



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Tuesday, 9 April 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) (2.00): As members would be aware, Minister Steel is absent from the Assembly this week for personal reasons. In question time, Minister Berry will assist on skills and training, Minister Stephen-Smith will assist on questions relating to Special Minister of State and planning, and Minister Cheyne will assist on transport matters.

Questions without notice

Chief Minister—conduct

MS LEE: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, during the hearing of the public accounts committee into the appropriation bills back in February this year, you were asked by the chair of the committee if you had ever delivered a surplus in line with the standard UPF net operating balance approach. Your response to that question was:

No-one has, Mr Cocks; no-one in the history of self-government.

You went on to repeat this assertion, saying:

I, like every other Treasurer, have not delivered a UPF surplus. No Treasurer has.

Recent reports in the media have the former Liberal Treasurer, Mr Gary Humphries, confirming that he indeed delivered a surplus under the equivalent of a UPF back in 1999-2000. Further, the consolidated annual financial statements show that in fact there have been several surpluses delivered under UPF, including by your predecessor, now Senator Katy Gallagher. Treasurer, do you admit that you were wrong, and will you correct the record now?

MR BARR: There have been a number of changes to the presentation of ACT budgets, the most substantive being the shift in 2006-07 to a pure GFS, with a headline net operating balance adjustment. In relation to former Treasurer and Chief Minister Humphries' assertions of running a surplus, he did, under Australian accounting standards, but not under the GFS statistics. Why? Because he was able to attribute more than \$100 million of land sales as operating revenue rather than an asset sale in his budget. His budget surplus was \$4 million, budgeted. He then projected a further surplus using the same land sales as in asset sales. In that era, 25 years ago, gains and losses on superannuation investment assets were also included as a measure of revenue. He projected surpluses under the former accounting standards, he may have achieved one under AAS, but he certainly did not under the accounting standards that now apply. He did so—

Ms Lee: Since when? 2007?

MR BARR: Since 2006-07. It is in the budget papers in the 2006-07 budget. In relation to the period during the global financial crisis, there were a number of significant emergency payments made to states and territories by the commonwealth that led to

what were projected budget deficits ultimately being surpluses. So, yes, now Senator Gallagher did not budget for a surplus, but, as a result of the stimulus payments provided by the commonwealth at the end of the financial year, there were a couple of years that were in surplus. *(Time expired.)*

MS LEE: Treasurer, do you still stand by your comment that no Treasurer in ACT self-government history has posted a surplus, given what you have just said in answer to my first question, and Senator Gallagher, whilst ACT Treasurer, delivering a surplus of \$43 million in the 2011-12 budget? Again, will you correct the record?

MR BARR: Again, the accounting systems were different, and there is a difference, obviously, between budgeting for a surplus and then, at the end of the year, under an audit, finding extra revenue. Indeed, I would owe an apology to Senator Gallagher, but I was around at that time and I have looked at the budget papers, and it was not a budgeted surplus. Certainly, because of the additional commonwealth stimulus payments that flowed through the state and territory budgets at that time, at the end of the fiscal year, once all of the consolidation and auditing were done, there was indeed an operating surplus in that regard. But it was not budgeted and it did occur in the emergency circumstance where the commonwealth provided significant additional revenue to the states and territories. To the extent that I was incorrect in the estimates hearing, I correct the record in that regard. But, obviously, the line of questioning was about who had budgeted for surpluses.

MR CAIN: Treasurer, you have just corrected the record. Why have you not done so sooner?

MR BARR: The nature of the questioning in estimates was about budgeting for surpluses, not end-of-financial-year results. There was an argument about under which accounting system; indeed, under the accounting system that we currently use, I have delivered a budget surplus as well. But you contest that, Mr Cain. You are allowed to contest that; that is fair enough. You are allowed to contest that.

Mr Cain interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Cain, I would be very quiet, if I were you.

MR BARR: In relation to the line of questioning in estimates, there was a long discussion about different accounting systems, as we have obviously just had in question time. To be absolutely clear, what a Treasurer budgets for and then what the final result can be can often be different, and accounting systems have also changed. Subsequent to now Senator Gallagher being Treasurer, there has been a further change in Australian accounting standards as they relate to the treatment of financial leases. It is also important, when making historical comparisons, to understand the changes in accounting standards over that time.

Ms Lee: Madam Speaker, I do not know whether it should be done by way of a point of order, but I ask that perhaps the Treasurer be given the opportunity to correct the record again. He has mentioned a number of times now that the line of questioning in the PAC hearing was about budgeting for it.

MADAM SPEAKER: Ms Lee, there is no point of order. The minister has been responding to the question put. If you want to seek clarification of his answer, I do not know that this is the time.

