



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Tuesday, 4 March 2025

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Questions without notice
Ministerial records—caretaker period

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Chief Minister. Two weeks ago health officials admitted in an annual reports hearing that they provided information to the health minister's office during last year's election, even though the government was in caretaker mode. This information was not provided to opposition or crossbench members. Chief Minister, did you or your office also receive information from the ACT public service during the caretaker period which was not disclosed to other parties or the public?

MR BARR: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. Information, yes; yes, you do receive information. I have to make a judgement call as to whether that information would warrant sharing. I am satisfied that I did not receive any information that warranted sharing. I did receive information in relation to the operation of government services in the caretaker period but I did not have any briefings with officials or hold any cabinet meetings during that time.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, how many Labor offices received information from the ACT public service during the caretaker period?

MR BARR: I cannot be definitive in that.

Ms Castley: Can you take it on notice?

MR BARR: Again, it depends on how information is defined; that is a very broad term.

Ms Castley: Anything to do with the budget blowout?

MR BARR: Specifically in relation to budgetary matters, the answer will be no.

MR CAIN: Chief Minister, did Labor offices receive information from the ACT public service during the caretaker periods for the 2020 election, and even earlier, for the 2016 and 2012 elections?

MR BARR: Again, that is such a broad question. To give an example of information I received: Floriade commenced, and I was advised that Floriade commenced and the hours of operation would be—

Mr Cain: You know what we're talking about, Chief Minister!

MR BARR: In relation to the specific questions around budgetary information, the pre-election budget update is the last financial update that is provided, and that is made public.

Ministerial records—caretaker period

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Chief Minister and again relates to information provided to Labor by the ACT public service during last year's election. Chief Minister,

can you rule out that any of the information provided to Labor in the caretaker period informed or influenced Labor candidates or their campaigns in any way?

MR BARR: Yes, I can.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, do you deny that Labor received any political advantage from any information that was received?

MR BARR: There was no political advantage to the Labor Party from any information received.

MR COCKS: Chief Minister, was any of this information provided to, or accessible by, ACT Labor employees or volunteers?

MR BARR: No.

Canberra Health Services—Canberra Hospital operations centre

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health.

In the past several weeks, I have heard from a number of health professionals about the current management of the health and hospital system, including the operations centre set up by the Chief Operating Officer. This includes numerous complaints about poorly-thought-out cost reductions, a lack of respect to medical professionals and, in particular, negative references to the operations centre that you are on the record supporting.

Minster, are there any instances of bureaucrats in the operations centre overriding the recommendations of clinicians and medical professionals?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. I must say, I have heard some of those comments as well. One of the things that I have been saying for some time is that some challenging decisions need to be made to deliver a more efficient and effective health system for the people of the ACT. One of the values of Canberra Health Services is being reliable, and we have made a commitment to Canberrans that we will be a reliable provider of health services.

In that context, I did have a meeting with some surgeons last week who raised with me one instance of a decision that, apparently, according to them, was made by the operations centre at Canberra Hospital that a particular surgery was going to go ahead instead of the surgery that the surgeon thought should have been a higher priority. We discussed that matter and the visibility of information in both directions, both from that surgical craft group to the operations centre and from the operations centre to the surgical craft group, to ensure that everyone was on the same page about how decisions are being made in relation to ensuring that those people who have been waiting some time for a surgery actually have access to that surgery, but also that those people who are considered to be high priority by the surgeons themselves are receiving the surgery that they need.

So, yes, to Ms Castley's question: I have heard those concerns. I have discussed

concerns directly, both with some of the surgeons involved, or at least their representatives—because I am not sure which surgeon that was—but also with the senior leadership of Canberra Health Services.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, is the resignation of the Chief Operating Officer of CHS due to his management of the operations centre that has come under criticism from medical professionals?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: No.

MR HANSON: Minister, is the Chief Operating Officer's resignation linked in any way to the contract for the "operations centre coordination and embedment", which expires in 10 days?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: No, certainly not to my knowledge, but I am not going to speak on behalf of the Chief Operating Officer who tendered his resignation. The reasons for his resignation are a matter for him, but to my knowledge it is not related to either of these things that the opposition has raised.

