



**QUESTION TIME**  
OF THE  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY  
FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**HANSARD**

Edited proof transcript

Wednesday, 7 February 2024

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## **Questions without notice**

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

**MS LEE:** My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, during annual report hearings on 23 November last year, you were asked whether Treasury had completed any modelling or estimates on how much revenue your government will collect from GP payroll tax. In response you said, “No. We will get data in due course on extra payroll tax collections.” However, FOI documents reveal that you were actually briefed on 25 August 2023, that your application of payroll tax to contractor GPs could raise \$5 million a year. Chief Minister, why were you not upfront about the revenue your GP payroll tax will collect and will you correct the record now?

**MR BARR:** That was not modelling, that was just an estimate. Modelling would be far more precise.

**MS LEE:** Chief Minister, why have you decided to force some GPs to increase their fees during a cost of living crisis and freeze recruitment of new GPs to stay under the payroll threshold for a \$5 million boost to your broken budget?

**MR BARR:** There has been no change in payroll tax legislation, or indeed application. A period of grace was provided for GP practices who were above the \$2 million threshold, which would see them not pay any payroll tax, and a mechanism was put in place where no payroll tax would be applied if the rate of bulk-billing lifted to its pre-covid levels. I do note that the rate of bulk-billing has lifted. I think it would lift further if the incentive were further increased in the coming commonwealth budget.

**MS CASTLEY:** Chief Minister, are you so concerned about your budget bottom line that you decided to insult GPs by saying that they are and I quote, “seeking to minimise tax” and “lack an ambition in relation to bulk-billing”?

**MR BARR:** What I am not going to do is automatically grant payroll tax exemptions to everyone who asks. I do note that we have had GPs, dentists, psychologists and a range of other allied health professionals all ask to not have to pay payroll tax. If the Treasurer of the day just agreed to every single request there would be a significant erosion of the territory’s revenue base. Other jurisdictions are applying the same principles, where they provided a temporary amnesty or periods of waiver, but clearly the integrity of the nation’s payroll tax system is at stake here. I repeat that the issue is ten years of under funding of Medicare that is now being turned around. What happened when the bulk-billing incentive was tripled? Bulk-billing went up everywhere, and if the incentive is further increased, bulk-billing will continue to increase across our community. So being lectured by the Liberal Party on funding for Medicare and bulk-billing, after ten years of running down the system, is hypocrisy of the most extreme level. The Liberal Party have no credibility on Medicare and no credibility on primary healthcare at all.

**Ms Lee:** Point of order Madam Speaker. Again, could you please remind the Chief Minister to directly answer the question instead of getting into arguments on—

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I believe it is in order, but following on from yesterday and today, I am quite happy to go back and have a view and if I change my mind I will let you know. Thank you.

### **Government—infrastructure plan**

**MS LEE:** My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, I refer to your announcement today that the mid-year budget will contain funding for a new rectangular stadium at Bruce and the Canberra Pavilion, which will eventually include a convention centre. The latest update of the ACT Infrastructure Plan already announced \$2.2 million in funding for an “operational needs analysis”. Chief Minister, will you be releasing a plan before the election on how you will build and pay for these projects when you already will have to spend around billions of dollars in the next few decades getting the tram to Woden?

**MR BARR:** What we have announced is further funding for precinct planning in three precincts—Exhibition Park, the Convention Centre Precinct in the CBD and the Bruce Health, Education and Sports Precinct. In each, we have outlined a pathway forward as part of the Infrastructure Plan that you identified, Ms Lee. We intend to work with the commonwealth in relation to the Bruce precinct; I am hopeful of a positive announcement around the future of the Australian Institute of Sport; we would seek to work with the commonwealth in relation to the convention precinct; and we have our own master planning and capital works investments announced in relation to the next stages of Exhibition Park’s renewal.

**MS LEE:** Chief Minister, how many feasibility studies has the Labor government already commissioned for a new stadium and convention centre in Canberra since 2009?

**MR BARR:** The government, as part of the then Football Federation Australia and Australian government bid, participated in a process to look at Canberra as a potential venue for that ultimately doomed bid for the 2022 Football World Cup. We did commission work in relation to both Manuka Oval and Canberra Stadium. Building on that work, we have looked at, examined and undertaken technical due diligence in relation to a stadium in the city. That technical due diligence showed that that was not a feasible pathway forward. You cannot build a facility of the size required on that site—it is not possible. So we have now focussed our efforts on the Bruce precinct and are funding the technical due diligence in the budget review to progress work on the stadium at Bruce.

**MR MILLIGAN:** Chief Minister, how can Canberrans trust that you will build any of these projects, given your track record of abandoning major infrastructure projects?

**MR BARR:** The government has a very strong track record of delivering projects, in spite of the opposition from those opposite—for example, light rail stage 1 and stage 2A underway. We are now onto the completion of our third hospital—

**Member interjecting:** The Cotter Dam expansion.

**MR BARR:** The Cotter Dam expansion was built. I think that has been in place for

some time now. We are now onto the completion of our third hospital—the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children, the University of Canberra Public Hospital expansion and a new northside hospital to come. That is three built and one in the pipeline—four for Labor. What is the Liberals’ record on hospitals? You have blown one up—so minus one.

