



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Wednesday, 25 February 2026

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Questions without notice
Cabinet ministers—conduct

MR PARTON: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, have you or any of your ministers been influenced by, or sought to change a decision of government by, individuals or entities who provide donations to the ACT Labor Party?

MR BARR: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. That is a very red-tie-like question, Mr Parton. The answer is no.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, has a trade union ever influenced a decision of government?

MR BARR: That is a broad question. In the history of Australian politics, I imagine the answer would be yes.

MS MORRIS: Chief Minister, can you categorically deny that you or any member of your government have engaged in conduct that may result in an adverse finding by the ACT Integrity Commissioner or the ACT Auditor-General?

MR BARR: I think that question is somewhat hypothetical, and it is also seeking an expression of opinion. To be clear, ministers operate under the ministerial code of conduct.

Public service—handling of staff complaints

MS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, following serious allegations reported concerning the former Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People. Will the minister outline when her office first became aware of concerns, what actions were taken, and why the government has declined to answer key questions about whether any public servant was disciplined, whether a formal investigation interviewed the commissioner, and whether she was informed of any outcome?

MS ORR: To answer Ms Morris's question, as advised to me, there is a lot that I need to consider around privacy and confidentiality, and employment law. I am hoping to provide a response to the questions that are being raised. I believe Ms Morris is asking about the incident of alleged sexual harassment that was reported in the newspaper. As I have already said on the public record, I was aware that the commissioner had made the allegation. I have been advised that it would be inappropriate to make any further comment, given that it has been reported that the commissioner has now referred this to police and there is active consideration of that report underway.

MS MORRIS: What information can the minister provide to assure the Assembly that proper processes were followed, accountability was maintained, and that any investigation was thorough and independent?

MS ORR: Again, without being able to go into the specifics of individual cases—the advice to me is that that would be inappropriate—I point Ms Morris to the processes and procedures that we have within the public service for considering complaints of

this nature and how that is stepped out through consideration by the standards group, looking at conditions of employment, the EA, and looking at how people have the right to bring a complaint and people have the right to respond. That is to be considered fairly and independently through to conclusion, against the policies and procedures that are in place. I point Ms Morris to that and say that the ACT government and the public service definitely have robust policies and procedures in place to consider these types of allegations when they are raised, in a way that is procedurally fair and in accordance with the law.

MS LEE: Will the minister commit to providing a full timeline of events and outcomes to the Assembly, including when concerns were raised, what steps were taken, and when the government will respond to a question on notice on this matter?

MS ORR: Given the complexities, I will take that question on notice and I will come back with the information I am advised I am able to disclose.

Food Relief Action Plan—Food Bank Fund

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services. In last year's budget, the government allocated \$1.5 million over three years to the Food Bank Fund, with the Food Relief Action Plan to guide the allocation of these funds. Minister, has all of the \$500,000 for this financial year been allocated and, if so, how has it been allocated?

MS ORR: The ongoing allocation of the funds associated with the Food Bank Fund—the provision that was made in last year's budget—is something that we will continue to work through. As I previously said, we will be informed for years 2 and 3 of the fund by the consultations in the development of the action plan. That is something that we will continue to work through as to how best to direct that funding. I can certainly keep Mr Emerson updated as we progress through those considerations.

Mr Emerson: A point of order, Mr Speaker, on responsiveness to the question. The question was whether the funding this year has been allocated and, if so, how it has been allocated. I do not believe we got a response to that question.

MR SPEAKER: Minister, do you have something further to add?

MS ORR: Mr Speaker, I would point the member to the part of my answer where I said that we are still working through those considerations.

MR SPEAKER: You are working through those considerations? All right.

MR EMERSON: Minister, has any of the Food Bank Fund funding been used to develop the ACT Food Relief Action Plan that was tabled today or otherwise allocated to purposes other than direct frontline food relief service delivery?

MS ORR: I will take the detail of that on notice and get advice from the directorate. My understanding is that the majority of the funding went to maintaining surge funding that had previously been provided, particularly to increased transport costs for getting food relief supplies to the ACT, and that that has been the bulk of the funding for the

financial year that we are currently in—the first year of the Food Bank Fund. There was funding provided as part of the Food Bank Fund to the relief network in VolunteeringACT to continue secretariat support. So, depending on how you interpret Mr Emerson’s question, you could say that that funding would fit into the parameters of what Mr Emerson has said. But I am not quite sure that is exactly what he was going to—so I will leave you to make that judgement.

He was asking whether there was any funding put towards the public service budgeting from the Food Bank Fund to deliver the action plan. My understanding is that it was not—that the funding put elsewhere—but I will double check that with the directorate.

MS CARRICK: Minister, why does the Food Relief Action Plan not include timelines for any of the actions it contains?

MS ORR: The Food Relief Action Plan has a timeline for the 2026 to 2028 period that exists within. It is designed to be that shorter action plan to show that this is what we will be progressing during this time. That was set through a range of considerations, including feedback through the consultations we did on what was an appropriate period of time to work through these issues, to inform the matters that were raised by the sector and to get an adequate level of detail to inform future actions in looking at how government best supports food relief within the ACT.

So I do not agree with the premise that there is no timeline attached. There absolutely is. It is the timeline of the action plan, and we continue to work through those actions against that timeline.