Canberra Health Services—performance

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Recently, I have heard complaints about the health and hospital system that you are supposed to run that include administrative interference in clinical care that has led to the cancellation of surgeries, a lack of respectful interactions between medical and administrative staff, and interference in clinical decisions, with a goal of boosting waitlist statistics. Given that you have overseen a \$300 million health budget blowout and the resignation of your COO, what do you say to Canberrans who experience some of the longest wait times at emergency departments and for elective surgery?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I would point Canberrans to the very significant improvement in the Canberra Hospital's and North Canberra Hospital's performance in relation to emergency department wait times and in relation to bed block. The CEO of Canberra Health Services, Mr Pepper, sent an all-staff email yesterday that included the information about the Chief Operating Officer's resignation and another executive staff change. In it, he also advised staff right across Canberra Health Services that Canberra Hospital has become, according to 2023-24 data, the fifth busiest emergency department in the country. But even in that context, we have consistently improved emergency department performance, and the team has managed to reduce ACT bed block minutes from 140 minutes on average in August 2023 down to just over one hour in February 2025.

That is a remarkable improvement, and it is due in no small part to the work that Dr Howard has led to establish an integrated operations centre for Canberra Hospital to get better visibility across the system, supported by the implementation of the Digital Health Record, a system that Ms Castley has constantly criticised and never supported, but that has changed clinical service delivery right across our health system, the efficiency of our health system and the visibility of records not only to our staff but to patients themselves through MyDHR. These changes have delivered a significant increase in performance of the hospital, and we would not have seen that without those

efforts. And, given the significant increase in presentations, we would be in a pretty bad way if we had not seen those improvements in performance.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, can you confirm how many professional and highly qualified medical staff have resigned so far this year—surgeons?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I note the clarification at the end of Ms Castley's question, in saying "surgeons", and I will take on notice the question that she clarified towards the end, regarding how many surgeons have resigned from Canberra Health Services this year.

Ms Castley: How many qualified medical staff?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Ms Castley clarified towards the end that she was talking about surgeons. If she wants to ask another question, she can ask another question. I will also include in that response the number of surgeons that have been recruited. Because what Ms Castley is ignoring is the fact that Canberra Health Services, through improving its brand, through targeted recruitment strategies, has been successful in recruiting highly qualified surgeons and other medical practitioners, including, I understand, the first staff specialist ENT surgeon ever to be recruited to Canberra Hospital, the first staff specialist cardiothoracic surgeon ever to be recruited to Canberra Hospital, and a highly qualified staff specialist anaesthetist, which is a change in the way that anaesthetists are recruited by Canberra Hospital as well. We are very happy to provide that record to those opposite.

MR HANSON: Minister, can you provide a breakdown of how many qualified medical staff have resigned so far this year, broken down by categories? Also, can you provide information about how many complaints have been made about the operations centre by other staff or patients?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take that question on notice and see what information we can provide.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—Yeddung Mura

MR RATTENBURY: My question is for the Attorney-General. The independent review into the over-representation of First Nations people in the ACT criminal justice system, conducted by the Jumbunna institute, found that despite having the lowest general imprisonment rate in Australia, overall, the ACT has the greatest level of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 2.1 per cent of the ACT population, yet comprise 27.2 per cent of the ACT prison population. In light of this, can you confirm if funding has been ceased to Yeddung Mura's intensive case management and new beginnings program, known as the I-Can program.

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Rattenbury for the question, and I appreciate Mr Rattenbury's engagement and, indeed, previous leadership in this space regarding reducing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system. I am not familiar with a decision of that nature, and I will take it on notice.

MR RATTENBURY: I note that you are taking that on notice. Perhaps you could also indicate, if that is the case, given the success of the program in assisting at least four clients, why you have decided to cease funding before the budget has even been settled?

MS CHEYNE: I will take it on notice.

MISS NUTTALL: Attorney, are there other programs run by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations for First Nations people in the justice sector that may also not receive continued funding?

MS CHEYNE: I think that is a hypothetical question. We are in the middle of the budget process right now, but I would acknowledge that the ACT government has a proud history of supporting Aboriginal-controlled community organisations and their programs. We understand that it is our First Nation's community who understands its community best and is best placed to assist it. There has been a considerable amount of focus on justice reinvestment, including in the Galambany Circle Sentencing Court, and associated supports around that, and I look forward to updating the Assembly with responses to the first question.

Waste—recycling facility

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. The ACT recycling facility burned down in 2022 in a battery fire. Media reports in 2023 quoting Minister Steel said the new facility would be operating in 2025 and insurance might cover our interstate recycling costs in the meantime. The government now says the facility will not be operating until 2028. The ACT government is paying an extra \$10 million each year to ship our recycling interstate. The new facility will only cost the ACT government \$15.5 million to build, with the rest of the investment met by the Commonwealth and a build-own-operate contract. So we are paying an extra \$60 million over six years for interstate recycling for the sake of a \$15.5 million investment that has been delayed for three years. What costings or cost-benefit analyses were provided to the government in taking these decisions?