*Members interjecting—*

**MR BARR:** It is a fact. You imploded a hospital. That is your contribution. The Liberal Party’s contribution to health infrastructure in the ACT was to blow up the Royal Canberra Hospital. We have built two, with a third about to be completed and a fourth in the pipeline, compared to what you did in government, which was to blow up a hospital. You have never built a hospital. We have—multiple.

**Mr Hanson:** Only because I forced you into it in 2016, Andrew. You weren’t going to build it and then I—

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members!

**MR BARR:** Welcome back. I missed you yesterday, Jeremy—exiled on the backbench.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Mr Barr and Mr Hanson, can we end the reunion, please.

### **Water—enlarged Cotter Dam**

**MS LEE:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, recent media reporting reveals that the Labor government’s Paradise Dam in Queensland will have to be rebuilt after tests showed that the roller compacted concrete in the wall is degraded and will therefore be a future safety risk. Legislative Assembly committee reports show that the same concrete was used in the construction of the enlarged Cotter Dam and similar construction issues have occurred, and that in 2012 cracks in the dam appeared. Chief Minister, have you conducted any tests on the concrete in the enlarged Cotter Dam since its construction and can you guarantee that the concrete is not degraded?

**MR BARR:** I missed the first part of your question, the very first sentence, because your colleagues were still interjecting.

**MS LEE:** Shh, everybody! Recent media reports reveals that the Labor government’s Paradise Dam in Queensland will have to be rebuilt.

**MR BARR:** Right. The Queensland dam. Thank you. I will seek some advice from Icon Water. I have not had any cracks in Cotter Dam brought to my attention. As the asset managers, I am sure that Icon Water are undertaking regular maintenance of the facility. I do note that the facility was built in spite of the interjections from Ms Lawder—

**Ms Lawder:** Over time and over budget.

**MR BARR:** that apparently infrastructure isn't built. I certainly can confirm that the enlarged Cotter Dam was built and is storing a lot of extra water for the territory.

**MS LEE:** Chief Minister, have there been any further reports of cracks or structural issues at the enlarged Cotter Dam since it was completed? You mentioned in your first answer that you would get some advice. Can I just confirm that you will take it on notice?

**MR BARR:** Thank you. I have had nothing brought to my attention regarding any concern in relation to the integrity of the dam wall at Cotter Dam. Nothing has been brought to my attention in that regard, but I will ask Icon Water for any information that they can provide to assist me in responding to Ms Lee's question, which I will do when I have that information available.

**MS LAWDER:** Chief Minister, will you release all or any documents related to the testing of the roller compacted concrete at the enlarged Cotter Dam?

**MR BARR:** Subject to advice from Icon Water, I would see no reason why not.

### **Lakes and waterways—safety**

**MR BRADDOCK:** My question is to the Minister for Parks and Conservation. Minister, on closer reading of the government's response on the coroner's report on drownings in the ACT rivers, one of the coroner's recommendations was for the ACT government to consider the Royal Lifesaving Society of Australia's advice to install flotation devices and throw ropes at popular river locations for swimming. What has the government done so far and plan to do in the future on the installation of flotation devices and throw ropes?

**MS VASSAROTTI:** Thank you to Mr Braddock for the question. As noted, that was a recommendation of the coroner's report, and we have been working particularly with the Royal Lifesaving Society in terms of developing a local drowning prevention plan, which is currently under development. We are hoping that the plan will be completed before next summer, and we are working with range of other government agencies in finalising the plan.

Around the issue of lifesaving equipment, we have been reflecting on the experience of this being a strategy that was in place many years ago, particularly being installed in many popular swimming locations. They stopped being replaced due to extensive vandalism and theft; however, this was some time ago, and reinstalling them is currently under active consideration. We are, as part of that consideration, and some of the discussions we are having with Royal Lifesaving Society is about considering whether or not bystanders can use such equipment safely or effectively, and so we will continue to interrogate that issue and hope to have the plan finalised, as I noted, before next summer.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Will the local drowning prevention plan also address the ability for members of the public to be able to call for emergency services' help at these locations?

**MS VASSAROTTI:** The issue of mobile phone coverage is an issue that has been identified, and we do acknowledge that there are really significant limitations on phone coverage at popular swimming spots. That is why in some of these particularly popular spots there is the provision of emergency communications to partly address some of these issues.

The plan is investigating whether or not phone coverage is possible in the area and will provide an appropriate way of ensuring greater swimming safety. We do note that getting telecommunications infrastructure into swimming spots, particularly those that are relatively isolated, would have significant investment, but again, it is under active consideration.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, how important is swim safety education and awareness for our multicultural communities?

**MS VASSAROTTI:** Thank you for the supplementary question. It has been identified through the coroner's report and the work that the Royal Lifesaving Association has done that there are particular groups that are at risk in our community, and certainly some of the early work that I reported about yesterday has really taken this into account.

The summer campaign, which was around reducing the risk around waterways, was targeting those most at-risk communities, so they include younger men, migrants, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, as well as residents that are living in proximity to waterways. As part of that, we have ensured that translations of the website's swim safety information are accessible for our multicultural communities, and also that the social media campaign also targets people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We are actually really pleased that the campaign has reached its benchmark goals for the target audience, and the engagement numbers have been really pleasing.