Development—CSIRO Ginninderra site

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Planning. The CSIRO Ginninderra site is a large site, with around a third of it identified by CSIRO for conservation due to environmental values. If the ACT were to acquire the site it would be our expectation that full environmental assessments and community consultation processes would be undertaken before development decisions were made. Minister, what processes will be undertaken by the ACT government before any development occurs on the CSIRO site?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Clay for the question, which highlights how long it takes to bring this kind of land to market and how difficult it would be to deliver 10,000 public houses as part of a salt and pepper approach to delivering housing in the ACT. Indeed, Ms Clay is absolutely correct, Madam Speaker, that in looking at a site like this of 701 hectares, you would need to undertake significant environmental studies, as well as further work in relation to traffic planning, estate development planning, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, before the land could be brought to market.

In relation to Ms Clay's specific question, Madam Speaker, I can advise that early environmental studies have been undertaken and publicised on the CSIRO's project development website, and I would encourage any interested in this work to visit that website. The studies have identified threatened box gum grassy woodland and derived native grasslands and species such as the Golden Sun Moth and striped legless lizard, and as such, a referral application will need to be submitted to the commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, and also most likely an environmental impact statement, which will need to avoid, mitigate and or offset any impacts identified.

Madam Speaker, as I am sure you are aware, CSIRO Ginninderra is currently national land. I was pleased to read recently that in March, the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister wrote to the commonwealth government to the finance minister, Senator Gallagher, encouraging the commonwealth to help to resolve the outstanding issues in the negotiation to transfer the land to the ACT in a timely way, but that will only be one step in what will be a lengthy process.

MS CLAY: A supplementary. Will environmental assessments and community consultation occur before or after the purchase?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: As I indicated in my response to the first question, CSIRO has already undertaken and publicised a range of environmental assessments and considered the land under its own work, and that is publicly available. Further environmental assessments would need to be undertaken. I understand that would also occur subsequent to, and in fact is probably irrelevant of, the land ownership. It is a question of where we are in the process of developing this potential land.

As Ms Clay would be aware, the territory plan would need to be amended no matter who owned the land to change the zoning of the site from non-urban NUZ3—hills,

ridges and buffer zones. This process may also apply a future urban area overlay to the site, indicating that the area will be developed in future, but the final planning requirements are still to be resolved following detailed studies.

However, the Belconnen District Strategy does identify the CSIRO site as a key site and a change area, and therefore no amendment to the district strategy would be required to enable the site to be rezoned and developed, but the strategy does note that a full investigation of planning, environmental and infrastructure issues would be undertaken.

The commonwealth, of course, has previously—in order to facilitate the development—rezoned the site to urban under the National Capital Plan, so it is now identified as an urban area.

MR CAIN: A supplementary. Minister, why in response to question on notice 1628 is the government “not in a position to respond” to questions about the cost of relocating powerlines on the CSIRO Ginninderra land?

MS BERRY: Madam Speaker, I will take that question. It was my response to the question asked by Mr Cain, and the answer remains the same. The government is not in a position to provide that information at this point in time.

Chief Minister

Motion of censure

MS LEE (Kurrajong—Leader of the Opposition) (2.12): Madam Speaker, before I go to the next question, given that you denied me the opportunity to get the Treasurer to correct the record, I feel that I have no other option but to seek leave to move a motion to censure the Treasurer for misleading the Assembly.

Leave not granted.

Standing orders—suspension

MS LEE (Kurrajong—Leader of the Opposition) (2.13): I move:

So much as that standing orders be suspended as would prevent the moving of the censure motion.

Madam Speaker, the Treasurer—we have been more than fair in giving him the opportunity, and as he has half-heartedly tried to indicate, yes, he did not actually come through and be upfront when he was giving evidence during that PAC hearing. He was adamant on a number of occasions that no treasurer in the history of ACT government had delivered a surplus according to the UPF measures. Now, I took that opportunity, Madam Speaker, to ask of the Under Treasurer how UPF is worked out. That, of course, is based on revenue minus expenses.

Mr Barr can use all of the tricky accounting phrases and data to try to justify what he thinks is happening, but the fact remains that he has posted no surplus under the UPF, which of course is the agreed standard by all treasurers across the country, and he has

no option but to try to hide that behind misleading statements such as, “No treasurer in ACT self-government history has posted one.”

Even today—and this is the crux of it—today, when he was given the opportunity and directly asked to correct the record where he is so blatantly wrong, he has stated that the line of questioning that was asked of him during the PAC hearings was about a surplus being budgeted. He could not be further from the truth. I quote directly from Hansard; the transcript of those proceedings, Madam Speaker, and this is from the Chair’s line of questioning:

If you had used the UPF net operating balance for all previous budgets the Chief Minister and Treasurer has handed down, how many surpluses would have been delivered in that time?

It is absolutely clear from the transcript, from the official record of what was said during that PAC hearing, that the question was very clearly about whether Mr Barr had handed down—not budgeted for but handed down—a surplus according to the UPF presentation framework.