MS CHEYNE: There is a lot in that. I would acknowledge that, for the ACT government, committing to continuing to provide a recycling service is not just about budgetary considerations but also about basic community expectations that we would continue with the arrangement of recycling in the ACT. It is unfortunate that there is no facility within our region that has been able to take the recycling that we were previously processing, and that is why it has been transported to Melbourne and—more recently and in an ongoing way until the new facility is built—Sydney.

We have been working very quickly on this facility and the procurement. It is one of the reasons that the FOGO facility has been delayed. We are very pleased that we have been able to make that announcement and provide detail to the community in February about what it is going to be able to do. I know that the community is looking forward to having a recycling facility in our jurisdiction and all of the benefits that provides.

In terms of funding analysis and what I can provide, I will see if there is anything further. But, in this context and in approaching budgetary considerations, the issues and

the options available to us certainly were presented to the government and the government made a decision to continue with recycling through a transported solution.

MR SPEAKER: Minister, did you take that funding aspect of the question on notice?

MS CHEYNE: If I have anything else.

MS CLAY: Is insurance from the fire at the old recycling facility covering our additional costs for recycling interstate?

MS CHEYNE: The insurance claim and process, as I understand it, remains ongoing.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, what has changed since 2023 that means the new facility will not be ready in 2025 as planned?

MS CHEYNE: I think I have covered this so many times. We have been through a very thorough procurement, understanding all of the relevant technologies that we have available to us and ensuring that we have worked within the procurement guidelines to get a facility to a point where we are able to sign a contract and have it delivered. It is not as simple as just building a brand new facility on the site where the previous facility burned down. I believe that this has been covered multiple times over several years.

Ms Clay: Point of order, Mr Speaker. The question was: “What has changed since 2023?”

MR SPEAKER: I think it is a relevant point of order. I think Mr Braddock’s question went to: the government stated that this facility was going to be delivered in 2025 and now it is going to be 2028; what has changed?

MS CHEYNE: Nothing has changed. There was a procurement process. I have, and the previous minister has, regularly kept the community and this Assembly updated.

Public transport—investment

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Transport. Minister, can you provide the Assembly an update on how the Barr Labor government and the Albanese Labor government are working together to invest in Canberra’s public transport future?

MR STEEL: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for his question. It was fantastic to join the Chief Minister and also federal minister Catherine King and our local federal Labor team on 17 February to officially get light rail to Commonwealth Park started. Together the Barr Labor government and the Albanese Labor government are co-funding this important stage of light rail that will deliver light rail to one of our most underutilised parts of the city, which will change our city for the better.

This is an important project that begins the goal of building a modern and transformative mass transport system that links the south and north of our city as we bring light rail to Woden. Our partnership with the Albanese Labor government represents what Canberrans see when they have two responsible and ambitious

governments in Canberra and delivers real progress for our city.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: There are risks to this continued partnership between the ACT and the Australian government. What are they?

MR STEEL: The biggest risk to the continued investment and partnership between the ACT and Australian governments is the election of a Dutton Liberal government. Peter Dutton and the Canberra Liberals have made it clear to the community their ambition for our city—

Mr Cocks: Point of order.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Steel, on a point of order. Mr Cocks?

Mr Cocks: The minister has begun to debate policy issues around the federal election rather than—

MR SPEAKER: No, I do not think there is a point of order. I think he was actually answering the question.

MR STEEL: They have made it very clear to the community their ambition for our city—cutting tens of thousands of public service jobs and under-investing in Canberra’s infrastructure. And they have form, because in putting the ACT last, and with their ideological opposition to delivering light rail, particularly the Canberra Liberals, Canberrans should be warned about what the election of the coalition will mean for Canberra and will mean for investment in our infrastructure like light rail, but other projects as well. Only two Labor governments—the Barr and Albanese Labor governments, working together for Canberra—will continue to prioritise and invest in the national capital.

MS TOUGH: Minister, why is it so important that Canberra has two Labor governments that invest in public transport?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Tough for her question. It is critically important that we have two strong Labor governments that not only can deliver for Canberrans but invest in public transport. Investing in public transport through light rail is about setting up our city for the future, supporting more people to get on to public transport, activating key parts of our city and linking the south of our city, which Ms Tough represents, to the north, so that we can share in the benefits of mass transit.

Our city is not going to stop growing, and that is why we cannot stop investing in the mass transit that our growing city needs. The contribution that the Albanese Labor government has been making in light rail to Commonwealth Park, in partnership with our government, shows a joint ambition for a vibrant city that is supported by better public transport, the right public transport system that takes us into the decades ahead and not into the past. When those opposite and their federal counterparts were in office, the ACT government was short-changed, the ACT was short-changed, on our share of federal infrastructure investment. It was 10 years of neglect of the ACT. Our two governments working in partnership have turned that around and we are building the public transport infrastructure that our city needs.