We do identify that we are really focused particularly on delivering interventions within the parks areas of responsibilities, but we acknowledge that swimming vulnerability for migrants and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities may not be limited just to rivers and lakes, so we do need to work across government to ensure that we are really promoting swim safety, skills and awareness for all environments, not just those that are covered through the Parks and Conservation Service.

### **City Services—staffing**

**MR PETTERSSON:** My question is to the Minister for City Services. Minister, I was pleased to hear last week that the ACT government has committed to directly employing 71 new staff in City Services. Can you provide more information regarding this announcement?

**MS CHEYNE:** I thank Mr Pettersson for his interest in our plan to invest in City Services and to create more jobs for Canberrans. As we know, City Services are essential for maintaining the quality of life and the environment in our beautiful capital. Our plan is to directly employ 71 new staff across a variety of entry-level jobs

within City Services, including temporary traffic management for routine road work, advanced weigh-bridge operations at waste facilities, and school crossing supervisors. Delivering more secure jobs to more Canberrans is a key priority for the ACT government, underpinned by the whole-of-government Insourcing Framework and Secure Employment Framework. Insourcing a variety of entry-level jobs within City Services will provide greater job security for many low-paid and vulnerable workers who provide essential services to the Canberra community.

*Mr Hanson interjecting—*

**MS CHEYNE:** I hear you are looking for a job! Secure work provides many economic, social and health benefits. It ensures workers have consistent and predictable income they can rely on, as well as access to sick leave and recreation leave when they need it, leading to improved financial, physical and mental wellbeing. This is part of our broader vision to make Canberra a more sustainable, inclusive and vibrant city for everyone.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Minister, how does directly employing these workers allow the government to provide better and more responsive city services to the community?

**MS CHEYNE:** I thank Mr Pettersson for the supplementary. This is one of the key reasons that we are making this \$2.2 million investment to directly employ City Services' workers and ensure high-quality service delivery to the public. By directly employing these workers, we are able to reduce our reliance on external contractors and agencies and adjust services as required, without the restriction of contract terms which can be costly, unreliable and inconsistent and add another level of management. For example, directly employing a dedicated traffic management team will allow the government to be more responsive and flexible in delivering a variety of road based city services, such as road repair and maintenance, tree pruning, mowing and litter-picking. Maintenance teams will be able to more rapidly deploy across the city without needing to arrange contractor traffic management well in advance.

Insourcing these services will also improve the government's ability to maintain road network operations and react to unplanned or last-minute events, including responding to emergencies. Directly employing these workers will allow us to better manage our resources, plan our projects and respond to the changing needs and expectations of our community.

**MS ORR:** Minister, what other work is being done to improve city services and maintenance following the multiple storm events over the summer period?

**MS CHEYNE:** I thank Ms Orr for the supplementary. Recurrent summers with significant weather events have disrupted the crews' usual proactive work program. While we did have a dryer October, the rainfall in November, December and January was 172 per cent, 138 per cent and 182 per cent of their long-term averages, respectively. For context, we received almost the same amount of rain from October to January as we did in the previous season over those four months, and that season was a La Niña season. This season's pattern of rain and sunshine has resulted in not only high soil saturation, which can bog heavy machinery, but also intense growing



conditions, resulting in thicker and faster growth. Our crews are needing to go slower to avoid damaging machinery and to cover an area multiple times in one go. Sunny days like today can be deceptive in masking just how damp the ground still is.

During this season, we delivered additional residential green bin pick-ups and quickly deployed green waste skip bins across Canberra's worst-affected suburbs to assist the community with clean-up following December's storm, and our crews have been working overtime—day, night and on weekends—to keep our city safe, clean and presentable. As the Chief Minister outlined yesterday, the unpredictable weather is another reminder that the changing climate necessitates different approaches to our city's repair and maintenance services.

My first priority in this portfolio has been to personally visit and engage with our hardworking GSOs at each of the City Presentation depots across the ACT. Having spent more than 20 hours talking to frontline staff already, I value the expertise and experience of our crews, including some with over 20-, 30- and more than 40-year careers in servicing our city, and we so sincerely thank them. Their feedback and ideas are directly informing our work to support them to do what they do best. We are exploring opportunities for surge capacity and equipment, as well as further efficiencies and efforts which may assist without compromising safety.

### **Government—human resources and information management system**

**MR CAIN:** My question is to the Special Minister of State. I refer to the Auditor-General's report into the failed HRIMS project where he said:

The HRIMS Program was a significant failure for the Territory ... Every aspect of the HRIMS Program, including its planning, governance and administration and management arrangements, was characterised by multiple failures at all levels.

Minister, noting your apology in the Assembly yesterday, are you now finally admitting that you were responsible for this significant wastage of ACT taxpayer money?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. Yesterday, I did deliver the ACT government's response to the Auditor-General's report No 10 of 2023, which did acknowledge the failures of the HRIMS program. I, as the minister, and the government, have taken responsibility to identify the problems with the project and put in place a lower cost and lower risk solution to the territory's human resource needs, particularly in relation to ICT, and have taken responsibility in applying the lessons learnt from the project to future ICT projects.

