



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Thursday, 21 March 2024

This is an **EDITED PROOF TRANSCRIPT** of question time proceedings that is subject to further checking. Members' suggested corrections for the official *Weekly Hansard* should be lodged with the Hansard office as soon as possible.

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Ministerial arrangements

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Tourism and Minister for Trade, Investment and Economic Development) (2.01): I advise the same acting ministerial arrangements as the previous two days.

Questions without notice Light rail—economic analysis

MR PARTON: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, in his response to the PAC inquiry into the Auditor-General's report into stage 2A of the tram, Minister Steel advised that, under the ACT government's capital framework, various detailed technical guidelines are applied in the economic appraisal of projects, including the New South Wales *Principles and Guidelines for Economic Appraisal of Transport Investment and Initiatives*. These New South Wales guidelines, which your minister cited, say:

... a detailed breakdown allows the make-up of infrastructure costs to be better understood.

The guidelines prescribe that these infrastructure costs should include capital, planning and designing, surveying and preparation, set-up or establishment costs, annual operating and maintenance costs and contingency costs. Chief Minister, do you still maintain that the total cost of \$1.46 billion for stage 2A is misleading, or are the New South Wales guidelines that your minister used also wrong?

MR BARR: I think you are conflating two different analyses there, Mr Parton, and endeavouring to attribute to the capital costs of a project a range of operational and maintenance costs that would obviously be for any transport infrastructure project. The whole point of your particular political attack was to suggest that this project costs exponentially more than another form of transport project. There would be and are operational and maintenance costs for the public transport fleet that is electric bus, compressed natural gas bus or diesel bus.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, by not publicly disclosing the full \$1.46 billion, were you hoping that the true cost of light rail stage 2A would not be fully understood by Canberrans?

MR BARR: The fact that all of that information is disclosed and has been in the budget papers and is public—and has been for years in many instances—would suggest that the government has disclosed, rather than seeking to not disclose. I think there is clearly a contest over the extent to which certain enabling projects—for example, raising London Circuit—that clearly enable light rail but are not solely attributable to the light rail extension come into some political contest.

Mr Parton's analysis does not include commonwealth contributions, offsetting revenue from land sales and revenue from the fares that are associated with usage of the light rail, for example. So the totality of the economic outcome is broader than what you are suggesting, Mr Parton. You are attributing costs to the project that should not be solely

attributed to light rail stage 2A. Again, the whole purpose of your exercise is a massive scare campaign. The government is focused on extending a very popular and effective form of public transport that also enables significant private investment in new infrastructure that our city needs.

MR CAIN: Chief Minister, is the reason that there are no publicly available procurement guidelines in the Capital Framework that it allows you to cherry-pick what you tell Canberrans?

MR BARR: No.

Economy—education market

MS ORR: My question is to the Minister for Trade, Investment and Economic Development, who also happens to be the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, could you please update the Assembly on the performance of the ACT's international education market?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Orr for the question. In short, the performance is incredibly strong. I think members are aware of Canberra's reputation as Australia's knowledge and research capital, and that international education is our biggest export. I am pleased to advise the Assembly that this sector has recovered to above pre-COVID levels and contributed \$1.26 billion to our local economy in the most recent annual data. This is an increase of over 65 per cent over the last decade. I think it is a remarkable result, given how significantly COVID impacted the higher education sector.

Pleasingly, since the pandemic, we have seen increased diversification in our international student market. India is now the second biggest source market, with more than 3,600 Indian students studying in Canberra. But there has also been very strong growth out of South-East Asia, with Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia all ranking in the top 10 sources of international students for Canberra. In total, there are now over 20,000 international students studying here in Canberra, and they are drawn from over 100 countries around the world.

MS ORR: Chief Minister, what will be needed to continue this growth into the future?

MR BARR: Clearly, international education is at the centre of our international engagement strategy. It is great to see the very strong partnerships between the ACT government, the University of Canberra, the Australian National University, the University of New South Wales Canberra, the Australian Catholic University and the Canberra Institute of Technology, who were all involved in the recent trade mission that I led to India.