Transport Canberra—bus frequency

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for Transport. I have received multiple reports from constituents about northbound R4 and R5 buses leaving the Woden interchange full and skipping subsequent stops between 8 am and 9 am on weekdays. It appears that capacity reductions on this route to cater for delays from the Commonwealth Avenue bridge works have been too severe. As well as leaving commuters stranded at bus stops, this reduction in capacity is creating its own delays due to overcrowded buses having to spend longer loading and unloading at each bus stop. Minister, when will you restore some of the cancelled services on the northbound R4 and R5 routes during the morning commuter peak?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. Obviously, it is perhaps a discussion that we are about to have after question time with the motion before the Assembly moved by Ms Clay and Mr Braddock in relation to bus services and the impact of the current construction works that are occurring by the NCA. There was a substantial update that was provided to the community that we are still seeing things bedding down on the traffic network and also in changes to behaviour on our roads and amongst bus passengers in adjusting to the updated public transport bus network. We are monitoring very closely the R4 service. We have seen some buses at capacity. I caught the bus—I think it was the R4, I think it was yesterday—through to the City and Belconnen, in fact.

Obviously on the earlier services there is more room for commuters but it is really those

at that peak time that we are looking at, whether there can be some extra services added. We will look to do that as early as we can. We have indicated to the community, and I updated the Assembly earlier in the year, that that would be at the earliest in term 3, once we understand what spare capacity we have within the network to be able to then deliver extra services on those routes that need extra capacity. We are also looking at whether we can improve the level of service being provided to West Belconnen and particularly around both the 12 and 13, but also potentially the extension again of the R2 and R3 through to Fraser West and Spence. So yes, we are looking at this, and we are looking at making changes to provide extra capacity on the R4 route as early as term 3.

MS CARRICK: Minister, are Transport Canberra officials continuing to hold discussions with the National Capital Authority about extending the northbound bus lane south from Albert Hall to Coronation Drive to relieve the bottleneck?

MR STEEL: It is not an active discussion, but there has been consideration of that in the past as part of the work that the Disruption Taskforce had been doing at the time around exploring options for improvements to bus priority in the area. That did not progress because of the traffic modelling at the time.

City Environment Directorate, Roads ACT and Transport Canberra have been working closely with the NCA on their temporary traffic arrangements during the construction period. I do not believe there is any suggestion of any change to what is currently in place, noting that one bridge will finish work and the other one will need to close around 2027. So there will be some adjustments that are made to the temporary traffic arrangements, but I do not think that extension of bus priority through to Coronation Drive is part of that at this particular point in time.

Obviously we are seeing delays on the traffic network as expected. The extent of those delays are slightly different to the modelling, but the delays are still there on the roads where we expected. But if there is spare capacity in the network, then we will return that through the provision of extra services as soon as possible. I will outline the reasons more fully in the debate about why that is the case in terms of the timing for the next update to the network and timetable.

MR EMERSON: Minister, is the government concerned that the deterioration in rapid bus reliability undermines your emissions reduction targets and mode shift targets?

MR STEEL: Reliability of the network is critical and that is why we updated the network and timetable to have a focus on reliability. If we had not made changes to the network and timetable that took into account the modelled impact of the NCA's bridge closure, then the buses would have been incredibly unreliable right across the system. It could have been chaotic. So we had to make a difficult decision to update the network and adjust service levels right across the network to make sure that we could maintain as much reliability as possible.

Now that we have an actual understanding of what the real conditions are on the traffic network and the impact on the timings of bus runs, we can now make those adjustments that we anticipated we would need to make. That is the process that Transport Canberra is in at the moment, understanding how the network is operating as it beds down. We

are now into the fourth week, so it is still relatively early days. Once we have an understanding of those delays in the network, we can then adjust the timetable again to make sure that the system is even more reliable than it is now, but the actions we have taken have prioritised reliability. That has been front and centre because we know that is what transport users really value, that when a bus is timetabled it shows up. That is why we have had to adjust the network and timetable.

There will be further revisions to make to improve reliability and that can happen as early as term 3 in terms of major updates, but there may be some tweaks that we can make before then, particularly for buses that are running early. We are looking at an earlier update to the timetable to adjust for those.

Aged care—federal government funding

MR RATTENBURY: My question is to the Minister for Health.

In a recent Senate estimates hearing, the Department of Health reported that the \$2 billion that was intended to go to aged care to address the issue of elderly people stranded in hospital due to a lack of available places in residential aged care is now not actually going to go to aged care after all and that it was the states and territories that requested this change.

Minister, what was the ACT's position on this issue during discussions about the National Health Funding Agreement?

MR SPEAKER: Chief Minister, you will be taking this one?

MR BARR: I will, given I was in the negotiations.

Certainly it was the view of a number of states and territories that they wanted flexibility in relation to the application of the additional commonwealth funding into the health system. I do need to be clear that no state or territory suggested that this was not a continuing priority that may in fact attract more than the commonwealth's notional allocation during the negotiations. But there was a view also that—given the different positions of different states and territories in relation to how big an issue this was in their respective health systems—there needed to be a degree of flexibility. Mr Rattenbury has, I think, sat around the table at these federation discussions in other portfolios and would be familiar with a common refrain—that is, that is that may well be an issue in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, but it is not in WA, the Northern Territory or Tasmania. So flexibility is often sought.

The ACT's position was that we recognised this was one of the priority areas, that we would dedicate a degree of resource to this, that we wanted the Commonwealth to do more in relation to aged care supply but that if we did not have aged care beds with which to move people into, there was a risk that the money being allocated to us could not be fully utilised. So we were agreeable with the other states and territories that there be flexibility, noting that we would still have this as a priority.

MR RATTENBURY: Thank you. My subsequent question then is how will the ACT allocate this money in light of the decision that was taken overall? Where will it be

prioritised in the areas that were identified?

MR BARR: Obviously the Minister for Health and the ERC will work through the detail of that in the coming budget round, but it will remain a priority. But we are not going to ease up on the commonwealth in relation to their responsibilities for the provision of aged care and increasing aged care supply.

We are, however, very willing to work with the commonwealth in terms of land release and potential rezoning that would make the supply of increased aged care accommodation more viable by identifying sites for such accommodation to be built.