Members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Members! Mr Hanson, enough.

Light rail stage 2—completion date

MR BRADDOCK: My question is also to the Minister for Transport. Minister, you have mentioned that the government aims to deliver one stage of light rail per decade. The first budget appropriation for stage 2 occurred in 2018. In your response to questions on notice during annual reports you referred to a website for the stage 2B construction timeline, which sets out 2028 to 2033. Minister, is the government overachieving on its objective of one stage per decade by treating 2A and 2B as two separate stages, or is the government running behind on that objective by taking a projected 15 years to deliver light rail stage 2?

MR STEEL: No, our commitment is to bring light rail down to Woden. That is what we are getting on with, and we are doing that in the most efficient way possible, which is, noting the different approvals processes, to split the project into two stages. We announced many years ago that we would get on with stage 2A, because of the less complex environmental approval requirements, and we have gone through a procurement process. That is what you do with infrastructure projects—you go through a procurement process. It is through that procurement that you get the final timeline once you have actually gone to the market and found out exactly what they can deliver based on the scope of the project being put forward. We have got that with stage 2A. We are in contract for that, and construction is now underway.

We are going through the planning and design process for stage 2B. We will then be able to consider a business case and then move through the next stages of that project as well. We set out that timeline on the website, and through the Assembly. Indeed, tomorrow, I will provide an update on the light rail stage 2B program, where I will again table the exact same timeline that I provided to the Assembly, so that the timeline that we expect is absolutely clear to the Assembly. But it is still subject to those procurement processes in the future and, indeed, the decision-making of third parties.

We are going through a planning process now through the federal environment department as part of the EPBC assessment process, and we are looking forward to going out to consultation soon with the community. But these are third-party assessment processes not directly managed by the ACT government. So there are planning risks associated with the project. We are seeking to reduce those planning risks up-front by going through this process now, before we then go through and determine the scope, develop a business case and then look at making an investment decision.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, does the government consider the impact on ACT emissions reductions when it delays these light rail projects?

MR STEEL: Sorry; I will have to get the member to repeat his question. I did not quite catch that.

MR BRADDOCK: Does the government consider the impact on emissions reductions

for the ACT when it delays these light rail projects?

MR STEEL: We have not delayed stage 2B; we are getting on with the work. We do consider the climate impacts, particularly for major projects. We are continuing to work with other jurisdictions, particularly New South Wales, as they develop standardised guidelines around the consideration particularly of scope 3 emissions in infrastructure projects, so that there is a consistent approach nationally that Infrastructure Australia can look at when assessing proposals. We know that it is important to provide a sustainable alternative for people to use, and we are getting on with the job, together with the investment from the commonwealth.

MS CLAY: Minister, are you planning for light rail stage 3 to Kippax to be delivered in one decade, or are you planning for that project to be broken into multiple one-decade stages?

MR STEEL: I have been really clear that our focus is on bringing light rail stage 2 down to Woden this term, by starting the planning and designing this term and going through the development of a business case and then undertaking the stages after that, which will fall into the next term of the Assembly. We are going to continue to work through each of those processes required to get stage 2 down to Woden.

There is a broader network plan for the light rail that we have already outlined. But, at the moment, the priority is to deliver stage 2. We cannot deliver two stages at once. We do not have the fiscal capacity to do that, even with commonwealth investment paying for 50 per cent. So we are getting on with the stage that we are focused on now. Stage 2A is under construction and stage 2B is in design and planning.

Woden—proposed urgent care clinic

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for Planning. The federal Labor Party has committed to a healthcare clinic in Woden, should it win the upcoming election; however, we do not have a town plan that identifies the location of services and community facilities, so the new walk-in centre is at risk of piecemeal planning and being in the wrong spot. Therefore opportunities for synergies with other community facilities could be missed.

Will you commit to undertake town planning for the Woden town centre that puts the community first and considers where a new walk-in centre would be best placed to be accessible and form part of a community hub?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Carrick for the question. Of course, the ACT government welcomes the investment from the Albanese Labor government in urgent care clinics and in our healthcare system. It is important they continue to invest in primary health care. We will continue to work with my colleague Minister Stephen-Smith and ACT Health to identify what land use requirements there may be for future healthcare facilities in the Woden Valley district. There are a range of government-owned blocks there. Many of those existing land uses enable health facilities to be built on them without any need for zoning change. There may be the opportunity to utilise privately or leased land and privately owned buildings to potentially deliver these services as well. We do have an existing healthcare clinic in Phillip as well, and there are also a

range of community-facility zoned blocks in the Woden town centre and, indeed, more broadly across Woden Valley district that could be utilised.