The new UNSW Canberra city campus will contribute further to this growth. When complete, the billion-dollar campus will see around 5,000 more places for local undergraduate and postgraduate and national and international students. Our universities are ranked in the top four per cent in the world, and we have universities amongst the world's top 100 education institutions. Our universities also rank very highly on graduate employment. A continued strong performance in both research and education will help to further strengthen their international brands and make them

attractive places to study.

In addition to supporting our universities through our international trade engagement, the territory government will continue to make Canberra an attractive place to study by boosting our city's reputation, already in the top 25 world cities to study in, as a high quality and safe destination for international students, whilst also being a fun and interesting city to study in.

DR PATERSON: Chief Minister, what benefits do international students bring to our community?

MR BARR: Canberra is a multicultural city, and having students from more than 100 countries around the world further enhances our city's diversity and culture. There are more than 20,000 international students in a population of about 470,000. It is a very big component of our city.

Around a quarter of Canberra's population was born overseas, so we have a wide range of cultural and community groups that assist these students to feel at home when they are studying here. International students studying in Canberra support thousands of local businesses and jobs, and the visiting friends and relatives component of our tourism market is clearly strongly linked to these 20,000 international students.

They support local businesses; they work in local businesses. We know that there is clearly demand for more skilled labour across our economy. After they complete their study, international students can access an extra year of post-study working rights in Canberra, compared to many other Australian capital cities.

Our ambition is that we can keep as many international students as possible in Canberra when they finish their study so that they can go on to contribute to our city and support key employment growth areas like health and education, as well as emerging knowledge industries like quantum, cybersecurity and space.

Light rail—economic analysis

MR PARTON: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, now that the true cost of light rail stage 2A has been revealed to be over \$1.46 billion, which is a staggering 254 per cent more than what you have previously told Canberrans, and it is obvious that the federal government's commitment is far from fifty-fifty, what figure for 2B do you plan to release to Canberrans? Will it be the true cost, as advocated for by Minister Steel, or the sanitised version, as advocated by you?

MR BARR: Firstly, I reject the premise of Mr Parton's question. We will release capital costs, we will release preliminaries costs and obviously we will release, as we have in stage 1 and the augmentation of stage 2A, the public-private partnership costs associated with the cost of capital and with operations and maintenance. What we do not seek to do is to mislead the community by rolling operations and maintenance and a range of other costs together—

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members!

MR BARR: and purport them to be a capital cost and then seek to present that as a cost per metre. I think that was one of the latest gimmicks that Mr Parton was seeking to push out into the community, as part of yet another Canberra Liberals light rail scare campaign. Why change the habit of a lifetime? You want to keep on this track—boom, boom!—

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members!

MR BARR: It is a track that continues to lead you to that side of the chamber.

Mr Parton: You can feel the tide changing, can't you?

MR BARR: You guys are already so confident that you have won the election, we may as well just not bother from here on in. So confident are you. There you go! Time will tell. We are clear about our position in support of investing in high-quality public transport. Depending on which Canberra Liberal you speak to, Mr Hanson has always been opposed and Mr Parton was opposed, then supported it and is now opposed again, apparently. The people of Canberra can see all of that. I have heard the reaction to this Liberal scare campaign. People are just rolling their eyes.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, now that we know the true cost of stage 2A, will you be going back to your federal colleagues to seek additional funding to make up the shortfall?

MR BARR: It is very clear that the commonwealth have contributed 50 per cent of construction costs towards the project. We would not expect the commonwealth to be paying for operations and maintenance ongoing. They are contributing to the capital cost of the project. That capital component is the component that we have clearly published, and the commonwealth have significantly contributed in that regard.

We will of course be approaching the commonwealth for a further contribution to the further extension of the light rail network.

Mr Parton: Needing! Needing, I think, is the word.

MR BARR: I think it is important that we do, because it is going into the national triangle and servicing more than 50,000 commonwealth staff who work in that precinct. It is also going into the single largest tourism precinct for our city, where our national cultural institutions are located. So there is a very compelling reason to extend light rail further and for the commonwealth to make a contribution.

MR CAIN: Chief Minister, how can you tell Canberrans that you will get a fifty-fifty commitment from your federal colleagues when you only secured a 20 per cent commitment for 2A?