I would certainly encourage colleagues in the Assembly to have this in mind during in deliberations around future planning changes. Some examples include the potential for aged care to be built as part of the club diversification away from poker machines, Mr Speaker. That is one example, but there would be many others where we could identify more land for aged care, because undoubtedly our city will need more aged care places in the future.

MS CLAY: Minister, can you inform the Assembly how much a night in hospital costs for a patient waiting for discharge compared to a night in a residential aged care facility?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Thank you, Ms Clay, for the question. I will take the detail of the question on notice, but this is a point that we have repeatedly made to the commonwealth government—that is, it is costly to have maintenance care patients in hospital. It also depends on the patient’s condition, but when patients are medically ready for discharge and waiting to transition to an aged care residential aged care facility there is also a copayment in most cases that is paid by the patient as well.

It is obviously a very significant issue, as I indicated to Mr Rattenbury yesterday, and something that the states and territories, before almost every health minister’s meeting, put out a media release on, detailing the number of maintenance care patients awaiting discharge to aged care before almost every health minister’s meeting. Just before the last health minister’s meeting it indicated that 79 patients were in ACT hospitals awaiting discharge to residential aged care. The cost of a hospital bed for a maintenance care patient will vary from patient to patient. So I will endeavour to provide Ms Clay with a an average cost for a maintenance care patient. The actual cost will obviously vary from person to person versus a zero-cost for residential aged care facility which is funded by the commonwealth government and does not cost the ACT government anything. Therein lies the issue.

Higher education—enrolments

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, can you provide an update on the health of the territory’s higher education sector?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the question, and, yes, I can provide the Assembly with an update. I can say that following a very challenging 2025, things are looking up for the higher education sector. There is new investment. We are seeing growing enrolments, and the sector is, as I mentioned this morning, central to Canberra’s identity as Australia’s knowledge capital. Our institutions are now

educating more than 60,000 students each year, so around one in eight Canberrans is, in fact, studying at one of our institutions, and that includes over 20,000 international students, reflecting sustained demand and global confidence in Canberra as a place to study.

Enrolments are continuing to grow. The University of Canberra, for example, has reported an 11 per cent rise in its domestic undergraduate enrolments for 2025. We are seeing significant investment in the sector, which is very pleasing, including what will be the biggest new project this century, being the new UNSW Canberra city campus, which will bring with it, upon completion, around 6,000 students into the city centre and hundreds of new jobs for our city. This growth is, of course, being supported by expanded student accommodation and strong collaboration between our higher education institutions. Taken together, it all demonstrates a resilient, high-performing sector that is creating opportunities for students, supporting jobs and strengthening Canberra's economic future.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Chief Minister, what does the growth in enrolments mean for the territory's economy?

MR BARR: In short, it means jobs and opportunities, jobs and opportunities, jobs and opportunities. And that extends not just across the higher education sector but across our entire economy. International education alone is the territory's largest export industry—\$1.54 billion in 2023-24. It has grown; it has more than doubled. This matters for our city not just for the higher education institutions and all of the staff who work there but for retail, hospitality and all of the other areas of the economy where students, who come here from around Australia and around the world to study, either work in or spend their time in or spend their money in. It is a really critical sector of the territory's economy. As I mentioned this morning, each additional student is not only a potential future researcher, entrepreneur and community leader but also a direct contributor to our city—its social and cultural vibrancy, as well as its economic future.

International students and students from around Australia are warmly welcome in Canberra. I think it is important, in light of current political debates in this country, that we send that message loud and clear. We welcome students studying in Canberra.

MS TOUGH: Chief Minister, how are our education providers working together to ensure choice for those choosing to live and study in Canberra?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary question. I think a really special part of Canberra's education offering is the close collaboration between our higher education and vocational education and training providers. They work together. They are often not competing directly with one another; they offer complementary education opportunities. In the trade mission I led to India earlier in the month, they were all working together as part of a strong Study Canberra initiative, and I welcome that collaboration. I welcome the fact that they will work together on combined educational offerings and articulation pathways from one institution to the other. I welcome that they work together on research projects—ANU and UNSW, for example, in areas of space and defence and quantum, and other areas where we have nation leading and often world leading research capability. I look forward to that continuing.

Not only is the higher education sector critical to Canberra's economic future—when you consider one in eight people are studying, and then when you add in the people who work, it is around one in six Canberrans who have a connection to our higher education sector. It is the powerhouse of our economy. It reflects the values we hold as a city, Australia's knowledge capital. No other city in this country has that level of concentration of educational attainment and educational opportunity. It is a massive comparative advantage for Canberra and one that we are pursuing aggressively, nationally and internationally.

Vocational education and training—government funded places

MS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations. A recent report by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research found that the number of government-funded students in training had fallen by 5.1 per cent for the period January to September 2025. Minister, why has current government spending failed to attract Canberrans to vocational training?

MR PETTERSSON: There is a wide range of reasons why enrolment numbers are not where we need them to be, as a city. I would first point to the very tight labour market that we are experiencing in the ACT. As many members would know and appreciate, it is easier now to get a job in the ACT than at any other time in self-government history. This means that, increasingly, people—commonly young people—do not need to pursue vocational education to attain jobs, as they have at other times. This presents, of course, challenges for the skills mix of the city, moving into the future.

The government is committed to ensuring that we do have the appropriate skills for our growing city, which is why we will continue to invest in and support learners in our city. In recent budgets we have increased subsidies for apprenticeships. We have provided cost-of-living payments. I will note that there are some positive signs. I note that CIT has recently held their enrolment season, and they are looking at an uptick in their enrolments.