We will, of course, rely on the advice from ACT Health and the minister responsible for Health to work through how we can facilitate a potential development or accommodation of any new facilities that may be funded by the federal government to support the healthcare needs of the community.

MS CARRICK: Will you consider where the mental health Safe Haven for Woden could be located in the town centre—potentially co-located in a precinct with the nurse walk-in centre, the new building for Woden Community Service and the youth centre—in a non-clinical community environment?

MR STEEL: As the planning minister, I am not the tsar for everything that happens in ACT government. My remit is limited to town planning matters and healthcare matters fall into the remit of the health minister, so I am not going to comment. I do not make a habit of commenting on other people's portfolios. But of course we will work closely with her and ACT Health.

Light rail stage 2—construction impacts

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the minister for business. Stage 2A of light rail has begun construction and is expected to be completed in January 2028, with more than three years of construction. Multiple businesses are under pressure due to all the construction work around and in front of their businesses, putting off potential and returning customers. What consultation has occurred with businesses who have been impacted by the light rail construction on London Circuit?

MR STEEL: Mr Speaker, I will take the question as the minister responsible for the light rail project and raising London Circuit.

There has been extensive engagement with businesses and other stakeholders, including community stakeholders, along the stage 2A alignment and, indeed, previously along the raising of London Circuit alignment.

This engagement has been going on for a period of years, in anticipation of major disruption caused by these projects, to enable them to prepare and plan for that disruption. We have taken the learnings from stage 1 of light rail and the disruption that was caused through that project, particularly in the Gungahlin area, and applied it through a business partnership plan for stage 2A of light rail. We have clearly set out the range of supports available, which are non-financial, to be able to support businesses through this period of construction, which will differ, depending on where the construction program is up to. Part of that is to have very clear communication with the businesses.

We have been meeting with the businesses through Infrastructure Canberra. We have been listening to issues raised by them in relation to the construction program. We will continue to do that right through the construction program and respond to those, regarding issues that relate to their specific business and what we can do to provide access, particularly for deliveries and those sorts of things—those practical issues that

they may raise in relation to the closure of public spaces near them and which may impact on their operations.

We do want to make it clear that those businesses are still open for business, and we will have the opportunity to do that through a range of different means—signage and so forth. We are open to that discussion. We are having that discussion with them. But this was always going to be disruptive—(*Time expired.*)

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, what issues have been raised by businesses through these consultations?

MR STEEL: I will take the opportunity to address that in the debate tomorrow, and perhaps provide a summary which goes beyond the time available in answering the question today. There have been a range of different issues. One example has been around signage. We will look at what we can do there—whether it is put through hoarding and so forth. We want to provide clear communication so that they know when different parts of the footprint are switched on again or taken away, depending on where the construction program is up to.

We will continue to engage with them through the mechanisms that have been established through Infrastructure Canberra, where we have those stakeholder reference groups, where they are engaging and where we have established relationship managers to engage with businesses to hear directly from them and respond to them. We want to be responsive. But this will provide a long-term benefit for the city. It will be disruptive.

I know that the opposition, despite saying previously that they supported this stage of light rail, do not support it. We want to get on with the job of delivering this. This is important for the future of our city and the future of businesses in our city. We are talking here about delivering an extension for the southern side of our CBD. We want to support business growth. We want to support more jobs. This project, in its own right, is delivering hundreds of jobs.

MS CASTLEY: The original question was to the minister for business, so my supplementary is to the minister for business. What have you done to address the issues raised during consultation?

MR STEEL: I will take the question again, Mr Speaker, because it is my responsibility, as the Minister for Transport who is responsible for this project. Infrastructure Canberra, under the AAs, sits with me and it is in relation to this project.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Members, can you allow the minister to speak.

MR STEEL: Infrastructure Canberra has been taking the lead on engaging with business through the last few years on this matter and, now that the construction has started, the continued engagement that will be needed with business. We will continue to engage with them. It will be a difficult period while this disruption is occurring, and we will do everything that we can, through the business partnership plan that we have clearly articulated, to support them through this process to deliver this significant, city-

shaping project.

Light rail stage 2—construction impacts

MR MILLIGAN: My question is for the minister responsible for business, transport or Treasury—take your pick! Multiple businesses are under financial pressure due to all the construction on stage 2A of light rail on London Circuit, which is driving away potential and returning customers. With more than three years of expected construction and closures on the road and nearby areas, these businesses need support. Is the ACT government providing any financial assistance to those businesses in the vicinity that are continuing to be adversely affected by the light rail construction on London Circuit?