MR BARR: Again, I reject the premise of Mr Cain's question. We were not asking the

commonwealth to contribute 50 per cent of ongoing operations and maintenance costs over the next 15 to 20 years. The maths involved in Mr Cain's calculations presumably includes the operations and maintenance component. What we are seeking is a 50 per cent contribution from the commonwealth towards construction. That is what we have achieved in stage 2A. I note that we did attract admittedly a smaller contribution out of the Abbott federal government—

Mr Hanson: He's a good man, Tony.

MR BARR: Put that on your campaign brochure and see how it goes.

Schools—teachers

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs. Minister, recent media reporting in the *Canberra Times* has revealed that, in a submission to the independent inquiry into literacy and numeracy performance in the territory, a group of ACT government schoolteachers said that some educators had been explicitly told not to teach phonics or use decodable readers. The media report goes on to say that the teachers said they felt a sense of “moral injury” because they were unable to help students who were “instructional casualties arising from the shortcomings of public schools” and that “this situation represents a breach of our ethical and professional principles, and it causes us significant distress.” Minister, are you aware of any government schools in the ACT that have forced their teachers not to teach phonics or use decodable readers?

MS BERRY: Thank you for the question, Ms Castley. I have not been made aware that that is the case. However, I accept that there has been a representation by teachers to the inquiry, and the government will respond to the inquiry on literacy and numeracy in due course. I look forward to seeing the outcomes and recommendations that come to the ACT government from the literacy and numeracy inquiry—a request that was made through a motion by Mr Hanson, retired education spokesperson of the Canberra Liberals, which I agreed to, and I added numeracy to that inquiry because—

Mr Hanson: Was I retired?

MS BERRY: That is a question for you to answer, Mr Hanson! I am looking forward to the outcomes of that inquiry because, in ACT public schools, we always strive to improve and do better where we can, and we do that based on the best possible advice from a range of different stakeholders. That is what this literacy and numeracy inquiry is showing us. We are getting a whole range of inputs, from students, parents, teachers, schools, school principals and others—not just one loud voice but a range of voices who are giving their own experiences and their own expertise and advice to the inquiry. As I said, I look forward to the outcome.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, will you undertake to investigate the specific extraordinary claims—not just the broader inquiry itself—made by these ACT government school teachers?

MS BERRY: I know the submissions are available now and are being publicised. However, I understand that these may be anonymous issues that these teachers have

raised. But, again, I will wait for the outcome and recommendations of the inquiry before I make any decisions about any further investigations or recommendation responses.

MR PARTON: Minister, what action will you take to ensure that no teacher suffers significant stress as a result of being unable to do what is best for their students?

MS BERRY: The ACT government absolutely supports public school teachers, and we have shown that through our enterprise agreement negotiations to have some of the highest paid teachers in the country working here in the ACT. We support them not just in their wages but in making sure that we can provide them with support in their education in teaching and in honing their craft, and that we provide them with the tools that they need.

This inquiry will give us more advice on what other kinds of tools they need to provide the best possible education, and we will work with a range of stakeholders to ensure that they can deliver that and that they are supported—stakeholders like the University of Canberra, for example, which we have been working with and have a great relationship with, supporting teachers through mentoring and additional professional development. We will continue to do that. We will continue to do that by listening to a broad range of advice from experts—not just one expert but a range of experts—to make sure that we come through with the right information to support teachers to do their job.

Schools—teachers

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, I refer to the same media article in the *Canberra Times*, which said:

We have been routinely dismissed when we try to be heard. For this reason, we have not been able to put our names to the quotes in this paper because we are genuinely afraid about the professional ramifications for our careers.

Minister, will you guarantee that no teacher will suffer any adverse ramifications, professional or otherwise, for just trying to do their job?

MS BERRY: Yes, absolutely. I am concerned that teachers feel, through their submission to the inquiry, they have not been able to deliver an education they have been taught to. I take the job of teaching-professionals within all our schools, but particularly within our public schools, seriously. That is why this literacy and numeracy inquiry is so important, because it provides the government with the opportunity to hear from a range of stakeholders, including public school teachers in our schools, as well as school principals and students.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, why would some ACT government schoolteachers feel they cannot speak out publicly for fear of ramifications?

MS BERRY: Again, I am concerned to hear that that is the case and that teachers feel they may not be able to deliver an education that—in their view and in our view, obviously—individual students within their classes deserve, and the best possible

education.