That is what it is, and for Mr Barr to sit here scoffing, laughing, and then to try to rewrite history is an absolute disservice to the people of the ACT that he has let down. Not even giving leave for this to be debated, after he was given ample opportunity to explain why he got it so wrong, indicates one of two things: he is continuing to pull the wool over the community’s eyes and saying, “Nothing to see here; nothing to see here,” or, despite being Treasurer for over a decade, he is so incompetent that he could not even remember that there had been surpluses under treasurers across Liberal and Labor in the time that he has been in this place!

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Tourism and Minister for Trade, Investment and Economic Development) (2.16): I think the Leader of the Opposition has condemned her own motion by the quote she used from the Hansard. The topic of conversation was about budgets. The question that Mr Cocks as Chair asked, following the debate about what measure you would use:

If you had used the UPF net operating balance for all previous budgets—

Budgets—

the Chief Minister and Treasurer has handed down—

As in when you deliver the budget. That is handing down the budget, Madam Speaker—

how many surpluses would have been delivered in that time?

Then the follow-up questions continued to refer to “hand down”.

I think any common understanding, Madam Speaker, of what is meant by “handing down a budget” is indeed that: what is in the budget. What is in the final outcome as audited by the ACT Auditor-General that is prepared and tabled about 15 months after the budget is handed down, Madam Speaker, is obviously a different matter and a

different conversation.

I have responded to the questions from the Leader of the Opposition, and indeed the supplementary from Mr Cain. I have explained the differences in the accounting treatments over the journey of self-government, as was explained in the estimates hearing, so there is no need to suspend standing orders, Madam Speaker. It is a massive overreach from the Leader of the Opposition.

Very clearly, even in the quote she used that I have then repeated that is there in the Hansard, the questions were about budgets handed down, Madam Speaker, not about final consolidated outcomes. My response was that there had not been a budgeted surplus, and there had not been, but certainly under other accounting treatments and at a consolidated end of year there have been a few. Three or four out of 30-odd years, and I said that. The circumstances that led to Treasurer Humphries's budgeted surplus, but that ultimately an audit determined it was not at the end after the year were point of some contention in 2001, but there is one thing before it is budgeted and then the final outcome.

It is clear, Madam Speaker, that there is no grounds for a suspension of standing orders and no grounds for a censure. This is quite an obscure debate about Australian accounting standards, I accept, that interests those who follow these matters closely, but I imagine that if this is the most critical point that the Leader of the Opposition seeks to make, she has fallen quite short today.

MS LAWDER (Brindabella) (2.20): I would like to thank the Chief Minister for quoting from the Hansard of the Public Accounts committee. What he has failed to do here, which is why we are seeking to suspend standing orders, is to admit here in the line of questioning that he provided misleading information in response to the question.

If you go to continue on the pages through the Hansard, you will see on the Public Accounts committee of 29 February the Chair brought Mr Barr back to the original question:

Mr Barr, I would appreciate it if we could stay on the question, which was about whether you, as Treasurer, had managed to hand down any surplus in line with the standard UPF net operating balance approach.

Mr Barr has here selectively quoted from the Hansard to back up his argument, but there is more. There is more. Mr Barr then said:

No-one has, Mr Cocks; no-one in the history of self-government.

We have seen Mr Barr in answer to the PAC questions say no and repeat it again in the PAC hearing. He has doubled down on that today. He is continuing to mislead the public, and I seek leave to table some consolidated annual financial reports from other years which show a surplus which is handed down: 2008-09 and 2010-11, for example.

Leave granted.

MS LAWDER: I table:

[take in text from minutes]

Mr Barr is doubling down on his statement. The question was not about whether a surplus was budgeted for. Mr Barr tried to twist the question to being budgeted for. That was not the question, and the Chair of PAC brought Mr Barr back to the original question, which was about whether a surplus had been achieved.

He is again failing to answer the question and trying to obfuscate and deny and muddy the waters here by saying that he did answer the question; it was about a budget. It is clearly not about a budget. That is why this censure motion has been brought forward today, and that is why we are seeking leave to suspend standing orders, because we gave Mr Barr every opportunity in those questions to answer and to correct the record, which he has failed to do. He has failed to do. It brings to mind, Madam Speaker, that old saying, which I will adapt slightly to suit this particular occasion: “We can have lies, damned lies, and Mr Barr’s statistics.” He has used his—

Ms Berry: Madam Speaker, a point of order.

Ms Lawder: Can we stop the clock?

Ms Berry: The clock is stopped. I just want to bring to the attention of you, Madam Speaker, the allegations that Ms Lawder used and the language that she used, and I suggest that they are unparliamentary.

MADAM SPEAKER: I would ask you to withdraw, Ms Lawder.

MS LAWDER: I withdraw, Madam Speaker.