MS MORRIS: Minister, how is it possible to announce a \$51 million increase in skills spending but end up supporting fewer students?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Morris for the supplementary question. A lot of this spend in skills is demand driven. We can only fund apprenticeships when there is an apprentice in place. We do, however, continue to invest in the wider skills ecosystem, to make sure that the systems, the networks and the facilities are in place and are there to provide the training opportunities that we need for our city. I do not accept there is a clear link between the total spend in skills, as a pure measure, and the number of students. There is continued investment from this government in supporting vocational education, and that is more than just the number of students.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, how does the government plan on translating spending into actual outcomes in this year's budget instead of repeating its mistakes?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Milligan for the supplementary question. I reject the premise of the question. This government has a strong commitment to our skills agenda. That is evidenced by our election commitments, and our work over many years in

government.

I would urge Mr Milligan and the Canberra Liberals to get on board. I would observe that the Canberra Liberals are lacking skills policies. If the Canberra Liberals do have useful suggestions, I would love to hear them; but, as I understand it, they do not currently have any policies. If they would like to, they can get on board and support what we are doing, because we are committed to growing the skills mix of this city.

We acknowledge—and I am up-front about it—that, right now, we are in an incredibly tight labour market, and there are not the same number of people pursuing vocational education. That is a problem right now—also, into the future. It is a problem that we are keen to address, and we will continue to invest in and support solutions to improve that mix.

ACT Policing—hate speech laws

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries. As Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries, do you support the actions of ACT police on Wednesday, 18 February when they removed artistic posters featuring political commentary and subsequently closed the venue, disrupting a live, ticketed music event?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Clay for the question and her continued advocacy for the arts in our city. The ACT government very clearly supports artistic freedom, and we also support the right for people to acquire and display art. I acknowledge the events on Wednesday last week were incredibly distressing for many members of the community—most certainly the performers and those who were seeking to attend that live music performance. That is a disruption to the arts but also small business. I appreciate the chilling effect that incident and the subsequent discussion and coverage have on artistic expression in our city. I think that is concerning.

I appreciate, however, that this is an ongoing matter. The ACT government has always been very clear within our own laws that we support artistic freedom. I note that the events relate to commonwealth law. In that spirit, I have written to the commonwealth minister, Tony Burke, to reiterate the ACT government's firm commitment to artistic freedom, but to also ensure his awareness of these matters.

Ms Clay: A point of order on relevance: I do not think it is an ongoing matter. Police have said that they are not pursuing any prosecution or charges. The question was: do you support the actions of ACT police on Wednesday, 18 February, given the matter is now closed? I am wondering if that is a question that could be answered.

MR SPEAKER: The minister was broad in his response. He was not entirely specific. I think he went to the issue and expressed a view but has not necessarily commented directly on police action. Do you have anything further to add, Minister?

MR PETTERSSON: I am happy to, Mr Speaker. I am not going to run commentary on the actions of police. I appreciate that they have a very challenging role to fulfil each and every day, but I have spoken to the events of that evening.

MS CLAY: Minister, what discussions have you had with the police minister around ensuring police have training and education so that art is not unjustly criminalised?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Clay for the supplementary question. I have spoken to Minister Patterson about these events. I do not think those conversations went to education for police, but I appreciate the suggestion from Ms Clay underpinning that question. It is something that I will consider further.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, have you had any contact with the owner of Dissent Cafe and Bar since they were raided by police for hanging political art in their windows on Wednesday, 18 February? If so, what was the outcome of those conversations?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Rattenbury for that question. To the specifics of the question, I have not spoken to that individual. I would, of course, be very willing and happy to entertain a conversation with them, noting their passion for live music and politics. I am sure it would be an interesting conversation. I appreciate that they have gone through a very challenging time in recent days, and I appreciate they may have a desire to speak with me. I would very happily make myself available if that were the case.

Vocational education and training—fee-free TAFE

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to Minister for Skills. Fee-free TAFE at the Canberra Institute of Technology was intended to provide free training for people seeking to learn or upskill and is jointly funded by the commonwealth and the ACT government. Minister, is the program delivering measurable results?

MR PETTERSSON: Mr Speaker, could I get Mr Milligan to repeat that?

MR SPEAKER: The last bit or the whole thing?

MR PETTERSSON: It is the last bit he keeps dropping off on.

MR SPEAKER: So the actual question rather than the preamble.

MR MILLIGAN: Okay. Minister, is the program delivering measurable results—the fee-free training courses at CIT?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Milligan for the question. Fee-free TAFE is an important initiative, in conjunction with the commonwealth government, that supports people who might not otherwise be entering vocational education to do so by providing access to VET without fees. This is, I think, particularly important for the priority cohorts that are identified in fee-free TAFE that we are seeking to further participate within vocational education. This is an important initiative that reduces barriers to entry that is wildly popular. It is oversubscribed, which I think speaks to the high regard with which it is held in the community.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, how many fee-free TAFE graduates have moved directly into employment in areas of recognised skills shortages?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Milligan for the question. There are a couple of elements to that. Not all non-completions are inherently a bad thing for that learner. If they are transitioning out of vocational education midway but that is into the employment they were seeking, that is considered, I think, a positive outcome. There are of course some elements underpinning that that would cause concern. The future skills of our city requires those completions and the qualifications to exist.

I will take it on notice and do my best to provide an answer. I will note that free TAFE has only been in place for a couple of years. So we do not necessarily have full completion rates, because not everyone who has undertaken one of those placements will have been able to complete their qualification in this time. I will take it on notice and see what we can provide.

MR CAIN: Minister, will your government ensure that fee-free TAFE at CIT continues beyond its current funding allocation?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank the member for the question. As the member would appreciate, I am not in a position to make announcements. I would also point to the fact that this is a partnership with the commonwealth. I acknowledge that the commonwealth have been very firm in their support in seeking to legislate free TAFE in this country, which I believe was not supported by all political parties in the commonwealth parliament.