When I became the Special Minister of State around December 2020, the program had just been assigned to the Chief Digital Officer, and it failed to meet its first deliverable. At that point, the government then undertook multiple technical and non-technical reviews into the program. We paused the program to identify the problems, initially with a view to resetting the program to get it back on track. But in examining the issues, we discovered that there was a lower cost and lower risk solution—that is the solution we are now pursuing at lower cost to the territory. We found

opportunities to streamline the complex HR processes, which were contributing to the issues in the HRIMS program, and we made a very difficult decision as a government to discontinue the HRIMS program, which was a responsible decision not to spend an additional \$140 million on that project.

In the response that I outlined yesterday, I have outlined the lessons learnt very clearly and the actions the ACT government is taking to address them, both for the new PC HRM program and for ICT projects. That is what responsibility looks like. I refer the opposition to the comprehensive statement yesterday.

**MR CAIN:** Minister, how can the ACT taxpayers trust you with any project, given you failed so spectacularly in your role overseeing the HRIMS project?

**MR STEEL:** In the response that I outlined yesterday, I have taken responsibility as minister. During my time, when the problems were identified with the program, we undertook reviews; we identified the issues; we put in place a lower cost solution for the territory, and we made the difficult decision to discontinue that program.

Now we have very comprehensively outlined the lessons learnt which will inform the new HR management solution, and, also, all future ICT projects. We have done that in a range of different ways which are structural in the ACT public service, and which put in place more robust policies and governance processes for all ICT projects. One particular example I would give is the best practice planning and delivery guide for ICT projects. That is already in place and informing other ICT projects in the territory, right across government. It has come as a lesson learnt from the HRIMS process that we needed to make sure there was better planning from the very beginning to inform the delivery of that program, and better optioneering to understand the full range of options and solutions available to government. We put that in place under my leadership. We are taking responsibility for the program and making sure that we improve and do better for future ICT projects.

**MR COCKS:** Minister, will you finally do the right thing and resign?

**MR STEEL:** It is not unusual for the Liberal Party to claim a scalp, but that would do nothing to improve the situation in relation to ICT projects in the territory. As minister, I take responsibility for improving the way we manage our ICT projects in the territory.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members!

**MR STEEL:** I have done that from the very beginning of taking this portfolio. When something does go wrong—and things do go wrong in government from time to time. It is how you manage those issues. We have identified the issues; we have found a lower risk and lower cost solution for the territory, and we are applying the lessons learnt. That was comprehensively outlined yesterday. I will continue to take responsibility for the better management of ICT projects going forward.

**Government—human resources and information management system**

**MR CAIN:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Special Minister of State. Minister, I again refer to the Auditor-General's report into the failed HRIMS project. The Auditor-General found:

Planning for the HRIMS Program was poor. The Territory failed to account for the complexities of the ACT Public Service industrial relations environment when developing and implementing the HRIMS Program...The Territory failed to finalise and endorse basic program management documents for the HRIMS Program.

Governance and administrative arrangements for the HRIMS Program were poor...Program monitoring and assurance arrangements were poor, including quality assurance, program reporting and risk management activities.

I could go on and on. As the Minister overseeing this project, why did you get it so wrong?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. We have proactively identified those issues through the technical and non-technical reviews that were commissioned during the time that I was minister overseeing this project. As a result of identifying those issues, we put in place in actions to address them, which were fully and comprehensively outlined in the ACT government's response to the Auditor-General's report yesterday. It is the proactive work that we had undertaken in relation to the program when it was not meeting its deliverables, which enabled us to provide that comprehensive response early. I suspect one of the reasons the Auditor-General only made one recommendation in relation to the program was because we had undertaken such a significant amount of work to review the program, to identify the issues, and also because of the substantial work we had already undertaken to address many of the issues identified—although there are some where ongoing work is required—in relation to project management; in relation to planning; and in relation to governance. We have been proactive. When things did not go right with the program we identified those issues and we put in place actions to address them, including a better solution for the territory of a future HR system, and, as well, put in place the lessons learned for all future ICT projects.

**MR CAIN:** So, Minister, why did you let this project go on for so long when it is clear from the Auditor-General's scathing report that it was in trouble for a long time?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. We certainly acknowledge the planning issues associated with the project that occurred early on. There is work we can do, particularly around better decision-making in the early stages of a project life cycle, to make sure we properly look at the issues; the complexity of the program; to make sure we have better processes in place, particularly around business process; to then assist in an easier delivery of an ICT program of this size, particularly in this case where it involved 18 different enterprise agreements. The complexity and scale of that, in implementing the business processes across government, was underestimated. We acknowledge that.

**Mr Cain:** And whose fault was that?

**MADAM SPEAKER:** You were warned Mr Cain.

**MR STEEL:** As a result of identifying those issues early on, through the various reviews that we have undertaken, we have now put in place a range of different actions which were identified through those reviews and have been tabled very clearly for the Opposition to have a look at in the response we made yesterday. They include work that we have already done to put in place a new best practice design and implementation delivery guide for ICT projects, which is informing better decision-making early on in the project's life cycle, so that we can prevent these issues from happening in the future.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I will give you the call, but Mr Cain you are warned. If I hear another peep out of you, you will be named.

**MR COCKS:** Minister, why did you continue throwing good money after bad on this project, when cabinet could have intervened when the first doubling of expense for this project was brought to you?