This is the first time I have heard that teachers in these circumstances feel this way. I work closely with the Education Directorate, with schools, with the school principals' association and with the Australian Education Union to make sure that our teachers are well supported in our school communities; so, yes, it does concern me that they feel like they will face ramifications as a result of raising these issues.

As I said, I will respond fully to the inquiry when the report is made, but I wish to ensure that if teachers feel like they are being held back, or that their profession is being stymied in any way—I would encourage them to speak with the Education Directorate, to speak with the education union, or to get in touch with my office.

MR PARTON: Minister, what culture have you created in the Education Directorate that would give these hardworking teachers the idea that they cannot speak out on such an important issue? How is it that, as the minister, the first you have heard about it is here in question time?

MS BERRY: I absolutely and completely reject the premise of that question about the environment that public schoolteachers work in in the ACT. We have absolutely backed them in for 100 per cent of the time, every time. That has been shown, as I said, through negotiations that we have been having with the enterprise agreement.

As far as my first-time hearing this—the first time was not during question time but through the submission to the inquiry. As I said, my office is always available to hear from teachers, to hear from school principals, to hear from students and to hear from parents. I encourage them to get in contact with me, the Education Directorate, their school, the education union or wherever they feel comfortable, and to ensure they are supported and backed in, wherever they fit within our public school system, because I am committed to that. I am absolutely committed to our public schooling system providing the best opportunities to every student, and to do that teachers must feel supported. I absolutely back them in. I have proven that through the whole time I have been the education minister—100 per cent of the time.

Justice—sentencing

DR PATERSON: My question is to the Attorney-General. Minister, the first referral to the Law Reform and Sentencing Advisory Council is to look at sentencing for crimes involving dangerous driving. In answers to questions on notice, you have either been unable to provide the relevant data or only from 2019 onwards. What data will the Law Reform and Sentencing Advisory Council have available to them to conduct their inquiry?

MR RATTENBURY: The very point of the Law Reform and Sentencing Advisory Council is that they do operate independently of government. So they have a range of mechanisms available to them to access data.

I have recently met with the Chair of the Law Reform and Sentencing Advisory Council. She has provided me an update on their work and she has indicated to me they are obtaining a number of different data sources. They are working through members

of the council. We have the Director of Public Prosecutions, the police and others represented on the council and so are using a range of data sources, as well as data that has been sent to them by members of the community. They are looking to work their way through all of that data to produce a more comprehensive picture.

This is the very point. I have provided the data that I have access to. There are contested views on the value of that data and that is the value of having this organisation to be able to look at these matters in greater detail.

DR PATERSON: Attorney, is the Law Reform and Sentencing Advisory Council adequately funded to conduct this type of data analysis and research?

MR RATTENBURY: As the member knows, this is the very first referral of the Law Reform and Sentencing Advisory Council. The council was funded with \$800,000 for its first year of operations. One of the things I have been very clear with the chair about, is that we are seeking to establish something new and we need to, as we work through that, examine how it is performing and what the resourcing is like. There is a secretariat of three staff to support the council so there is quite a bit of capability there. In addition to that, there are, of course, a dozen-odd members of the council who also bring their own expertise and capability.

In terms of whether the resourcing is adequate, I think that is something we will need to examine as we work through the operation of the council, but certainly the Chair has indicated to me at this stage they have had excellent contributions from the members and she is very positive about the progress they are making on the referral that has been sent to them.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, what are the timeframes and process of the public release of the council's first report?

MR RATTENBURY: The council is due to report back to the government by 30 July this year, 2024. Again the indications are they are on time for that. They believe they will meet that deadline. They have had a discussion paper out. I cannot remember the date that was released but it has been part of their process as well. That is probably the one out to the public at the moment that I can point the member to.