What we have seen here is that Mr Barr has firstly tried to avoid the question in the PAC hearing. Secondly, when brought back to the question, he has given a response which is clearly incorrect—clearly incorrect! Ms Lee in her question today has brought that to his attention again, and he has once again pivoted to saying, “Delivered a budget surplus. Budgeted for a surplus.” It is what we have heard from him over and over again. Once again, he is trying to pretend it was a different question that was asked. That was not the question that was asked. The question was about a surplus. That is why we should be able to have leave to debate this censure motion today, not once again push this to the background, obfuscate and make sure that people are not hearing the true facts of the matter here: that Mr Barr is trying to pull the wool over your eyes. He is trying to say that no-one has ever delivered a budget surplus, and this is clearly incorrect. Mr Barr should be ashamed of himself for doubling down on his assertion and continuing to say that—

Ms Berry: Point of order, please, Madam Speaker. I just want to ask your advice on the references to pulling the wool over people’s eyes in the way that Ms Lawder has made that comment, which implies that the minister is being dishonest.

MADAM SPEAKER: Ms Berry, I will let it stand, but I will just caution members in the use of their language and know that there is an extensive list of unparliamentary language, and I will be paying attention to it.

MS LAWDER: I will just finish, thank you, Madam Speaker. Mr Barr has been in this Assembly since 2006. He has been in the Assembly when some of these surpluses have been delivered and signed off, such as the 2011-12 consolidated annual financial statements that his predecessor, Ms Gallagher, delivered in 2011-12. *(Time expired.)*

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (2.26): Madam Speaker, the Greens will not be supporting the motion to suspend standing orders. We are in the middle of question time. I and other members are waiting to be able to ask our questions of the executive—

Opposition members interjecting—

MR BRADDOCK: as this is the scheduled time for us to do so. If there is a wish to have a debate about accounting standards and treatments and about what the Treasurer said, there are appropriate means to have that debate within the order of sitting.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, Ms Lawder was heard in silence.

Question put:

That so much of standing and sessional orders be suspended as would allow the moving of a motion of censure.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 8

Noes 15

Peter Cain
Leanne Castley
Ed Cocks
Jeremy Hanson
Elizabeth Kikkert
Nicole Lawder
Elizabeth Lee
Mark Parton

Andrew Barr
Yvette Berry
Andrew Braddock
Joy Burch
Tara Cheyne
Jo Clay
Emma Davidson
Mick Gentleman

Laura Nuttall
Suzanne Orr
Marisa Paterson
Michael Pettersson
Shane Rattenbury
Rachel Stephen-Smith
Rebecca Vassarotti

Questions without notice

Public housing—asset stock

MS LEE: My question is to the Leader of the Greens. Mr Rattenbury, since you were the Minister for Housing, the ACT's public housing stock has declined and the Labor-Greens government owns—

Mr Barr: Madam Speaker, on a point of order: questions can only be to a minister by their portfolio.

MADAM SPEAKER: Whilst there is history of the leader having portfolio responsibility—

Ms Lee: This is just background. It is not actually on—

Mr Barr: The opening line needs to be a question to a minister.

MS LEE: So this is to the Minister for Consumer Affairs.

MADAM SPEAKER: All right. Ms Lee, continue.

MS LEE: Thank you. Since you were the Minister for Housing, the ACT's public housing stock has declined and the Labor-Greens government owns fewer public housing dwellings than it did in 2012. Cabinet documents reveal that Housing ACT and the Community Services Directorate raised significant concerns during the process that you, as housing minister, began to sell the Northbourne flats for \$82.7 million and there was an agreement that there should be "no reduction in public housing numbers on a long-term basis through the redevelopment". Recently, in announcing your \$6 billion housing policy, you said "the government needed to prioritise people over profit". Mr Rattenbury, why was prioritising people over profits not important to you when you had carriage of the housing portfolio?

MR RATTENBURY: As much as I would love to entertain this discussion, I think it is well outside the standing orders.

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, the question is out of order. Mr Rattenbury is not currently responsible for housing policy and the policy referenced in the question is a Greens' policy. The Clerk and I agree that it is out of order.

Economy—performance

MR PETTERSSON: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, how is the retail economy faring in the ACT?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Pettersson for the question. Data from February was released last week, which showed our retail economy is faring well, in spite of some challenging headwinds. Retail trade increased during the month of February by 0.2 of a per cent. It is up over the course of the year by about 0.7 per cent. We have experienced, through the year, growth in retail trade since the 2021 COVID lockdowns ended.

The ABS household spending data shows spending on goods has increased by 6.4 per cent over the last 12 months, and spending on services has increased by 8.5 per cent. Non-discretionary spending is up by 8.3 per cent, but discretionary spending is up by 6.7 per cent, so whilst it has been a more challenging 12 months than the 12 months prior, it is pleasing to see that the ACT's retail economy is holding up off the back of both discretionary and non-discretionary spend increases.

MR PETTERSSON: Treasurer, which retail sectors have seen the strongest growth in the territory?