**MR STEEL:** Well we have not. We have closed the program. That was a decision we made last year in the budget, following work that had been done to review the program where we identified a previously discounted option to look at upgrading the HR Chris21 system at a lower cost and lower risk for the territory, but also noting still the need to build a new time and attendance system. Many of the costs associated with the program accrue at the point that we made the decision to discontinue it. So yes, there was a cost involved in that, but it was the responsible decision because it did not throw good money after bad. It avoided a future additional cost of \$140 million which was expected for the program. So from the get-go, when the issues were first identified with the program, when it did not meet its deliverables: we reviewed the program; we put it on pause; we identified the issues; we found a lower cost solution; we closed the program; and now we are putting in place the lessons learned for all future ICT projects, including the new PC HRM program.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, members, please!

**MR STEEL:** We have taken responsibility right the way through.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** You have concluded Mr Steel? Yes?

**MR STEEL:** Thank you Madam Speaker.

### **Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders—ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body**

**MS ORR:** My question is to the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Minister, the 2023-24 mid-year review includes \$1.23 million to strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, bolstering Canberra's

legislated First Nations Voice following the majority support in the referendum last year. Minister, what will this funding deliver and how will it strengthen the Elected Body?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Ms Orr for the question. As Ms Orr rightly points out and as we are all aware, last October more than 60 per cent of Canberrans said yes to elevating the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on issues that affect them. This is an idea that, unlike the Canberra Liberals, ACT Labor wholeheartedly supported. The Barr Labor government is now investing \$1.23 million to strengthen the ACT's own voice mechanism, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. This includes funding to increase the amount of time Elected Body members are paid for each year. This will support members to dedicate more time to engaging with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and representing the ACT on the national stage, including as part of the coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, the Coalition of Peaks, which sits alongside ministers at the Joint Council on Closing the Gap and alongside officials in the partnership working group that is driving that change.

We will also strengthen the Elected Body's capacity to work with the ACT government to drive better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people right here in the territory and to hold the government to account for our commitments. This initiative also provides funding for an independent secretariat for the Elected Body, which will provide critical administrative and record-keeping supports to help it run efficiently. That independent secretariat is already in place.

The government is also investing \$200,000 from the Healing and Reconciliation Fund to engage an independent review to undertake consultations with the local community on how we can continue to strengthen the Elected Body model into the future. This will support the government, the Elected Body and the community to ensure that the model meets the community's expectations and is well placed to work in partnership with government and community to deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans.

**MS ORR:** Minister, how will a stronger Elected Body enhance the voice and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Ms Orr for the supplementary. ACT Labor is firmly committed to supporting the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and uplifting their voices in decision-making forums. The ACT government recognises that it is vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be able to live well and in line with their own values and to be empowered to work in partnership with government and to hold government to account.

The Elected Body is a critical voice in promoting and protecting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT to freely determine their political status and to pursue their economic, social and cultural development in line with the right to self-determination. Since its inception in 2008, the Elected Body has played an essential role in developing and implementing programs and initiatives through its advocacy and active partnership with the ACT government and the local First Nations community, including in the development of the ACT Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander Agreement. The current agreement, 2019 to 2028, was the first 10-year agreement and is being delivered in partnership.

With more time and resources, this additional funding will bolster the Elected Body's ability to engage with the community and the government on policies and programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans. This includes holding hearings to monitor the government's delivery against our commitments. Hearings were held last year and further hearings will be held this year, before the next Elected Body election in July this. As I said, the Elected Body represents the ACT on the coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations. In this capacity, the Elected Body represents the rights, interests and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT at the highest level.

We also work with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations with representatives across a range of committees and portfolios to ensure that self-determination is real in the ACT.

**DR PATERSON:** Minister, how will this additional funding support the implementation of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Dr Paterson for the supplementary question. The priority reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap outline how governments can achieve positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through shared decision-making, developing partnerships with Aboriginal representatives and through long-term and sustained investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Achieving these ambitions will require governments to invest in mechanism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have their say on policies and programs that affect them.

The national agreement also commits all governments to identify, develop and strengthen an independent mechanism that will support, monitor and report on transformation of government entities and institutions. In the ACT, the Elected Body serves as the primary mechanism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have their voices heard. But we know that we can do more to strengthen that mechanism. In the Productivity Commission's report released today, the ACT has been recognised as having an elected body as an independent mechanism. But we also know and have been told that we need to do more.

The increased resourcing will strengthen the self-determination of the Elected Body and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the review will enable us to understand how we strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body into the future in the context of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the need for the independent mechanism but also in the context of a growing community-controlled sector in the ACT. Other representatives on the coalition of peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations represent the community-controlled sector. We did not have a peak in the ACT to play that role at the time the Coalition of Peaks was formed. Perhaps in the future we will. The review will look at all of that context as well as in the context of the consultations that were taken on the National Voice, so that we can deliver on the objectives that Canberrans have clearly

voted for.

### **Planning—Macgregor**

**MS CLAY:** My question is to the Minister for Planning. It relates to Macgregor block 9, section 140, and is about lease enforcement and maintenance. Minister, this development was completed at the start of 2022 but has never been used for its purpose, and the block is overgrown and is not maintained. Has the government taken any enforcement action to ensure that the block is maintained?