Mr Barr interjecting—

MR PETTERSSON: Believe it or not, Chief Minister, there is a particular political party that have not been supportive of free TAFE. So I genuinely appreciate this passion being displayed by the Canberra Liberals for the benefits of free TAFE. We here in ACT Labor will continue to support it, in partnership with the commonwealth. I take this may be as a sign of hope that maybe the Canberra Liberals will, but I am still waiting for their skills policy from the last election.

Domestic Violence Crisis Service—government funding

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. Last week, the CEO of DVCS advised me that the government had informed the frontline service that the available funding for the next financial year was 20 per cent less than the current year. In a statement to the *Canberra Times*, you said the government would not be cutting their funding. If your statement to the Times is correct, why have DVCS been told that there will be 20 per cent less funding available from 1 July?

DR PATERSON: The ACT government is very strongly committed to supporting our specialist domestic, family and sexual violence sector. DVCS plays a really critical role in that, in supporting victim-survivors but also working with people, men, who use violence to change their behaviour. So I want to acknowledge the critical work of their staff and their service. We are currently going through a core contract negotiation with three of the core services in the ACT, so DVCS, CRCC—so Canberra Rape Crisis Centre—and EveryMan. As part of those negotiations, both DVCS and CRCC have a funding cliff that is coming at the end of the June-July financial year. This is obviously

something that DVCS and the ACT government is well aware of. I have raised this issue with my colleagues and worked to be able to provide a clear statement to DVCS and CRCC that that core funding, that drop off, will not occur for the 2026-27 financial year. We are just entering into a budget process now. So there will be a process that we will go through to understand the full picture of domestic family sexual violence funding in this next financial year and ongoing.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, why is the government not making the same investments in frontline service providers as the significant commitments recently made by the New South Wales and Victorian governments?

DR PATERSON: I am not aware of the interstate commitments that are being made, but we went to the budget and we provided a significant amount, \$30 million, of new funding to the domestic family sexual violence sector in the last budget. We recognise that this violence is a complete scourge on our society and the ongoing need and support of these services to victim-survivors. As I said, we are going through a budget process as we speak and so this will be a matter for cabinet consideration.

MR PARTON: Minister, could you provide the Assembly with up-to-date data showing how much the government has spent on family and domestic violence, broken down by spending on ACTPS activities compared with frontline service providers, over the last five years?

DR PATERSON: Yes, I absolutely can. This is in the budget documents over the last five years and it is also in the ACT domestic family sexual violence fact sheet. This is a fact sheet that we put out with the budget last year. So this very clearly articulates the entire lot of spending and what has gone to each service or program. It also articulates that 100 per cent of the Safer Families Levy has gone to frontline services. So I encourage Mr Parton to go to the ACT government website and the information is all there. I also really encourage him to circulate this information to colleagues and community because it is a really helpful fact sheet that clearly articulates the government's priorities in spending to address domestic family sexual violence.

CBR 2030 ACT Strategic Economic Development Framework

MR BRADDOCK: The government's newly released CBR 2030 ACT Strategic Economic Development Framework fails to consider regional employment and economic activation of town centres that lack major employers such as Gungahlin. This is despite a recent Gungahlin Community Council survey of 1320 residents showing 82.8 per cent of respondents stating they believe the ACT government should implement targeted strategies to attract commercial businesses to Gungahlin. Chief Minister, what consideration did the government make during the revision of the economic development strategy to generating employment in town centres that lack a significant employment base?

MR BARR: That was not the purpose of the strategy. The strategy is around the territory and its broader economic drivers in relation to specific regions within the ACT. Obviously the levers there are principally in the planning space. As it relates to distribution of employment across the ACT, we are the most polycentric city in Australia in terms of our employment nodes. But it is acknowledged that some town

centres do not have the same level, particularly, of commonwealth government employment as others, and some town centres are at different stages of their economic development.

As it relates specifically to the Gungahlin town centre, the Suburban Land Agency will shortly be proceeding with the Gungahlin town centre east developments that include areas that are currently just vacant lots and including a series of lots that have a light rail stop central to their economic development opportunity. There will be further land release and further commercial development opportunities for the Gungahlin town centre specifically. More broadly, we are obviously pursuing inbound investment and we have had significant discussions with the Scentre group in relation to Woden and Belconnen and with the owners of South Point in relation to Tuggeranong. And the SLA is leading work in relation to Gungahlin and the minister for planning is of course leading work in relation to the future Molonglo town centre.

MR BRADDOCK: Chief Minister, are there any economic development strategies being implemented to increase employment in Gungahlin?

MR BARR: Yes, there are a number that specifically of course relate to both the prospectus that was issued around future commonwealth employment opportunities together with the work of the Suburban Land Agency around that future land release and the zoning that would attract particular investment. We do also have an outreach program where we do seek to engage with major retailers, for example, around establishing or expanding their network of operations in the ACT.

I think it is fair to say, Mr Speaker, that generally if there is only one or two outlets in the ACT, they will tend to have a north side and a south side. Where an entity might be large enough and have a volume of sales sufficient to have a presence in every town centre—supermarkets, banks, certain major retailers—then Gungahlin has increasingly seen that investment. But there is scope for more.

I think there is also a reality, though, that our economy is evolving and being reshaped and we do not know entirely the impact that artificial intelligence will have on the labour market in Canberra, let alone in Australia. But the only thing I am certain of is that it will change that dynamic. Some jobs will disappear; new jobs will be created. And given Gungahlin was the first area connected to the National Broadband Network, it has a significant advantage over other parts of the ACT that are still to be connected to that broadband network.

MISS NUTTALL: Chief Minister, how can the government say it is focused on giving people back time while not addressing local employment opportunities?