MR BARR: The latest data shows the highest growth was in department stores and other retailing. The household spending survey data from the ABS showed that recreation and culture spending had increased 9.9 per cent in the territory over the past

12 months. We also saw a modest increase in food retailing, but one area that clearly has been impacted by the increase in interest rates has been household spending on cafes, restaurants and takeaway food services. This is consistent with the general trends that we are seeing around the nation, as the Reserve Bank's interventions flow through the economy.

As I mentioned in the first answer, growth in non-discretionary spending is outpacing increases in discretionary spending, although both are growing. As this continues, we expect to see consumer price index pressures will ease further in the coming year.

DR PATERSON: Treasurer, what is the forecast for CPI in the year ahead?

MR BARR: We expect the rate of CPI growth to continue to slow from 5.7 per cent in fiscal year 2022-23 to around 3.75 per cent in the current fiscal year. The impacts of tighter monetary policy are continuing to moderate inflation, and based on the current RBA settings, CPI growth is expected to slow to 3.5 per cent in 2024-25 and then head back into the RBA's preferred band of between two and three per cent, with 2.75 per cent forecast for fiscal year 2025-26 and 2½ per cent forecast for 2026-27.

Our retail economy continues to grow whilst inflation is reducing, and that I think is a desirable policy outcome to ensure the jobs that the retail sector supports are continuing to be supported whilst inflation comes down, easing pressure on households.

Building—construction industry

MR CAIN: My question is to the Acting Planning Minister. Minister, the cost of building a new home in Canberra increased by 13.3 per cent in 2023, more than three times the national average increase of 4.1 per cent. Meanwhile construction time frames in the ACT are experiencing similar increases. While I acknowledge skills shortages and supply chain issues are national issues that impact our jurisdiction, the local planning and development industry attributes the effects of the new planning system as a significant additional burden. Minister, why has your new planning system had such a significant, and negative, impact on the cost of building a new home in the ACT?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I reject the premise of Mr Cain's question. The new planning system has been established to deliver an outcomes based framework and establish a strong platform to facilitate the National Planning Reform Blueprint, which is designed to deliver more housing and more housing choice for Australians and for Canberrans.

MR CAIN: So Minister, how much of your slated \$50 million injection to accelerate land release will go towards engaging with local planning, building and construction businesses to provide them with the support they need?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the detail of Mr Cain's question on notice, but as part of the affordable dwelling commitment under the accord, the ACT will deliver 350 affordable rental dwellings. Of these, 175 will be funded and delivered by the ACT government and 175 will be funded by the commonwealth government and delivered by the community housing sector. The ACT government is on track to meet its share of the affordable housing dwelling commitment and, of course, this work is led by the Coordinator-General for Housing, through CMTEDD.

In order for the ACT to achieve its population share of the broader \$1.2 million new dwelling target in the accord, approximately 4,300 dwellings per year will need to be delivered between 2024 and 2029. The government is closely monitoring how we deliver on the ACT's capacity target through the ACT government's residential land releases and private sector delivery. The District Strategies and the changes under the new planning system, which Mr Cain referred to in his first question, also indicate where and how growth and new housing can be accommodated into the future. The Chief Minister met recently with the Master Builders to discuss how this commitment will be delivered, and we are absolutely reassured that this is indeed deliverable.

MR PARTON: Minister, how could you possibly expect the building and construction industry here to continue with business as usual when your government introduced 125 new pieces of legislation or rules impacting them in 2023?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am not going to accept the premise of Mr Parton's question. I have not had the opportunity to count up those 125, but of course when you do introduce new rules they work in both directions. Some of these will be enabling those businesses that do the right thing, including those businesses that do the right thing by consumers and by their workers, to actually compete on a level playing field. Much of the approach we have taken to legislation and regulation on this side of the chamber has been to ensure that those businesses that are doing the right thing, doing the right thing by consumers and doing the right thing by workers, are not undercut by those businesses that are not doing so.

Planning—Gungahlin town centre

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. The government undertook consultation on the draft Gungahlin Town Centre East ambition report in August last year. Can you please provide an update on the project and when the final design and place framework will be released?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Braddock for the question. He is right: there has been significant consultation with the community on the Gungahlin Town Centre East development, including the final section of the town centre to be developed. We are currently finishing the design and place framework, which was developed with a great deal of community support, as Mr Braddock would be aware. It is expected that that framework will be released on YourSay in the coming months. Land release for that piece of land is expected to start in 2025-26 financial year.

MR BRADDOCK: How will the final design and place framework encourage space in Gungahlin Town Centre East for employment and not just residential apartment towers?

MS BERRY: As I said, the government has consulted with the community in great detail to understand what the community expects from redevelopment of that site and if that will be included in the place and design framework for community consultation going forward for the land to be released.

MS CLAY: Minister, how is the government using the new outcomes-based planning system to obtain better outcomes in the Gungahlin Town Centre?

MS BERRY: I might take that one on notice; thank you.

