs to be done, especially to ensure that maintenance is available.

I would like to see the arts speeded up if at all possible. I have certainly gone to a lot of plays around the area. In fact, a lot of residents I know have taken up acting for the first time, including Terry O'Brien, of all people. He was a mate of mine from the army. He did a wonderful expose of the judge in *Oklahoma*, I think it was. It is amazing to see the local talent available in the arts. I commend the government for at least starting the project, but impress on them the need to ensure that it finishes. It will be a magnificent addition to Belconnen.

I turn finally to the lake itself, which is a great, untapped resource. I was pleased to have something to do with creating a boatshed. I was involved in rowing and other activities on Lake Ginninderra. I think I launched that together rather badly. I recall a two-man boat, which I have forgotten the name for. It is a very beautiful area. It is a great resource for joggers and for family picnics. There are a lot of lovely parts to Belconnen. It is one of the great untapped secrets of Canberra. It has done a lot in the last 40 years. Happy birthday, Belconnen.

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

Adjournment

Legislative Assembly members—pairs

MS MacDONALD (Brindabella) (6.00): Mr Speaker, earlier today, under standing order 46, Mrs Dunne made a personal explanation in relation to the issue of pairs being granted or not being granted. There is a bit of a question mark about that. Mrs Dunne

made some comments that I think it is important to address. I think what Mrs Dunne said was that contingent approval had been given for—

Mrs Dunne: That was the word I used to you and your staff on a number of occasions: contingent.

MS MacDONALD: I believe that is what she said earlier today, Mr Speaker. I did have a conversation with Mrs Dunne yesterday. I do not deny that. We had a conversation about the fact that Mr Barr was unwell and that Mr Corbell was also not going to be in. I was asked who would be representing the government at the riesling challenge. I have to say that I was surprised when Mrs Dunne asked me that because it was my understanding from conversations with my staff, having been away myself, that the approval was not given.

Mrs Dunne has not actually put any of this in writing so I have to go on what my staff have said to me. Last Thursday, 14 September, my staff sent this advice to Mr Barr's office: "I have chased this up with Vicki several times, but have since been informed that no pairs will be granted until a decision regarding the chair of the legal affairs committee is made." It was my understanding, and certainly the understanding of my office, that no pairs would be granted until such time as the chair of the legal affairs committee had been resolved. When I spoke to Mrs Dunne yesterday, the chair of the legal affairs committee had still not been resolved because caucus had not met at that time, so it was not resolved.

It was certainly my understanding that the pairs had not been granted. I also suggest that Mrs Dunne would be a bit naive to think that the government could operate on the basis that we could have ministers attend functions and have speeches prepared with an hour's notice that a pair was being granted. We were operating under the assumption that the pair was not granted—

Mrs Dunne: Because you do not know what "contingent" means.

MS MacDONALD: The pair was not granted, Mrs Dunne. You may say that it was actually on a contingent basis, but the fact is we could not operate on the basis that, at the end of the day, you might say no, and then we would not be able to go. You claim to have been misrepresented but the fact is, Mrs Dunne, that we were operating on the basis that you had not approved the pairs—

Mrs Dunne: Because you do not understand English.

MS MacDONALD: You had not approved the pairs. I just thought it was important to make that distinction in this place and set the record straight.

Legislative Assembly members—pairs

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (6.04): Mr Speaker, pursuant to standing order 213, I move:

That the document quoted from by Ms MacDonald be tabled.

The standing orders make provision for tabling of documents. Ms MacDonald has used a document and quoted from it, presumably at my expense, and it would be useful if it were tabled.

Ms MacDonald: Mr Speaker, I seek your guidance. I do not have an issue with tabling the document. It is a document from my staff member to Mr Peebles. It outlines the discussion, as it occurs from 5 September. There is discussion about other things. I do not have a major issue with tabling it, but—

MR SPEAKER: If the Assembly passes the motion, it would offend the Assembly mightily if you refused to table it. But if the Assembly decides to reject the motion then it does not have to be tabled. It is a matter for the Assembly to decide.

Ms MacDonald: On that basis, I am happy to table it.

MR SPEAKER: You will need leave to table the document. You may agree to the motion. That will sort it out.

MRS DUNNE: It is easier to put the motion.

MR SPEAKER: The Clerk explains that if you get leave to table the document the motion is irrelevant. And as the motion is the property of the Assembly, you may well require leave to withdraw the motion. It gets complicated, doesn't it? It might be just as easy to put the motion.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Ms MacDonald: I table the following paper:

Request for a pair—copy of emails between the offices of Mr Barr and Ms MacDonald.