MR STEEL: The range of supports that we will provide to businesses has been outlined through the business partnership plan, and they are of a non-financial nature. We will continue to work with the businesses to listen to specific issues that they are raising, and respond to them as appropriate. We are also working with the City Renewal Authority, who have responsibility for this precinct, to look at what they can do to support this area, which is within their remit, in terms of activating the public spaces to make sure that Canberrans know that these businesses are still open and operating. We will be looking at working with them to make sure that this remains a vibrant precinct even during construction.

But, also during this time, with the employment of hundreds of construction workers, there will still be people in this precinct. It will be alive. There will be construction workers who will need to go and buy a coffee from the local cafe, and who will need to undertake other activities and access services in the precinct as well.

We have seen that in projects like CIT Woden, for example. We will also see it in the stage 2A construction zone. But the ultimate goal is to provide a better place to do business, and a more activated space, and we need to undertake this city-shaping infrastructure and investment now. That is going to mean a period of construction, but it will be worthwhile in the long run.

MR MILLIGAN: Has the government considered any reduction in government rates, fees and charges for those businesses affected by the light rail construction?

MR STEEL: I am not going to pre-empt the debate tomorrow, but I think you were quoting from the motion that you have put forward on the notice paper. We are considering that motion at the moment, but the range of supports that we have outlined in broad terms are in the business partnership plan. We will hear from businesses specifically about what their issues are and respond to them—and that may be non-financial.

MR COCKS: Has there been any reduction in these fees or licences for businesses that are not able to use the provisions associated with those licences—for example, having tables and chairs on out-door walkways?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. The government, over recent years, has made some announcements about licence fees more broadly to try and support activation in the city area, but we will continue to listen to businesses about their

specific needs, and they will obviously have to make their own decisions about what licences they want to continue with during this period. Some of them have already pivoted, based on the fact that we have provided information over a period of years that this construction would be occurring near them. In fact, businesses that have set up since that time have now decided that they want to move in a different direction.

This has been known for some time, and we hope that businesses will take on this opportunity to look at how they can deliver their businesses perhaps in a different way during the period. It is going to be a difficult time and a period of change for them, and we will continue to work closely with them through Infrastructure Canberra to see what supports we can provide to respond to local needs, which are practical and are consistent with the business partnership plan.

Australian Football League—corporate sponsorship

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Chief Minister. Capital Brewing Co was recently forced to cancel its sponsorship of the GWS Giants as a consequence of the ACT government's decision to put Manuka Oval's beverage contracts out to tender. Capital Brewing, an iconic local business, had exclusive pourage rights at Manuka Oval's GWS games as part of the sponsorship arrangement and invested a significant amount of money in branding assets to enhance the local aspect of the visitor experience. Why did the government sideline a local business by removing its exclusive pouring rights? And was the Chief Minister aware that doing so would compromise Capital Brewing's sponsorship deal with GWS?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. The trail of events in the question may not, in fact, be exactly what has occurred. The advice I have is that the matter in question relates to commercial suites within the Manuka Oval venue rather than general pourage rights. There is a complex set of interactions in place between the hirers, corporate sponsorships and pourage rights that the government, as the venue operator, may seek to procure. Sometimes they come into commercial conflict when particular brewers seek exclusive rights. Across our venues, we have football teams that have different alcohol sponsors. The Brumbies have a sponsorship with BentSpoke, the Raiders have a sponsorship with VB, and the Giants—perhaps reflecting the orange theme of their jersey—have an Aperol sponsorship.

Mr Hanson: That says it all!

MR BARR: I will declare I am a big fan of Capital Brewing. I enjoy their Coast Ale and Trail Pale Ale, so I acknowledge a potential conflict of interest in this matter. I also note that we have been previously successful with an Australian first, where we did not offer exclusive rights to one brewer at Manuka Oval; we had three: the Lion Nathan group, BentSpoke and Capital Brewing, all offering their beers at the venue.

Obviously these matters are complex, in terms of commercial negotiations, and must also adhere to the Australian Capital Territory (Self-Government) Act and the Constitution, noting that trade and commerce is to be free and must be consistent with our Local Industry Participation Policy procurement guidelines, the Australian Industry Participation Framework, and the Australia and New Zealand Government Procurement Agreement—*(Time expired.)*

MR EMERSON: Why isn't the government doing more to support local businesses through strategic procurement, given the quality of their products and that, even with 80 to 90 per cent of the facing product at Canberra Stadium being supplied by multinational companies, local breweries still sell 35 per cent of beverages?