MR BARR: Well, Miss Nuttall, with respect, I do reject the premise of the question. We are focused on both local employment opportunities, territory-wide employment opportunities, because often the question is not which part of Canberra will get the investment, it is where the Canberra will get any investment at all. And this is often a challenge we face as a very small economy, even within Australia, let alone in a global context.

Giving back time is also about transport investment and ensuring that people can move

around the city effectively and I think we have a shared agreement and understanding that the work we did together in government to deliver light rail for Gungahlin, for example, was in fact an important project to give back time and to invest heavily in people's ability to move around the city in a sustainable and a low emissions way as well. So we will continue that focus. Investment in giving back time is more than just employment, but I do acknowledge employment is a factor. But clearly trends around working from home give back a considerable amount of time that would otherwise be lost to commuting in any circumstance, even if it were localised commuting.

Public schools—staffing

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Last year the minister promised there would be no redundancies for permanent staff in ACT public schools in 2026. In turn, we were worried that that has hung casual staff out to dry. We are already hearing of classes being split, collapsed and cancelled this year, so we clearly need to do more to retain our teaching staff.

Minister, how many classes have been split, collapsed or cancelled so far this year?

MS BERRY: I will take that question on notice.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, if the directorate does not currently collect these figures or make them available publicly, when will they start doing so to provide a public record for how frequently kids are missing out on learning?

MS BERRY: I reject that students in our schools are missing out on learning. There is a range of different ways, and processes that our schools use, to manage vacancies when they arise. We have talked about teacher vacancies in this place a number of times, that COVID has a very long tail and that we require teachers and school staff not to come to work when they are ill. And that is appropriate. Unfortunately, over the last couple of years, we have seen an increase in the number of staff contracting COVID or having flu-like symptoms and being unable to work. The Education Directorate works very closely with schools to ensure that we can provide those relief staff when they are available. Also, schools work hard to provide alternative learning and teaching arrangements when those circumstances do occur.

I believe that that information is provided to schools at the school community level, which is appropriate. I do not believe that the Education Directorate collects that data. I am not sure of the purpose of it, given that schools provide that information to their communities.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, can you guarantee that class splits, collapses and cancellations will reduce this year? And if not, why not?

MS BERRY: That is very hypothetical. I do not know what the flu season is going to be like this year or whether COVID is going to step up again this year, so I cannot give that guarantee. What I can guarantee is that schools will work hard to ensure that students get learning in a range of different ways, if they have to make alternative lesson arrangements, should there be staff in our schools who are sick. Of course, I would hope that everybody in this place would agree that coming to work unwell is not a priority

for our schoolteachers. We would want them to take the time off so that they are well enough to work when they are much better and in a healthy position. It is a challenging environment. Education is not the only space where managing increases in flu or COVID-like symptoms is becoming a challenge for us to manage as a society, but I think our schools do an excellent job in managing that in the circumstances when that does occur.

Economy—private sector

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Treasurer. The 2025-26 midyear budget review revealed that growth in gross state product was largely driven by government spending, with private investment lagging behind. Treasurer, why is government spending the only thing driving growth in gross state product?

MR STEEL: I do not accept that. Certainly, government spending, mainly by the commonwealth government, being the largest employer in the territory, does affect gross state product—and, of course, the ACT government as well. We do expect that, over the forward estimates, we will start to see a pick-up in private demand, which will contribute to that economic indicator in the future. Yes, there has been a substantial amount of spending by the commonwealth. Obviously, they are taking steps around constraining growth, and re-prioritisation, in much the same way that the ACT government is, and we expect that that will be replaced in the future by a pick-up in private demand.

MR MILLIGAN: Treasurer, what impact did your increased taxes on businesses have on private investment?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. Obviously, we continue to monitor the performance of the economy, which is, of course, leading the nation in terms of GSP growth, and years of uninterrupted growth in the territory. With the decisions that we make, we do need to think about the implications of those, but we have been very careful about that. The decisions that we took in the context of an economy the size of ours were relatively small, so there was not a significant change, or a change at all, to economic forecasts as a result of the decisions that we made in the budget last year. Of course, in every budget we will need to consider the circumstances in which we are making decisions, and we will need to think about that very carefully.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, how does the government plan on reversing its terrible track record on incentivising private investment, given the latest economic indicator summary shows that private investment fell by 0.4 per cent in the last quarter and is now down to, on those numbers, 55 per cent of the economy versus 77.3 per cent in other jurisdictions, and government consumption has now reached 63.9 per cent of total consumption?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. We will continue the economic development strategy, some of which the Chief Minister has outlined in answer to questions in question time today—supporting a knowledge economy, continuing to invest in infrastructure that is required by our city and which also supports business growth and investment in the territory.

We will continue to look at our settings in every budget around taxation and a range of things to make sure that we remain competitive. We have the National Competition Policy agreement with the commonwealth, where we are looking at competition settings, particularly as they relate to planning, as well as the broader labour market and labour mobility. We are undertaking the largest updates to the Territory Plan since self-government to support more housing investment through enabling more supply. This is an economic reform as much as it is about a moral imperative to provide more homes for the people that need them. All of those are our focus, and will support continued investment in the territory.

Taxation—payroll tax

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries. A recent Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry survey revealed that businesses with 15 to 24 employees face stress because they sit near the threshold for payroll tax. Minister, how many businesses will be impacted by the government's rushed decision to reduce the threshold for payroll tax during last year's budget?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Milligan for the question. As Mr Milligan would appreciate, tax policy does not sit with me, but I am happy to take the question on notice and see if we can provide a figure.

MR MILLIGAN: Will the minister apologise to small business owners for the government's ambush with its changes to payroll tax?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Milligan for the supplementary. I reject the premise of the question. The ACT government, in setting its tax policy, has consideration of a wide range of factors, so I reject the premise of the question.