Bushfires

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (6.07): I want to take the opportunity to correct, once again, some assumptions that were made about the Greens by Mr Pratt. I think the Glenn report and the McBeth report were referred to. If we go back to the *Hansard* of 19 November 1996, we see that Lucy Horodny, in speaking to the bushfire bills, says the opposite of what Mr Pratt believes the Greens say. We get a little bit sick of hearing that the Greens are responsible for the conditions that produce fires, et cetera. Ms Horodny said:

Mr Speaker, the Greens will support these Bills. We note that the Bills implement the recommendations of the task force on fuel management practices—

There is no reason for me to read this out. It is in the *Hansard* of 19 November 1996. I can hear the usual mirth over in that corner. I have come to the conclusion that no-one really listens to the speeches that people make in this place. They are more inclined to be making smart comments to each other or interjecting across the room or just having

conversations. That makes *Hansard* extremely important because it is the only true and accurate record of what was said here.

For the record, and I will probably have to say it again, the Greens actually have quite a nuanced and quite an informed approach to land management. There is no black or white. We do seek scientific advice and we do seek community participation. I do not just stand up here and say that I know everything, because I certainly do not. When it comes to making a decision about anything, it is always done after asking the people who can assist us to come to our conclusion.

Jeffrey Makin exhibition

MR MULCAHY (Molonglo) (6.09): Mr Speaker, at the beginning of this month I was fortunate enough to be invited to open an art exhibition at the Stephanie Burns gallery in Yarralumla which features an Australian artist of considerable local and international acclaim: landscape painter Jeffrey Makin.

Jeffrey Makin, quite simply, ranks as one of Australia's premier landscape painters. Born in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, he earned a diploma in painting from the National Art School in Sydney and a master's degree from Deakin University in Melbourne. Mr Makin is a prime testament to the notion of individual achievement, having held several senior academic appointments throughout his career and having cultivated a thriving artistic practice that has been recognised both in Australia and throughout the world in over 60 solo exhibitions.

Amongst his many accolades, Mr Makin was artist in residence at Edinburgh university in 1990, a director of the National Art School in Sydney and has been commissioned to produce works at Melbourne university, the Hilton International Hotel in Brisbane and the hotel at Sydney International Airport, amongst many others. He is also currently an art critic of the *Herald Sun* newspaper in Melbourne. His body of work is represented in all national and state and most regional and corporate art collections around the country. And it is little wonder, as the bold and colourful scenes that he depicts reflect the depth of feeling he has towards the landscapes that he paints.

This particular exhibition contains 21 of Mr Makin's works that were painted in the en plein air, or out-of-doors, style on recent trips to my home state of Tasmania and Victoria and Queensland. There is a unique tradition in the en plein air style of painting: a raw originality and special affinity that is produced between the artist and the subject he paints.

Mr Makin's considerable artistic ability has been developed with highly esteemed company. In the 1970s, Mr Makin worked with Fred Williams and Clifton Pugh on capturing breathtaking scapes around Melbourne, throughout New South Wales and the outskirts of Victoria. The trio did much to cement the Australian en plein air tradition established by Melbourne's Heidelberg school, and the exhibition that is currently in Yarralumla is testament to that.

There is also, however, a desire to more accurately record the details of landscapes in Mr Makin's more recent works. Again, his genuine attachment to his outdoor subjects is demonstrated in his feeling of duty to faithfully capture them in his paintings. The

unfortunate and gradual disappearance of the natural environments that have long been the focus of Mr Makin's work seems to lend a mood of preservation and authenticity to his pictures, capturing that extra detail to ensure that future audiences can appreciate the painted scenes when the original landscapes have long gone.

The Jeffrey Makin En Plein Air exhibition continues at the Stephanie Burns Fine Art gallery in Yarralumla until this weekend. It will be closing on Saturday. I encourage all Canberrans who are in the area and who enjoy landscape art to drop in and experience Mr Makin's spectacular and colourful works. They, I think, will appeal to a broad range of tastes. I commend the wonderful paintings that Mr Makin has produced to those members and the public of Canberra who have the chance to attend the exhibition.

Citizenship

MS PORTER (Ginninderra) (6.13): I rise this evening briefly to reflect on the citizenship ceremony that Mr Mulcahy and I, amongst others, attended in Commonwealth Park on Sunday morning. This was a special ceremony, as it was held on the same day that many such ceremonies were being held around Australia to recognise the importance of good citizenship.

Commonwealth Park was a wonderful setting for this ceremony, as it was held in the midst of Floriade. It drew a large crowd of interested bystanders. We have all heard of the record number that attended Floriade on the first weekend, and many people were attracted by the music and colour of the ceremony.

This important ceremony bestowed Australian citizenship on people from over 23 countries, from Afghanistan to Russia, from Vietnam to the United States, from New Zealand and Canada to the Congo and Iraq. The youngest person to receive citizenship was four years old, and I believe the oldest was 66. These new citizens happily sang along with the Blokes Choir to the words of *We are Australian* and we all joined in with enthusiasm.

I reflected on the words of the song: we are one but we are many. In the face of so much debate about Australian values at the moment, I reflected on the value of acceptance, both of our diversity and our similarities, our differences as well as our commonalities. I think it would be a great pity if, during this current debate around these so-called Australian values, we lost sight of that value. We would all be the poorer for it. I thank all those people that were involved in assisting the organisation of that ceremony, including the volunteers from the Burley Griffin Lions Club.