Planning—call-in powers

MS CLAY: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development or, possibly, the Minister for Planning—but I am sure you will help me out as to who should answer. On 27 February, Labor's Minister for Planning, Minister Steel, called in and approved development on blocks in Denman Prospect on the western edge. This was done under the repealed act. The new act does not allow call-ins because they bypass the checks and balances in a planning system designed to operate at arms-length from ministers. For this development, the Conservator of Flora and Fauna initially objected to building 51 units on one particular area because it would destroy the Bluetts adjacent habitat and risk further endangerments and extinctions. The final decision places strict requirements on the developer to mitigate these impacts, including moving every single pink-tailed worm-lizard found in the area. Why did Labor's planning minister approve development for those 51 units on that area instead

of requiring the developer to redesign and move those 51 units elsewhere on the site?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will respond to this as acting planning minister. I can inform Ms Clay that the call-in powers were utilised because it was determined that the project will achieve the objectives of the Territory Plan, including the statement of strategic directions and objectives for each zone, and will provide a substantial public benefit. The development provides additional community facility zoned land that can be used to deliver services such as schools. In addition, the new estate will increase housing supply in the ACT, some of which of course will be affordable housing.

As Ms Clay has rightly indicated, the decision does include substantial requirements that need to be met, including satisfying the Conservator of Flora and Fauna of a very wide range of conditions, including in relation to pink-tailed worm-lizard habitat. The planning minister determined that the project would achieve, as I said, the objectives of the Territory Plan. Most entities provided conditional support for the proposal or advice that could be conditioned. Entities that did not support the proposal, partially did not support the proposal or required additional information included Icon Water, Transport Canberra and City Services, the Emergency Services Agency and the Conservator of Flora and Fauna and the Tree Protection Unit within TCCS. The conditions of the approval have been incorporated into the decision to ensure that all key matters were addressed.

In relation to Ms Clay's comment in relation to the use of call-in powers, my understanding is that the planning minister has indicated that this would be one of the last times, if not the last time, the call-in powers will be used. But he has publicly indicated his reasons for doing that.

MS CLAY: Does the minister have an intention to call-in for the developments that might meet those needs for housing or schools, or does the minister think that there are no further call-ins required?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am clearly not the planning minister. It would be inappropriate for the planning minister to flag a potential call-in in advance, in any case, and it is not appropriate to be asking for future government decisions to be announced in question time.

DR PATERSON: Minister, will this call-in go some way to alleviating the housing crisis that we are facing?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Dr Paterson for the supplementary. Of course, in determining the call-in, the planning minister has indicated that this would free up and expedite the development of additional housing, in line with our joint commitment to increase housing supply in the ACT while also ensuring that all of the conditions will be met by adding substantial conditions to that decision to ensure that the Conservator for Flora and Fauna and all of those other agencies are satisfied that conditions are met to enable this to go ahead.

This will allow the creation of 295,000 new single-dwelling blocks and 15 new multi-unit sites to accommodate approximately 839,000 dwellings, some of which will of course be affordable housing. That will therefore assist in increasing supply to support

the inevitable population growth that is occurring in the ACT because it is such a fantastic place to live, work and raise a family. Of course, Molonglo is turning into an absolutely fantastic part of Canberra in which to do that. So the minister has balanced the need to ensure that there is increasing housing supply in the ACT with the requirements of all of those agencies to ensure that the proponent can get on with the work of delivering that housing while also meeting all of those requirements. That is exactly why the minister has taken the decision that he has.

Government—conduct

MR CAIN: My question is to the Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction.

Minister, on 28 February this year, you were quoted in local media criticising your colleague the planning minister for using call-in powers to approve the Stromlo Reach development, which of course we have just heard about. Government backbencher and your ACT Greens colleague Ms Clay was quoted as saying, “Labor is in bed with property developers.” This is clearly a very serious claim against your party’s senior government partner and insinuates an inappropriate relationship between ACT Labor and the property development industry.

Minister, are you aware of any inappropriate relationships between any members of ACT Labor and property developers, and could you name them?

MS VASSAROTTI: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for the question. The member would probably be aware that I am also on the public record as being incredibly disappointed by the decision that was made by the planning minister. It is something that I have actually spoken about. I think that the comments of my colleague, and in fact mine, spoke to the frustration of what transpired, particularly given some of our expectations in terms of discussions that would happen in a situation like this.

Certainly, in relation to what we are trying to achieve on good accountability, particularly for property developers, and having clear processes, it has been looked at in detail.

Mr Parton: A point of order, Madam Speaker, on relevance. The question is specifically about the insinuation of an inappropriate relationship between members of ACT Labor and property developers, and I would ask that the minister get to the point in her answer.

MADAM SPEAKER: She is responding in part, but maybe you could get to the point.