MS BARRY: Minister, are you aware of any staff who have been laid off in anticipation of the payroll tax changes?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Barry for the question. No; I am not aware. In my meetings with businesses, no-one has raised that specific outcome with me.

Yerrabi Yurwang—government funding

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, your government has repeatedly acknowledged the need for culturally safe Aboriginal community-controlled health services in north Canberra. This includes commitments made in the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-28 to build and strengthen the Aboriginal community-controlled sector, including health-related services, which includes the Yerrabi Yurwang Health Centre. Minister, is it not the case that your government has left Yerrabi Yurwang without the funding certainty it needs to continue delivering frontline health services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Gungahlin?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am not sure which part of the Leader of the Opposition's question was a direct quote. As I think I have indicated before, I met with some Yerrabi Yurwang board members in December. The organisation has been in ongoing

conversations with our officials since then to understand what their short-, medium- and long-term requirements are to deliver a sustainable primary care service on Canberra's northside. I recognise the commitment of the board, the CEO and staff to delivering that service.

I wrote to Minister Butler about this matter, encouraging him or his office to meet with Yerrabi Yurwang to talk this through to understand what funding arrangements might be available from the commonwealth, given that both primary care and Aboriginal medical service funding are the responsibilities of the commonwealth government. They have recently met. In fact, just today I have received a response from Minister Butler outlining that there will be a new grants program that Yerrabi Yurwang would probably be eligible to apply for. That will be released in the next financial year. It is useful to have that confirmation. There was no confirmation of any short-term funding.

Our officials continue to talk to Yerrabi Yurwang about what may be required in the short-term. But what I have sought is an understanding of what the pathway to sustainability in the medium to long term looks like. The amount of funding that Yerrabi has been seeking for a very short period of time is quite a significant amount of funding. I am concerned that, if there is no pathway to sustainability, this is not necessarily the best use of our resources in that environment where there is not a sustainable pathway.

MR PARTON: Minister, in those discussions with Yerrabi Yurwang's leadership, did you indicate that the ACT government would steadfastly pursue securing ongoing support and, if so, why has that commitment not been honoured?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I reject the premise of the Leader of the Opposition's question. I did indicate that I would advocate to the commonwealth government to have these conversations to seek for there to be a sustainable funding solution in the medium to longer term in these areas of commonwealth responsibility. I have done that. I understand that Senator Gallagher has also met with Yerrabi Yurwang to have these conversations. I have also had advocacy from the member for Fenner, Andrew Leigh, and I have had a conversation with him about that.

As I indicated in response to the first question, I have written to Minister Butler and my office has spoken to the office of Minister Butler. I received a response from Minister Butler indicating the pathways for Yerrabi Yurwang to potentially be funded by the commonwealth. I know that commonwealth officials have also been meeting with them about this. So we do continue to have these conversations. We recognise that there is a lot of passion and a lot of commitment, but we also want to ensure that there is a pathway to sustainability for this organisation, given the very significant amount of funding that Yerrabi has been seeking from the ACT government, in a very short period of time—having first been made aware of the funding request and the quantum of it in December, if not January, in terms of the quantum.

MS BARRY: Minister, will you step in today and secure that Yerrabi Yurwang does not close up shop?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Barry for the question, but yesterday the opposition asked a number of questions about the operation of the Financial Management Act and the responsibility for officials to act within the law when spending

ACT government funding. There was no specific program established in the last budget that could potentially fund this organisation. There are some related areas of funding where there is potentially opportunity to move some funding around—and that is the conversation I have had with Yerrabi Yurwang. There is also a funding opportunity that is currently open. That is \$1.5 million to expand bulk-billing for children and young people under 16, and we have ensured that Yerrabi Yurwang is aware of that opportunity. But, of course, the funding from that would not flow until next year.

The conversation we are having with them at the moment is to understand what the need is, to understand what the pathway to sustainability is and for our officials to understand whether there is any funding that could be made available for this purpose under the FMA.

Government procurement—conduct in procurement

MR PARTON: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Chief Minister.

Chief Minister, in 2024, the ACT government awarded a \$444 million contract to JJ Richards of Hume for the provision of kerbside waste collection in the ACT. What involvement did the Transport Workers' Union have in the selection of the successful tender, including representations to the directorate, the minister's office, or the minister?

MR BARR: I will need to take that question on notice. I am not privy to every single engagement in relation to that, or indeed any, procurement. The Transport Workers' Union would of course have an interest in representing its members and in any transmission of business from one contractor to another. I have been around this place long enough to know that, were there any changes in the arrangements associated with their employment, from one contractor to another, that Mr Parton—or whoever was sitting in the opposition leader's chair—would be asking a different set of questions, and those in the media would be asking a different set of questions.

This appears to be a fishing exercise from the opposition in relation to this matter. We will take that for what it is.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, how can you ensure that your government ministers maintain arm's length from procurement arrangements, given the TWU's and unions' ability—given your answer in question time earlier—to influence government policy?

MR BARR: Well, there is a difference between policy and a procurement. I think Mr Parton has been around long enough to know that. Government can set a policy, for example, that in a transition from one contractor to another that there would be no loss of conditions for the staff who are working in that context. So that would be a policy decision. The decision as to who wins a particular procurement is of course, entirely at arm's length from ministers, as it should be.

MS MORRIS: Chief Minister, given the ongoing issues with probity and corruption concerns, do you believe it is appropriate for trade unions to continue to have influence on government procurement?

MR BARR: I think organisations that represent employees—whether they are formally trade unions or indeed professional guilds—will always express opinions in relation to government services that would involve their members. I think the ideological bent of Ms Morris’s question is that trade unions are inherently evil, but, of course, doctors associations—

Mr Cocks: Point of order. I believe the Chief Minister has moved into debating the question.

MR SPEAKER: It is arguable that he has. Chief Minister, have you completed your answer?