Health—endoscopy services

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, today in the *Canberra Times* it is reported that you finally admitted that your election commitment to expand and upgrade endoscopy services will not be delivered. In an ABC radio interview last week, the Deputy Chief Minister said that the Labor Party “don’t make promises we can’t deliver”. It is now clear that your government will also fail to deliver your election commitments for a new south side hydrotherapy pool on time and the north side elective surgery centre. Do you disagree with the Deputy Chief Minister’s comments given that you are aware of your significant failure to deliver promises that you made to Canberrans at the last election?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think the Deputy Chief Minister was very clear in that interview that sometimes things happen that will delay the delivery of commitments. What we have said to Canberrans is that we will deliver expanded endoscopy services, and I was very pleased to visit North Canberra Hospital yesterday—

Opposition members interjecting—

Ms Berry: Madam Speaker, I can hardly hear the minister, and she is right behind me.

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, if you ask the question, how about allowing the chamber to hear the answer?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I was very pleased to visit North Canberra Hospital yesterday to formally open the new procedure room at North Canberra Hospital, which will deliver—

Ms Castley: A point of order on relevance, Madam Speaker.

MADAM SPEAKER: Yes?

Ms Castley: I asked the minister whether she agreed with the Deputy Chief Minister’s comments. I did not ask for remarks on the north side hospital.

MADAM SPEAKER: There is no point of order. She has started talking about commitments.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: In that case I have answered the question, Madam Speaker.

MADAM SPEAKER: You have concluded?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Yes.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, are there any other election commitments that you would like to admit that you have failed to meet, such as your commitment to deliver 60,400 elective surgeries in this term of government?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: As Ms Castley is well aware, in the first couple of years of this term of parliament, we were dealing with the impact of a global pandemic, and we did not fully understand its impact in 2020 at the election. However, despite that, we have got on with delivering our election commitments. We have delivered free, point-of-service abortion services for Canberrans. We will open the Canberra Hospital expansion in August this year. We have just delivered and opened, as I was saying earlier, the new endoscopy procedure room at North Canberra Hospital, and work is progressing to deliver that infrastructure commitment at Canberra Hospital to enhance endoscopy procedures. There has been a change in the plan around that because of some of the constraints on the North Canberra Hospital site.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, please. You have time; do you want to continue?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I could go on and on, as I do regularly in this place, about all of the commitments that we have delivered and that we will continue to deliver as we progress through this year.

MS LAWDER: Minister, why should Canberrans believe that an ACT Labor government will deliver any of their election promises, such as the north side hospital, when you consistently fail to deliver your major commitments each term?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Ms Lawder is completely wrong. We do not fail to deliver our commitments. We have delivered many, many commitments in this term. We will continue to do so between now and the caretaker period. Canberrans can trust us to deliver. Madam Speaker, if you talk to any Canberrans about delivering on health, I do not think—

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Resume your seat. Members, collectively, the noise coming from my left is far too much.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: If you talk to Canberrans about who can be trusted to deliver on health, Labor will come out far ahead of the Canberra Liberals.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, the next one I have to pay attention to will be warned.

Public housing—asset sales

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development.

Minister, I refer to the article in the *Canberra Times*, I think from Lucy Bladen, on 2 April discussing how much money your Government has made from selling public housing. Figures reveal you have received \$1.1 billion from sales since 2011-12 and

that you have spent \$900-odd million on the purchase of new properties. What I am interested in is how much of that \$900 million did not come from the sale of properties, but rather from the commonwealth government. Now, rather than have you just take it on notice, I have gone through the budget papers for the relevant years and tallied up the federal injections in this space for those relevant years, and the total is \$465 million.

Are you able to confirm that during the decade in question, your government used \$465 million in commonwealth funding to assist with the purchase of new housing properties?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Parton for the question and for the great detail he went into to explain the answer that he was asking of me today. I will have to take part of that question on notice. Despite his best efforts, I will take some of that question on notice! But I will say that the ACT government will have delivered well over \$1 billion in new housing in the ACT and renewing, as part of our growth and renewal program. That will continue to apply. We will have increased public housing supply across this city by—

Mr Parton: A point of order on relevance. The question was very clearly about the \$465 million—

MADAM SPEAKER: She started by saying that she will take some of that detail on notice. Then, she has time to answer the question relevant to policy area.

MS BERRY: When we started the growth and renewal program, we had 11,704 public housing properties. In 2026-27 when the program is realised and we complete the construction of all those properties, we will have grown public housing to 12,104. We will also have renewed 20 per cent of aging, unsustainable unsuitable stock, building better, modern, sustainable homes all across our city for people who need them.

MR PARTON: Minister, where did the extra money go? Given the \$465 million federal injection, you have profited, or this government has profited nearly half a billion dollars from the buying and selling of public housing. Where did the money go?