**MR STEEL:** I thank Ms Clay for her question. I am happy to seek advice about whether any compliance action has been undertaken by Access Canberra. Access Canberra's role can be to inspect blocks in the ACT to make sure that they are in accordance with the Planning Act. That includes consideration of issues like rubbish that could be visible in the public domain, whether a lease has a building constructed within the required time frame and whether a lease is being used in accordance with the purpose clause in the Crown lease. I think that is the issue that Ms Clay has identified. I am happy to come back and provide some more information about that specific block in Macgregor.

**MS CLAY:** As well as block maintenance, has the government taken any enforcement action to ensure that the block is used for its intended lease purpose?

**MR STEEL:** That is the issue that I will come back to the Assembly on, and Ms Clay specifically.

**MISS NUTTALL:** If not, could you give us an indicative time frame of when you may take action to see the block used for its intended purposes?

**MR STEEL:** I assume that by "you" you mean Access Canberra, operating in their capacity and their independent role. I will certainly find out some information from them about what they are doing in relation to this matter. I was not aware of any specific issues in relation to this prior to today's questions, so I will seek some advice about what the exact issues are and whether any complaints have been received by Access Canberra as well.

### **Transport Canberra—bus fleet**

**MR PARTON:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Transport. Minister, your government was given specific advice by the commonwealth more than a decade ago that the Renault diesel buses currently being used on our network would be non-compliant to disability standards in late 2022. We are over a year past that deadline, and yesterday, as well as talking about short-term fixes, you admitted that there would be a further delay. Given the many warnings on this, how could you possibly have failed to comply with this ten-year deadline, and can you guarantee that the Renault diesels will be off Canberra's streets by the end of 2024?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question, and he is quite right. We have been advised by Scania Australia that they have unfortunately experienced further delays in being able to provide Transport Canberra with leased diesel buses as part of a lease

contract arrangement that has been in place since early 2022, which would have enabled us to meet the deadlines required under the Disability Discrimination Act, which is a commonwealth act and requirement.

As a result of that, we are of course looking at a range of options. I have asked advice from Transport Canberra to seek advice on what we can do to address this issue, either through the contract or other means, to be able to make sure we can replace these buses as soon as possible and provide accessible transport for Canberrans.

It is of course a great disappointment for me that Scania Australia has not been able to deliver these buses as per the terms of their contract. The arrangement was in place with them to meet our requirements under the Disability Discrimination Act, but because they have not met the terms of the contract, we have not been able to comply with that in the timeframe specified.

We are minimising the use of the Renault PR100 series buses as much as possible, but we also need to make sure that we retain reliability of services for Canberrans at the same time, so as one new bus is supplied to us, whether it is from the contract with Scania Australia or through another contract that we have in place—for example, we have purchased 90 Yutong buses. If one of those arrives, we will replace one of the Renaults and take it out of service. Only a small number of them remain in the fleet, Madam Speaker, and we are trying to minimise the use of those as much as possible so that we can provide accessible transport for Canberrans.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, why should Canberrans believe you this time, given the retirement of the Renault diesels has already been delayed on so many occasions?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. I have been upfront and transparent with the public and with the Assembly, providing at the earliest opportunity an update on the supply of these buses, because it does invoke this particular act of parliament, the Disability Discrimination Act. I have been providing those regular updates for the community and for the Assembly on when they will be supplied, Madam Speaker.

The government over a number of years has been engaged in procurement of new buses. We have done that under a new Zero-Emission Transition Plan for Transport Canberra. We did it prior as well. Minister Fitzharris purchased around 80 Scania Bustech buses. We have gone forward with a further leased agreement that has not yet been completed, but we have also purchased 90 electric buses and also executed another contract with Custom Denning for four additional leased electric buses.

We are currently updating the Zero-Emission Transition Plan for Transport Canberra at the moment, which we expect to deliver later on this year, which will look at the pathway ahead and what we need to do to not just support the zero-emissions transition, but make sure that we have got a fleet renewal strategy in place to support the growing needs of our community.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, why does your government fail to achieve every transport related deadline it sets for itself?

**MR STEEL:** We have not, Madam Speaker, and you just look at the examples:



stage 1 of light rail delivered under budget, successfully operating now. Just under five years since April 2019. We are getting on with projects like the new ticketing system, which continues to be up front. We are looking at providing updates to the community on that soon, Madam Speaker. We have already got 12 electric buses in the fleet, the highest per capita of any city transport operator in the country. We are getting on with the work in the transport space to provide better transport. We have just signed a contract, Madam Speaker, with Canberra Metro for the stage 2A extension to Commonwealth Park. All that the—

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MR STEEL:** The problem with the Canberra Liberals is they do not promise anything. In fact, they promise to cut things: to cut transport infrastructure, cut services. Madam Speaker, we build things.

**Ms Lee:** Madam Speaker, point of order. Again, according to standing order 117, I ask you to ask the minister to be directly relevant in answering the question rather than get into furious arguments.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I do not believe he is debating, and I think he is just responding to the question, but as I indicated—

**Ms Lee:** Really? Because he is just talking about apparently what the Canberra Liberals do.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** —earlier, I am happy to review the last couple of question times, and should I need to come back to something, I—

**Ms Lee:** I think so.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Ms Lee, I have said I would review. I do not need commentary.