MR BARR: I started to address that before time ran out. We must adhere to both the Australian Constitution's section 92 and the Australian Capital Territory (Self-Government) Act's section 69 which relate to free trade between jurisdictions, which means that our local industry participation policies must be consistent with the Australian Constitution and with our international free trade agreements. That puts a set of parameters around any government procurement process. We are also a signatory to the Australia and New Zealand Government Procurement Agreement, and the Australian Industry Participation Framework. So, whilst we, through our Local Industry Participation Policy, have a weighting in favour of local industry, that must be consistent with the Constitution and our free trade agreements.

I make the observation that, whilst the ACT government procurement market is of a size, it is relatively small. If other jurisdictions were to respond and to seek to allow no participation from ACT businesses in their procurement, then we would find ourselves in a very difficult position with limited opportunity for our businesses to win contracts interstate or overseas. These are all factors we have to take into account, but we do have positive weighting in favour of local business, and we will work through this issue. I have received correspondence from Mr Laurence Kain of Capital Brewing in relation to this matter. I will approach that in good faith.

MS CARRICK: Is the government doing anything new to support local food and beverage businesses, particularly as we see other states, such as Western Australia and Victoria, taking steps to actively increase the presence of local businesses at major sporting venues?

MR BARR: We do, and we have already actively done that, including some Australian-first outcomes that involve particular brewing companies at Manuka Oval. I point to events that we hold that have somewhere between 75 and 100 per cent of vendor participation being local businesses. But I stress: we must operate within the Constitution and within Australia's free trade agreements. Step outside of that and we are subject to legal challenge. Think more broadly about the market opportunities that we would deny ourselves if all the states and territories, and indeed nations, went down a path of tariffs and protectionism. And we might be seeing some of this unfolding at an international level, led unfortunately by the United States.

Schools—teachers

MISS NUTTALL: My question is for the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Minister, does the Education Directorate collect data on what discipline teachers teach in each school? For example, if I asked you to provide me with how many maths teachers there are in the ACT, is that the sort of number you could give me?

MS BERRY: I would have to take that question on notice if it were asking for detail on the numbers of specialised teachers. I think we might have that information available

and if Miss Nuttall was wanting to access that, she can ask for it.

Miss Nuttall: Can you confirm whether that one is being taken on notice?

MR SPEAKER: Ms Berry, Miss Nuttall is just seeking clarification as to whether you have taken that first question on notice?

MS BERRY: I am not sure which part I am taking on notice. Does she want to know how many maths teachers there are?

MR SPEAKER: Miss Nuttall, for clarification, can you go through that first question again, just so we are all on the same page?

Miss Nuttall: The main bit of the question—the last bit was an example—the main bit is: does the Education Directorate collect data on what disciplines teachers teach in?

MS BERRY: I can take that on notice.

MR SPEAKER: Thank you Minister.

MISS NUTTALL: As a supplementary, I want to check then, is the government confident that as part of their near full staffing of schools, that wherever possible, teachers are working in the disciplines they were trained in?

MS BERRY: That is my understanding.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, would you be able to take on notice which teaching disciplines are currently the most sought after by the ACT education system?

MS BERRY: I can take that on notice.

Economy—employment

MS TOUGH: Chief Minister, can you please update the Assembly on the current state of the ACT economy following the release of the latest labour force data figures?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Tough for the question. I am pleased to advise the Assembly that the latest figures show that the labour market in the ACT remains the strongest in Australia. Unemployment for January was at 3.2 per cent, which is the lowest in the country; employment grew by 3.5 per cent through the year to January 2025; and total employment in the territory now sits at 273,600 jobs. I am also pleased to advise the Assembly that the ACT has a significantly higher participation rate, at 72.4 per cent, when compared to the national labour force participation rate of only 67 per cent. Over the past decade, the ACT has, on average, outperformed the nation by five percentage points.

Our economy performed strongly through 2023-24. Gross state product increased by four per cent, which is above its long-run average, and the ACT state final demand increased by 1.5 per cent in the September quarter, to be five per cent higher through the year. The ACT was the fastest-growing jurisdiction for state final demand in terms

of quarterly growth, driven largely by strong growth in public investment and consumption.

MS TOUGH: Chief Minister, what is the government doing to ensure this positive growth continues?