MS VASSAROTTI: Sure. The Greens for many years have raised the issue of our lack of comfort around call-in powers in particular, given that it is a political decision that is made around things such as developments. That is where the nature of the comment comes from. In terms of particular relationships with developers, we are working hard, particularly through the portfolio of sustainable building and construction, to ensure accountability and an understanding of how—

Mr Cain: A point of order, Madam Speaker.

MADAM SPEAKER: Resume your seat, Ms Vassarotti.

Mr Cain: The question was: are you aware of any inappropriate relationships between members of ACT Labor and property developers?

MADAM SPEAKER: Ms Vassarotti, you have eight seconds left.

MS VASSAROTTI: I have run out of time.

MADAM SPEAKER: You have concluded?

MS VASSAROTTI: I have concluded.

MR CAIN: Minister, are you suggesting that Ms Clay was deliberately misleading the public by saying that Labor is in bed with property developers?

MS VASSAROTTI: I thank the member for the question. My understanding is that the comments made were expressing frustration and were satirical in nature; and, actually, they were taken by the majority of people in that way.

MR PARTON: Minister, are ACT Labor and ACT Greens failing Canberrans by not being able to work constructively and productively with each other?

MS VASSAROTTI: I thank the member for the question. I think that, over the term of this government, and in terms before that, we have demonstrated between the two partners in government a good working relationship. We are two different parties. We have different perspectives on different issues which we work through.

Mr Cain interjecting—

MS VASSAROTTI: Often it is behind doors, but sometimes it is publicly. We are two different parties that have different perspectives.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, please stop.

Mr Rattenbury: Madam Speaker, it is also evident that Mr Cain's question is outside the standing orders. Minister Vassarotti cannot be responsible for Ms Clay's comments, in question time.

MADAM SPEAKER: Yes, I understand.

Mr Hanson: On the point of order, through deciding to take the question and answer it, she has made it in order, Madam Speaker. She has litigated the issue.

MADAM SPEAKER: She is responding. She has taken the question, and she is responding. I will ask Mr Cain to be quiet.

MS VASSAROTTI: I am not sure how much more I have to say. Partners in any

relationship will have differences at different points in time. We will work through those. We have a very well-functioning government working right now, and we will continue to do so.

Suburban Land Agency—funding

MR CAIN: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. Minister, the 2023-24 budget review provides \$50 million in funding for the SLA to, amongst other things, maintain prudent liquidity requirements. That \$50 million is almost identical to the net cash shortfall identified in the SLA's audited financial statements. Reporting in the *Canberra Times* in October 2020 revealed that the SLA requested a \$50 million lifeline, amid concerns that a dire cashflow situation could delay work on new land release and threaten its viability. Minister, do you maintain that this \$50 million appropriation is not to bail out the SLA from a \$50 million cash shortfall?

MS BERRY: Yes.

MR CAIN: Minister, how will the SLA support Mr Barr's much-needed land sales, given that the SLA recorded a \$50 million cash shortfall and has stated publicly that this will impact the viability of the agency and cause further delays to new works?

MS BERRY: If I can just explain how land development occurs. It does not all happen in one go. The sale of land does not happen in one go.

Mr Cain interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Cain, that's enough.

MS BERRY: And the revenue from land sales does not appear in one go. It is lumpy, so it means that there will be cashflow changes throughout the development process. This means that the SLA's cashflow figures will appear differently, depending on when land is developed and then when land is for sale.

MR PARTON: Minister, can you explain specifically what the \$50 million will be spent on and whether any of the \$50 million will go towards a single block being made available?

MS BERRY: This is to support the Suburban Land Agency to do its work, to do it faster, to provide more land for sale—developable land for the community to purchase. And it is to overcome the issues that I have just described around the lumpiness in the Suburban Land Agency's cashflow so that it can get on with the job of making more developable land available for Canberrans.

Legislative Assembly—number of members

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Chief Minister. This weekend, Tasmanians will go to the polls to elect the 35 members to their newly expanded Legislative Assembly. This is in addition to their Legislative Council and the other councils they have across local government. It has been recognised that an expanded Assembly is

what is required to fulfill the duties of Tasmania's parliament. A 2013 report to the Eighth Assembly made the same recommendation for the ACT. Have you given any further thought as to when the ACT Legislative Assembly should expand to 35 members, as per that 2013 report?