Belconnen—40th anniversary

MRS DUNNE (Ginninderra) (6.15): Just in case we do not get back to Ms Porter's motion on the 40th birthday of Belconnen, I thought that I would make some comments in the adjournment debate. As we have heard, the Rt Hon Doug Anthony inaugurated Belconnen in June 1966, and it is nice to think that for many years Doug Anthony, the member for Richmond, was my local member.

I really wanted to contemplate some of the shortfalls in Belconnen, and Mr Stefaniak touched on these. He said that, in many ways, Belconnen has somewhat of a Cinderella

status. It is partly a product of the postmodernist brutalist architecture of the town centre. The overpasses with the unfortunate discoloured perspex do not add much to the visual amenity there; they tend to overshadow the beautiful aspects of the lake. It is a shame that the town centre, as described by somebody, is a shopping centre with five backsides, all of which steadfastly turn their back on the vistas of Lake Ginninderra.

In my comments today I want to dwell on the birthday presents that the Stanhope government has given the people of Ginninderra, the people of Belconnen. The first of those is pay parking at Calvary Hospital. That was a great birthday present. Very soon after the 40th birthday of Belconnen, Minister Gallagher introduced pay parking at Belconnen. Someone quipped to me recently that it was a pleasure to go to a function at the Wests rugby club because at least you did not have to pay for parking and was it not ironic that you did not have to pay to park when you wanted a drink in Belconnen but if you were ill or were dying, you had to pay to park.

The other birthday present to the people of Belconnen in June 2006 is the proposed closure of 13 schools, the gutting of the Melba high and Copeland college and the cutting back of Southern Cross primary school, and that on top of the closing of Ginninderra district high school last year.

It is interesting to look at the list of things published in the *Chronicle* to mark the 40th anniversary of Belconnen. As Ms Porter mentioned earlier, the list was compiled with the assistance of Mr Brian Rhynehart, and I commend the *Chronicle* on publishing this list and their interest in Belconnen. Thirteen of the events on the list related to education. Education is an important issue for the people of Belconnen, and the 13 events are by no means all the education achievements in Belconnen, but, of a list of 30-odd subjects, 13 were education related. It is ironic that the government proposes to close 13 schools in Belconnen—a fine birthday present to the people of Belconnen.

I think that Ms Porter should hang her head in shame. She likes to go around and wring her hands at school meetings about how she is listening to the people of Belconnen. But this morning Mr Stefaniak read out some of the comments of people from Belconnen and they are actually saying things like “I think that the consultation on *Towards 2020* is BS”. It was a shame that Mr Stefaniak did not read the rest of that comment because that person said that, as a Labor voter, she hoped that the next time the Labor Party was in government in the ACT would not be before 2020.

Youth Dance Fest 2006

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (6.19): Mr Speaker, this morning I had the pleasure of representing Minister Gallagher in launching Youth Dance Fest 2006 at the National Museum of Australia. Mr Mulcahy, Jacqui Burke and Mr Smyth were also in attendance. A fantastic non-competitive annual event run by Ausdance ACT, the dance fest sees students from ACT government high schools and colleges produce and perform a three-day dance festival.

The event began in 1985, as part of the Canberra Youth Arts Festival, and a total of 20 schools, both government and non-government, performed. This year it is sponsored by ACT Health and Canberra Milk. Now in its 22nd year, the dance fest sees participation by almost 2,000 students who are aged between 12 and 18 and come from

34 schools in Canberra. This year students from every ACT government high school and college, as well as some non-government high schools and colleges, are participating in the dance fest.

Whether it be by performing, presenting or producing, there is an opportunity for all students to engage and participate to gain experience in performing, announcing, backstage work and choreographing. Students are also given the opportunity to design the event's official poster. Youth Dance Fest 2006 promotes positive body image and a healthy diet, encourages artistic appreciation and aims to increase self-esteem and team work skills.

Each year since its conception, dance fest has taken on a different theme, last year's being "Connections". The theme of dance fest in 2006 is "Australians All", a theme that will stimulate students' minds and will undoubtedly deliver some interesting messages.

At the launch this morning, three pieces were performed. Two in particular took my attention. The piece by Lake Tuggeranong college involved an Australian's vision of Australia, with fly swatting and what certainly looked like social drinking at a barbecue—an interesting perspective of what life is like being an Australian.

The students from Copland college presented a fantastic piece with a magnificent display of support for workers' rights. They danced through a description of early Australian working life in the mining area to today's struggle for workers with the federal government's WorkChoices law. It culminated in a piece with all of the cast holding up "Your rights at work" placards, a moving political statement made by years 11 and 12 students from Copland, no doubt reflecting the conversations happening in and around these students' homes and peer groups. These powerful and moving messages and many more, I am sure, will be on show at the Canberra Theatre next week.

Congratulations to Ros Dundas, ACT Health and participating schools. I wish all participating students the best of luck for next week with their performances and productions.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.22 pm.