### **Transport Canberra—accessibility of buses**

**MR PARTON:** My question is to the Minister for Transport. Minister, your government continues to show disdain for members of the disability community by running non-compliant buses on the network for more than a year after they officially became non-compliant. How is Transport Canberra making sure that passengers who require an accessible service can get that service? What information and mechanisms are out there to ensure that everyone can access our transport system?

**MR STEEL:** I refer the member to the statement that I gave yesterday which demonstrates that we are being up-front and transparent with the community about where we are up to in the transition to accessible buses for the community. There are also the steps that the ACT government, through Transport Canberra, has been taking to support people with a disability to access transport services. Of course, as transport minister, I established the Accessibility Reference Group. We have been engaging with them in Transport Canberra and City Services.

I refer the member to the statement where I said that we have been working closely with the community. If a person with a disability wants to, they can contact Transport Canberra if they need an accessible bus on the service that they use regularly, and we can take that into consideration in terms of changing which particular bus is used to deliver that particular service. We also, of course, have other options available which they can talk to Transport Canberra about—

**Mr Parton:** You can give them a lift.

**MR STEEL:** Yes; it may include potentially giving someone a lift or it may be about providing them with information about the options that are available in terms of the Flexible Bus Service, which is there to support people with mobility issues, to be literally picked up from their home and taken to a local shopping centre, a GP or where someone needs to go.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, if the government had been given a 20-year warning on this deadline rather than just the 10 years, are you confident that you could have managed this important transition?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. It is ironical, but I will address the question anyway. All bus operators and all transport operators, like Transport Canberra, around the country have been grappling with the issue of the transition to Disability Discrimination Act requirements. They do not just apply in relation to the accessibility of buses; there is a range of other requirements as well. Many of them are not meeting the requirements under the commonwealth act at the present time. We have been discussing those challenges.

We have a very small number of disability non-compliant buses. We are working very hard and diligently to phase them out as soon as possible, but there have been some effects from COVID-19, as a result of the supply chain issues and workforce issues experienced by the bus industry, that have meant that the buses that we had contracted have not been delivered in the time required. We have those contracts in place to deliver them in compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act. I have provided transparent updates to the community in the Assembly when those have not been delivered on time, and I will continue to provide further updates as we receive more buses and when we are able to fully transition these buses out of the fleet.

**MR MILLIGAN:** Minister, has the government been updating the Australian Human Rights Commission about its non-compliance with the disability standards?

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

### **Planning—Majura Valley**

**MS CASTLEY:** My question is to the Minister for Planning. I refer the minister to the promise made 14 months ago by his predecessor, Mr Gentleman, to grant Majura farmers 25-year leases with no withdrawals. Minister, do you stand by this offer?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for her question. As she knows, the issue that is currently holding up the consideration of renewal of leases in the Majura Valley

involves split blocks—that is where the Australian government, particularly through the Department of Defence, has an interest in that land—and waiting for a decision from the federal government to de-gazette those blocks. We cannot make a decision to renew those blocks until a decision has been made by the Commonwealth and until we can fully understand the conditions that may be attached to that decision.

I have taken the opportunity, as the new planning minister, to meet with many of the farmers and their representatives on these split blocks. I have listened to their concerns. I understand much more about their concerns and the uncertainty that they currently face in relation to the tenure on those blocks. The Chief Minister has written to commonwealth ministers, now on a number of occasions, to advocate for a decision that is made in a timely way.

**Ms Castley:** On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I asked if the minister stands by Minister Gentleman's offer. It is a yes or a no.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I am not directing the minister to answer yes or no.

**MS CASTLEY:** How does the government justify leaving this issue unresolved for the Majura Valley farmers in limbo for 19 years, given the lives it has disrupted in the process?

**MR STEEL:** The government has been working as collaboratively as we can with the commonwealth government to resolve this issue. We have been advocating to them consistently, including when the Liberals were in power federally, because it has been going on for such a long time. They did not make a decision in relation to their property disposal policy.

We are advocating for the current government, federally, to make that decision in a timely way that gives the split-block owners an opportunity for certainty going forward, but, ultimately, the ball is in the commonwealth's court, and once they have made a decision, then the ACT government can consider making a decision in relation to renewal.

**MR CAIN:** Minister, why are you incapable, despite your rhetoric, of drawing a line under this issue which has been mishandled for nearly two decades? It is something even Mr Gentleman could see needed to be done.

**MR STEEL:** Mr Cain has ignored my answers to the previous questions. This is a matter that is currently before federal government. We are advocating for them to make a decision. We cannot make a decision for them. That is a decision they have to make for themselves. We have made that very clear to the people residing in the Majura Valley. We cannot make that decision for the federal government. Once they make that decision, then we can consider what opportunity there might be for renewal.

### **Government—community engagement**

**MISS NUTTALL:** My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, on 19 December, the winning ideas for the My Little Big Idea were announced. However, at the time, the YourSay page for the Richardson idea indicated that the

community panel workshop was yet to occur. Chief Minister, why was this, and can you offer us assurances that the neighbourhood democracy processes were fully undertaken?