MR BARR: I do not think there is a case at this time for a further expansion in the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly.

MR BRADDOCK: Chief Minister, does the government agree that a five-electorate structure should be maintained in any future expansions of the Assembly?

MR BARR: That ultimately would be a matter for the Assembly itself through the Electoral Act. You are asking me to announce an advance government policy, Mr Braddock. I will not be doing that today, but I do want to be absolutely crystal clear to the media: there will be no change to the number of electorates or the number of members, certainly ahead of the October 2024 election. What happens in the future is clearly a matter for a future Assembly, but there are obviously some practical realities around the size of this chamber and the office accommodation in this building that would mean that any decision in the future to expand the size of this place would come at considerable cost, beyond just the extra salaries of members and staff; a significant capital spend would also be required in order to accommodate additional members in this place or, indeed, in any new place. I suspect that will act as a very significant handbrake against any expansion of this place for the foreseeable future.

MISS NUTTALL: Would an expanded Assembly make it easier for independent members and minor parties to get elected?

MR BARR: Not necessarily, Miss Nuttall. It may well be that, after the weekend's election, Tasmania abandons the Hare-Clark system as it is quite likely to return a Star-Wars-bar like parliament, given the polling that we have seen in that regard! No. I think the likelihood of Independent or small-party representation is based on the quality of policies and candidates measured against all other policies and candidates that are part of an election campaign. I think it is fair to say that the history of this place is that candidates who are well-regarded by their community and bring forward good policies tend to get elected.

Mr Parton: But I got elected!

MR BARR: There was a very strong temptation to echo that interjection, but, no, Mr Parton, you have campaigned well in your electorate, often in spite of your own political party, and have got elected—miraculously, on occasion!

Waste—styrofoam

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for City Services.

Minister, I have had a number of Bonython residents reach out regarding the consistent dumping of styrofoam at the Tuggeranong recycling drop-off centre. I have heard that this dumping is pretty bad across the board, despite many clear signs every two metres or so that ask people not to do so. Other than signage, what has the government done to

ensure styrofoam is not being abandoned at drop-off centres?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Miss Nuttall for the question. Polystyrene cannot be recycled at ACT government facilities; it does go to landfill. But there is a perception, I think, among some people in the community that it can be recycled, and people have been putting it in their recycle bins. As a result, several years ago there was a trial conducted at the recycling drop-off centre for people to dispose of their polystyrene there to keep it out of our recycling facility—our material recovery facility as it existed then. However, through that trial it was revealed that the skip bin that had been provided was being primarily used by nearby businesses and was quickly being filled to capacity. Once it was at capacity there was polystyrene left on the ground and then it was blown around and became a litter issue, so the trial was discontinued.

There has been a significant amount of dumping still occurring, regrettably. As Miss Nuttall reflected, there has been additional signage installed. The facilities are cleaned regularly. They are cleared of material every day, except for Sunday, to try to manage this situation, but ultimately it is the people who are dumping it in the first place who are responsible and who should not be doing this. The government does have significant powers under the Litter Act if this continues.

MISS NUTTALL: Does the government currently have any policies or plans to collect or recycle styrofoam given how common this material is in our waste streams?

MS CHEYNE: On 1 July last year, we actually banned expanded polystyrene, loose fill packaging and expanded polystyrene trays like those often used for fruit and vegetables. A ban on moulded polystyrene packaging for white and brown goods was also considered, but feedback from the community is that there is currently a lack of fit-for-purpose alternatives. Fortunately there have been many innovations in packaging materials in recent years that will support a move away from polystyrene in packaging, including air pillows, compostable mushroom or corn starch based packaging, cardboard voids and other non-plastic alternatives, which are becoming more widespread.

There is a packaging reform underway nationally, with the intent that all packaging available in Australia is designed to be recovered, reused, recycled and reprocessed safely, in line with the circular economy principles. I am not aware of technology yet that can appropriately recycle polystyrene, and in a few years, hopefully, this issue will not be as prevalent as it is, but we always welcome new innovation.

MS CLAY: Minister, do you have any updates on time lines of when the national reforms might be produced?

MS CHEYNE: My understanding is that we are working towards 2025.