MS BERRY: I thank again Mr Parton for his question and trying to sort of do that whole gotcha moment in the Assembly today. What I will do is take it on question and provide Mr Parton with a detailed response on the funding that he is suggesting that the ACT government has used for public housing, and how much the ACT government has spent to renew and grow public housing in the ACT.

MR CAIN: A supplementary. Minister, how much of the half a billion-dollar profit from public housing sales was spent on the tram?

MS BERRY: It is not a profit, because it is reinvested into our community, but I thank Mr Cain for the question and refer him to my second answer.

Australian Capital Territory—population

DR PATERSON: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, can you please update the Assembly on the latest population growth data for the ACT?

MR BARR: I thank Dr Paterson for the question. The most recent ABS data shows that our population has again grown in the September quarter, by 0.6 per cent. That brings Canberra's population to just shy of 470,000. We have had the highest population growth across all Australian states and territories in the decade to June 2023, when the territory grew at two per cent per annum compared to national population growth of 1.4 per cent. There are a couple of states that have jumped ahead of us in the last 12 months, but, overall, the territory's rate of growth has been nation-leading over the decade.

This rate of growth, of course, does bring some challenges, particularly in relation to infrastructure and housing—population growth does require infrastructure—but these are good challenges to have. When I look to a couple of other jurisdictions—particularly the one closest to us in population size, Tasmania—I would much rather have our challenges of robust growth, a younger demographic and more people moving here year on year than the challenges that Tasmania faces, with an aging demographic and people leaving their jurisdiction, particularly younger people. Population growth is an important driver of Canberra's future. We will soon cross over half a million people, and that requires more investment in infrastructure and housing.

DR PATERSON: Treasurer, what have been the factors driving the population increase?

MR BARR: There are factors of natural increase, international migration and, when accurately measured, internal migration within Australia to Canberra. There are, of course, low barriers to internal movement within Australia. A significant driver of our population is the increased size and diversity of the territory's labour market. In the simplest form, people vote with their feet. They come here to work, study or raise a family. Typically, people come here in their greatest numbers in their late teens and early 20s. We have always been able to attract people in that demographic. What we have not been so great at is retaining them once they finish their course of study. We are also an increasingly popular destination for international students. Student arrivals have increased 166 per cent from a decade ago, and each year our tertiary education institutions enrol over 60,000 students. Sixty thousand in a population of 470,000 absolutely demonstrates that Canberra is Australia's education capital.

MS ORR: Treasurer, what are the infrastructure priorities of the government to support the growing population?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Orr for the supplementary. Infrastructure certainly matters. We should not lose sight of why we spend so much time talking about it. Over the next five years, our budgeted infrastructure program includes investment in public transport, our road network, education and skills infrastructure, digital and physical health infrastructure, climate action, emergency services, and event infrastructure. We will continue to have a strong focus on infrastructure investment. It cannot, of course, all be delivered at once. There are workforce constraints and there are supply and material constraints, but it does need to be delivered over time.

We have a big and ambitious infrastructure plan. It stretches out as we have been asked by industry and the community to give a long-term view of not just what is happening in the next four years but also what will be happening over the next decade and the

decade beyond that. It will shape our city into the future. Our capacity to impact housing affordability, economic opportunity, wellbeing and social outcomes is very much linked to an ambitious infrastructure program that includes investment in housing as our population grows.

Sport and recreation—Canberra United

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation. Canberra United is currently at risk of folding. Capital Football has stated that the only way the team can continue operating is through improved investment. Aside from the \$250,000 in-advance payment, what other options are being considered to secure financial stability for the Canberra United team?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Nuttall for her question and for her interest in the future of Canberra United in the ACT. The ACT government has been working over the last couple of weeks having meetings with Capital Football, with the A-League proponents, with investors and with the Save Canberra United support group to bring people together for a solution that will support Canberra United going forward. Even today, I spoke with both Capital Football and the supporters' group lead just to see where things were up to and to catch up with where things are going as far as getting support for the team.

The ACT government's support for women's football in the ACT has been continuing since 2016, for some time now, and we will continue that support. We have offered Capital Football \$250,000 cash right now, up-front, for them to use to support the Canberra United team. We will continue to work with all of the stakeholders involved, and anybody interested in being part of this to work towards making sure that Canberra United can be funded in the short to medium term. I remain hopeful that there will be an A-League men's team in the ACT and that that will also take on the women's team. I have always said that I would support a men's league team and for the women's team to be included in that kind of approach.

In my meetings with the A-League and the A-League proponents, I feel more hopeful than ever that there is an opportunity here for an investor to come on board; however, it is not in time, at the moment, to save Canberra United, so bringing everybody together who has an interest in this is what I have been doing as part of my work over the last couple of weeks, knowing that Capital Football have had these financial difficulties.

MISS NUTTALL: What plans does the ACT government have to continue providing pathways for aspiring soccer players, given the success of the Matildas?