**MR BARR:** I thank Ms Nuttall for the question. I understand there was only one proposal that came forward that would fit within the criteria of the program for Richardson, and that was put forward by the Richardson school community. There were other submissions but they were beyond the possible scope of the program with a \$40,000 budget. So with only one viable idea that came forward, it was the only one that could be pursued. I think it does have very strong support from the Richardson school community. It will be a valuable asset for that school and the broader suburb of Richardson, and indeed surrounding suburbs.

**MISS NUTTALL:** When can the Assembly expect to see the results of the planned review into the My Little Big Idea pilot program for both Richardson and Page?

**MR BARR:** I am anticipating the evaluation will be complete in the first half of the year. I will look at it and then I am sure it will go up on a website.

**MS CLAY:** Why does it say, in the third report on the parliamentary agreement released in December, that the agreement was for conducting the pilot in two suburbs rather than the originally-agreed five, and why does it not state why the decision was made by the Treasurer to only budget for two, not five?

**MR BARR:** There was a mutually agreed variation of the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement.

### **ACT Policing—resourcing**

**MR MILLIGAN:** My question is to the Minister for Police and Crime Prevention. Minister, the recent RoGS data shows that the ACT continues to have the lowest number of police per capita in the country. Minister, how are these low numbers affecting the operation of policing in the ACT?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Mr Milligan for the question. This government has, of course, made record investments in policing in the most recent budget and investments in each budget prior to that while I have been the police minister. This has shown in the work that ACT police have been doing across the territory in crime prevention and also in reducing crime. You can see in the RoGS data that the trend for crime in most circumstances is trending down. There has been very good work done by ACT Policing, and I think that comes on the back of our strong investment in the police force.

**MR MILLIGAN:** Minister, why are our police numbers consistently the lowest, year after year?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** As I said, we make the investment in ACT Policing and then they, in an operational sense, use that funding to ensure that they can get the outcomes that are needed for a safe community. Of course, Canberra is one of the safest cities in Australia. The work that they are doing should be congratulated, and I take this

opportunity to congratulate our Chief Police Officer, who has served the longest of any of our CPOs in the ACT. He is heading off next month for some long service leave, and we will be updating the Assembly on a new CPO after that. There has been very strong work done by ACT Policing, as you can see in the result today in finding the two lost children—again, very good work by ACT police.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, how many of the police reported in the RoGS data are actually on active duty and not on sick leave or other leave?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Mr Parton for the question. It is a level of detail that I do not have immediately in front of me. But I am happy to take that on notice and come back to the chamber.

### **ACT Ambulance Service—staffing**

**DR PATERSON:** My question is to the Minister for Fire and Emergency Services. Minister, will you please update the Assembly on the new ACT Ambulance Service roster?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Dr Paterson for her interest in our first responders. The government values our frontline responders. That is why we are investing \$19.71 million over four years to implement a new and modernised roster for our paramedics. The roster is designed specifically to support our hardworking ambulance crews. It is fit for purpose for our modern, highly capable and committed Ambulance Service.

We know that in recent times demand for the ACT Ambulance Service has been at its highest levels. Despite this, and as noted in the *Report on Government Services*, ACTAS continues to deliver some of the country's fastest ambulance response times. Our investment in a modernised roster will enable ACTAS to continue to be one of the nation's leading ambulance services, but it will also boost the health, safety and wellbeing of our frontline responders.

We care about the health and wellbeing of our paramedics, who are central to the success of ACTAS in providing the highest level of care and life-saving services to members of our community when they are at their most vulnerable. The government remains committed to ensuring that the Canberra community can continue to have the highest confidence in the performance of their Ambulance Service.

**DR PATERSON:** Minister, will you please advise how the improved roster arrangements will benefit ACT Ambulance Service workers and the service overall?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** The current funding of \$19.71 million over four years will support 30 full-time equivalent new frontline paramedics, increasing the available crews through peak periods. Our investment will alleviate the physical and mental pressure on our paramedics; provide additional support and supervision to on-road crews; improve fatigue management and practices resulting in less physical and psychological injury; and enable a better work-life balance for paramedics.

In addition, training requirements and professional development opportunities will be

better supported under the new roster by increasing operational flexibility, ensuring that our ambulance workforce support staff continue to enjoy rewarding careers in the ACT Ambulance Service, with improved rostering leading to better health, wellbeing and work-life balance for the workforce. The government will continue to provide support for our ACTAS workforce as they continue to meet community expectations.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Minister, will you please advise how the improved roster arrangement for the ACT Ambulance Service will benefit the ACT community?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** Our Ambulance Service performs a vital role in our community, responding to those in need when they are at their most vulnerable and when they need it the most. As noted, ACTAS delivers some of the fastest response times in the country, as well as achieving very high levels of patient satisfaction. More paramedics and available crews will ensure that Canberrans feel safe, supported and cared for.

The pattern of the new roster will expand the workforce, which allows a degree of specialist and general ambulance capabilities to be available during peak demand and reduced during periods of low demand. A modernised roster will support the mental and physical health of our paramedics, which is paramount to enabling them to perform at their best and provide exceptional care for the people in our community.

The investment positions ACTAS to be even better placed to continue to meet community demands and expectations of our Ambulance Service, while maintaining exceptional response times. Frontline workers play an integral role in the safety of our community and we thank them for their continued commitment to providing essential services.

**Mr Barr:** Madam Speaker, further questions can be placed on the notice paper