Health—health workforce

MR PETTERSSON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, can you provide an update on how the ACT government is supporting the health workforce to continue to grow now and into the future?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mr Pettersson for the question. Over this term of

government, the Labor government has not only met our commitment to an additional 400 health professionals; we have delivered on that commitment early and have gone beyond it. We have brought on well over 500 additional doctors, nurses, midwives and allied health professionals to our public health services because we know how essential they are to the community.

The government has a comprehensive plan for public health services that will deliver health infrastructure for our growing city and ensure patients can access the right care, in the right place, with the right person at the right time. We are delivering state-of-the-art infrastructure because we have listened to our health workforce and will ensure they have great places to work.

We are also ensuring our health workforce remains amongst the best paid in the country with an additional \$27 million investment in the recent budget review for initiatives to attract and retain talented staff. We have invested in wellbeing, professional development, research, growing positive culture and the ACT Health Workforce Strategy because we want our teams to be safe and happy at work and to be sustainable into the future. This includes an \$8.5 million investment in the 2023-24 budget to develop and strengthen the junior medical officer workforce and have dedicated resources for our trainee medical officers to support and retain them in Canberra Health Services now and into the future.

We have supported students studying at our local universities and enhanced graduate programs and support for our newest health professionals. We have invested in nursing and midwifery ratios and are continuing to negotiate phase two of ratios with our industrial partner, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation. The government will continue to focus on creating career pathways, investing in modern equipment and infrastructure, and supporting staff with initiatives that provide better wellbeing and professional development opportunities.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, how is the ACT government supporting recruitment activities for health professionals to join Canberra Health Services ahead of the opening of the new Critical Services Building this year?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mr Pettersson for the supplementary question. It will be an exciting year for Canberra and our health service with the opening of the new Critical Services Building. Over successive budgets we have invested in expanding the health workforce to support the operation of the new building: more doctors; more nurses; more allied health professionals; and more support staff. It was a great pleasure, just the other week, to meet with some wardspeople from Canberra Hospital and to talk about their opportunities and how they can be engaged in the operationalising of the new building.

Recruitment is a priority, and a dedicated team at Canberra Health Services has been focussed on finding the right people to care for our community. An international recruitment campaign is underway, showcasing the benefits of working for Canberra Health Services and in Canberra—a place we all know is a fantastic place to live, work and raise a family. This is delivering promising results already and part of our recruitment strategies include streamlining the onboarding process to bring on more experienced staff even sooner. Our investment to attract and retain workers in our public

health services through new initiatives in enterprise agreements means we can ensure our health workers can access some of the most competitive pay and conditions in the country.

We are also ensuring teams will be working with the latest technology in the new Critical Services Building. This includes the new interoperative MRI suite that will enable doctors to see real time images of the brain during surgery. This medical advancement is a significant step forward, positioning Canberra Hospital as a leader in neurosurgery, meaning better outcomes for patients and a major attraction for specialists.

As our health system grows, we have a plan to grow our workforce. We are recruiting more health professionals every day to work in our health services. We are supporting their careers and building state-of-the-art facilities, all while ensuring our health workers are some of the best paid in the country.

MS ORR: Minister, can you provide further information about the ACT government initiatives to support health professional students and graduates that will ensure the government can deliver on its commitments to expanded health services and infrastructure for the Canberra community?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Orr for the supplementary. We have listened and delivered a program to ensure students struggling with balancing their study, placements and work can access financial assistance to continue their degrees. The Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Study Incentive Program has ensured more than 200 local students could access cost of living and placement support, and it supports the next generation of health professionals who will be joining our health system. The program was developed in consultation with our university partners, and it is reducing the stress and worry of students who are undertaking essential placements. We are also seeing the program support students in critical workforce areas such as midwifery and occupational therapy.

Ensuring we have a health workforce that is highly skilled and supported is critical as we continue to invest in the health system to meet the growing needs of our city and region. Last month the ACT public health workforce welcomed more than 360 new health graduate professionals, including more than 200 nurses and midwives, 96 junior medical officers and 59 allied health graduates, starting their first year of supported practice in Canberra Health Services.

Through graduate and consolidation programs, CHS is continuing to build and develop the health workforce, with expert senior staff providing guidance and support. We will continue investing in our health workforce and our students to ensure we are providing a great place for health professionals to study and work into the future.

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