MR BARR: The government is pursuing growth in the territory's total workforce, to grow that workforce from the 273,600 jobs that I mentioned in the previous answer to 300,000 jobs by 2030. This year we will establish the Active Capital Fund, a new mechanism to support start-up businesses and our city's innovation ecosystem—enhancing the commercialisation of ideas generated by the ACT-based tertiary education, research and business sectors. We also intend to continue our work with the tertiary education sector to stabilise and then resume a path of growth for that sector. We are set to grow our visitor economy towards a new target of \$4 billion of expenditure in economic value by 2026 and \$5 billion by 2030.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Chief Minister, the recent reduction in inflation and the resulting drop in the RBA's cash rate was welcome news across the country. What impact has that had on Canberra's economy?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the supplementary. Inflation in Canberra has, of course, fallen considerably. It is lower than the Australian average and has been through the inflation increase cycle and on the way back down. This is important for household and businesses in our city.

The interest rate cut will see approximately 80,000 Canberra households better off. Savings will generally range between \$50 and \$150 a month for households with mortgages, depending, obviously, on the size of that mortgage. We are anticipating that the benefits in terms of consumer confidence, which are already being reported in various national surveys, will begin to take effect locally. It has been a difficult period of suppressed consumer demand. But, in 2025, the economic outlook looks more optimistic both for the consumer economy and, particularly, for those households—which are around 40 per cent of Canberra households—who have a mortgage.

Roads—Molonglo River Bridge

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. The Cotter Road and John Gorton Drive form one of the busiest road networks in the ACT, and until the new east-west arterial is completed for Molonglo, it is the only way in and out of the Molonglo Valley. After years and promises and delays, the government finally signed the contracts for the Molonglo River Bridge in 2022. The bridge is supposed to be delivered and completed by December this year, but I have heard repeated concerns about further delays.

Minister, will the Molonglo River Bridge be fully completed and open by December this year?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Cocks for the question, notwithstanding that it is pre-empting exactly a point in his motion that I need to respond to on Thursday. I am confused about what he wants me to do here, Mr Speaker.

Mr Hanson: Answer the question!

MS CHEYNE: Thanks! Yes, Molonglo River bridge is well underway. There is a major milestone coming with the installation of the girders, I think is the correct term, as well as a further—

Mr Hanson A point of order on relevance. The question was quite clear, and it is will it be fully completed and open by December this year?

MR SPEAKER: Mr Hanson, I am of the belief that the minister is getting to the answer of the question.

Mr Hanson: I hope so.

MS CHEYNE: I thought, given that Mr Hanson is the local member, he might find that relevant, but okay! The intention is certainly December 2025 for the majority of the works. I think we all understand that, in terms of civil contracting works, that is what we term the “completion date”, and then there can be further ancillary works there, but I look forward to updating the Assembly in due course.

MR COCKS: Minister, what measures have you taken to reduce congestion on the Cotter Road and surrounding roads?

MS CHEYNE: I am not sure what Mr Cocks is implying—whether I need to be there with a stop/go sign or installing my own traffic lights! What actions I have taken? Certainly, listening to the community. We are planning for some major road changes and upgrades in that area, and we also need to make sure that we are not compromising other government objectives and environmental objectives.

MR HANSON: Minister, on what date will the promised Molonglo Valley east-west arterial road be open?

MS CHEYNE: We are barely in the term and already copying and pasting from a motion! We have been very clear that this is a big project that is going to take us well into what I expect will be the end of this decade and into the next decade, as we use this project to unlock more land and complete the rest of the Molonglo Valley and connect through to the Tuggeranong Parkway. For that reason, I do not have an exact date, and I think it is quite foolish to suggest I would.

Roads—Monaro Highway

MS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, members of the Assembly were recently told to prepare for 15 months of traffic chaos and disruption to accommodate the demolition of the Dog Trap Creek bridge as part of the Monaro Highway upgrades. Minister, given the works are planned to commence this month, when will the community be updated that they are in for 15 months of traffic chaos and disruptions?

MS CHEYNE: One of the reasons that I was proactive in writing to all of the local

members in this place was in the hope that they are undertaking the work in speaking with the community and supporting what is going to be a broad disruption. We are looking forward to releasing quite a lot of content in the coming days; that is my understanding. I have certainly seen some material, and I have just asked for some further tweaks on. Once that is cleared and ready to go, we will get it out there.

MS MORRIS: Minister, has public communication of alternative routes and predicted delays been advertised early enough to help commuters facing 15 months of traffic disruption and chaos?

MS CHEYNE: I think that is hypothetical. We are doing our very best to explain to the community what the impact will be. We will also be providing suggestions of alternative routes. We do not necessarily have all of the data about predicting people's behaviour into the future and what this might result in, but we will be monitoring this, and we will be making adjustments as needed, especially as we understand the broader traffic flows across the community.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, will there be any measures such as fare reductions, extra bus services or free parking near the bus interchanges to encourage Tuggeranong residents to make use of public transport during the construction period?

MS CHEYNE: No.

Mr Barr: Further questions can be placed on the notice paper.