MR BARR: I will continue, Mr Speaker. I think I have made my point. It is clear that organisations that represent the interests of workers will advocate in relation to workers. Organisations that represent the professional interests of their professional membership will also do the same. So I think the tenor of the questioning here is to seek to demonise the union movement—

Mr Cocks: Point of order. I believe the Chief Minister is once again debating the question itself by straying into imputations about the tenor of the question.

MR SPEAKER: Yes, he is. Chief Minister, if you would just stick to answering the question, that would be great.

MR BARR: The fact that Mr Cocks is so sensitive about this point I think proves my point, Mr Speaker.

Mr Cocks: I think that is probably imputations and debating the question.

MR SPEAKER: Chief Minister, I would ask you not to provoke the opposition. I think if you just stick to answering the question it would be useful.

MR BARR: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Given your long experience in provoking, I take your advice—

MR SPEAKER: I hope you are not reflecting on the chair!

MR BARR: On the chair? No, certainly not on the chair, Mr Speaker. Your time in Mr Cocks’s seat, maybe. But that is, of course, ancient history.

The fundamental point here is that organisations will advocate on behalf of their members. That is entirely appropriate. It is, of course, important though, that final decisions in relation to matters of government procurement are not determined by them.
(Time expired.)

Justice—criminalisation of coercive control

MS TOUGH: My question to the Minister for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. Minister, can you provide an update to the Assembly in relation to the criminalisation of coercive control?

DR PATERSON: I am very pleased to update the Assembly on the progress made over the last six months in relation to the work towards criminalisation of coercive control. On 13 August last year I hosted a round table on coercive control with community stakeholders to commence this important discussion. This meeting included a presentation from Domestic Violence NSW presenting their perspective of the offence in New South Wales and the perspective of their members in their frontline work with victim-survivors.

On 20 October, we held our first meeting at the Coercive Control Steering Committee, which also was attended by various members of the Assembly. This was an important starting point to start the dialogue. Since then, the steering committee has continued to meet and consider the scope and approach of the legislation at multiple meetings. The committee was briefed on the Victim-Survivor Voices Report on Coercive Control to ensure the expertise of those with lived experience is central to our consideration of the offence provision. This report was also publicly released on 22 November.

In February, the committee was briefed on technical legal aspects and opinions by the DPP and Legal Aid. This has allowed the committee to really engage with the detail of how the offence should be designed, the benefits and advantages of different approaches. Myself and the Chief Police Officer met with New South Wales Police to discuss their experiences of the criminalisation in their jurisdiction and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate have conducted targeted consultation with justice stakeholders, as well as engaging with the New South Wales and Queensland legislative frameworks and relevant other government agencies.

I have been working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Expert Reference Group to understand the impacts and concerns for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Community organisations including Women with Disabilities ACT are conducting targeted consultation with their members in relation to the development of the offence. We will continue to work with the committee as we begin to progress the drafting process.

MS TOUGH: Minister, what can we learn from other jurisdictions who have already established coercive control offences?

DR PATERSON: We are carefully monitoring the experiences of New South Wales and Queensland jurisdictions, given both have just recently moved to criminalise this as an offence. As I said, ACT Policing have been engaging with their counter counterparts in other jurisdictions and in New South Wales. The Implementation and Evaluation Task Force has tabled a number of reports which contain useful data in relation to the types of behaviour being reported to police in the first months of the offence in operation.

The most commonly recorded controlling behaviours of the 224 coercive control reports were harassment, monitoring and tracking, threats or intimidation, financial abuse, shaming, degrading or humiliating, and social isolation or cultural abuse. I am very focused on ensuring our offence adequately captures technology facilitated abuse, which is so often present in coercive, controlling relationships.

The New South Wales report also contains data in relation to the implementation in their jurisdiction, including training and community education. This task force will report again in July 2026 and we will continue to monitor these reports. In New South Wales just a few weeks ago we saw the first jail sentence imposed for a coercive control offence, a two-year custodial sentence with a 15-month non-parole period. The appropriate sentence for our jurisdiction is under consideration, given New South Wales and Queensland have taken different approaches in terms of the maximum penalty for this offence.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how does this work fit together with the government's broader response to domestic, family and sexual violence?

DR PATERSON: Introducing legislation to criminalise coercive control will strengthen the ability of our justice system to respond to domestic and family violence, particularly in circumstances where the violence is categorised by a pattern of controlling behaviour. It sits within the broader work of the ACT government in responding to domestic, family and sexual violence.

We are close to finalising updates to the ACT's Risk Assessment Management Framework to improve how it reflects dynamics of coercive control and ensure a consistent risk assessment approach in referrals and safety planning across government and non-government agencies. The RAMF is also an integral component of the information sharing scheme, which will support greater collaboration and coordinated support to people experiencing violence, including coercive control.

We are also in the final stages of developing the ACT's 10-year domestic, family and sexual violence strategy and its associated action plans, which will reflect many of the activities which support the introduction of a standalone offensive coercive control. The introduction of a bill to create a standalone offence is only the first step. We have observed in New South Wales it takes time for reports to be received, charges laid and ultimately convictions secured. Appropriate mechanisms and structures to monitor the implementation of the offence, how it is used and its impacts are already being considered and this work will continue.

As we move forward, we will continue to rely on the expert advice of the Coercive Control Steering Committee and other relevant stakeholders to ensure appropriate resources and structures exist to support the implementation of this offence. It is critical that we proceed carefully but with resolve to address this pervasive, harmful and dangerous behaviour and send a clear message to the community that coercive control is unacceptable and increase the tools available to our justice system to respond in a way that promotes safety for victims and accountability for people using violence. Thank you.

Mr Barr: Mr Milligan is getting very concerned; he has somewhere to be. So I will ask that all further questions be placed on the notice paper, Mr Speaker.