MS BERRY: We will continue to support women's sport in the ACT, as we always have. We have supported women's sport, as I said, since 2016, in a range of different ways by providing direct funding to women's sport in the ACT, particularly to Canberra United but to Capital Football and the Meteors as well. We have also provided grants funding to improve facilities to ensure they are gender neutral and more inclusive. We have provided \$400,000 in grants under previous governments to support women and girls continuing to play football, basketball, rugby league—any sport that they like. We would also support the Canberra Raiders and the Canberra Brumbies to support the women's teams in those codes as well.

We know that, right now, there is a wave and momentum for football in the ACT, particularly because of the success of the Matildas and we saw that during the Socceroos game at our GIO stadium where 25,000 people attended that match and, of them, 90 per cent of the spectators were from here in the ACT, and almost half of those spectators were women and girls. We need to make sure we provide more of those opportunities for Canberrans to enjoy international sport, particularly for women and girls to see what they could be by having that international sport played in the ACT.

MR BRADDOCK: Are there any reasons for the disparities in funding provided to the GWS versus what was on offer for Canberra United?

MR BARR: The funding for national league teams does sit within Economic Development. The GWS funding arrangement includes both men's and women's teams and a significant component, approaching 45 per cent, is, in fact, a tourism partnership between the ACT government through VisitCanberra, the AFL and the Giants, whereby there is an active promotion of Canberra in our largest domestic tourism market, Sydney. I know there is a common misperception in relation to that particular arrangement, where there is a comparison drawn between the totality of the funding but not necessarily its purpose.

Obviously, all of our national league teams have a requirement to use the CBR branding but the different teams in different competitions have different television and marketing exposure. There are different costs associated with operating teams in national leagues; that can reflect the number of games, the number of players and the amount of travel that is required. But what we do seek to do is to ensure that Canberra has access to the widest range of sports and, as a broad rule of thumb, the ACT government contribution to the total cost of running a team will, as much as possible, be consistent, noting that in the case of the AFL it would be probably less than 10 per cent of the total cost of running AFL men's and women's teams, given the number of players and the national nature of the competition. Other sports have fewer players, do less travel, play fewer games and have lower costs to actually run a team, but of course the important point to make on the Giants' arrangement is that a significant proportion of that funding is, in fact, a tourism marketing promotion campaign in Sydney.

Housing—Affordable Home Purchase Scheme

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. Minister, regarding the botched affordable house and land program, it has been revealed that there is a four year grace period for the completion of dwellings that was not communicated to buyers at any point in the process. One buyer was forced to FOI the deed between the ACT government and their builder to finally find out about the four-year grace period. Minister, why did your government promise these low income buyers that their homes would be built in two years, knowing full well that the builders had four years in which to deliver?

MS BERRY: I have provided this information to Mr Parton previously around how the affordable housing program works, and the role that the ACT government and the Suburban Land Agency has as far as setting up the purchaser with the contractor or the builder developer. Once that land is sold at the affordable price, the relationship then

moves to the contractor and to the owner of the land.

It is unfortunate that there are individuals who were not aware of the four year period. There was advice provided by the SLA to the purchasers that those individuals, or any individual as part of the affordable housing program, have legal advice. It appears as though that legal advice also did not include the information around the four year period. Again I sympathise greatly with the, at least, two people that I am aware of that have been impacted by that timeframe. I have sought advice from the Suburban Land Agency about how we can make that information clearer going forward and what our affordable land purchase would look like. In this circumstance, unfortunately, the information has not been made available to the two individuals that I am aware of. As I have said previously, I do sympathise with them for that and will make amends to ensure that information is provided going forward.

MR PARTON: Minister, why is there a hidden four year grace period between the SLA and builders, when this scheme is for those who cannot afford a private builder under normal market circumstances?

MS BERRY: It is not hidden.

Mr Parton: It is!

MS BERRY: It is not hidden. It is not hidden. Building contracts, purchasing homes and land, and dealing with developers can be quite complicated, and that is why the advice is provided for individuals to seek legal advice. I understand that has happened in this circumstance, however, that legal advice did not include the four year timeframe.

MR CAIN: Minister, when will you be upfront about the failures of this scheme and the reasons it is no longer available?

MS BERRY: I do not know what the context of that question has to do with any of the previous questions, which were a direct inquiry as to why there was this four year period, to which I have responded. I refer Mr Cain to those previous answers.

Housing—Affordable Home Purchase Scheme

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. Minister, last month in this chamber I asked why you had not responded to buyers who emailed you due to their lengthy delay of construction commencing with the Affordable Home Purchase Scheme. You stated: “I will respond to people who get in touch with my office. It might not be immediately, on the same day, or even the same week that a person emails my office, but I do respond to any emails that come to my office with the appropriate advice.” We are aware of at least five constituents who have contacted your office regarding these delays and either waited months for a response or simply have not heard back at all. Minister, why have these people on low incomes, who naively trusted your government’s promises, waited months for a response from you?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Parton for bringing this to my attention and the attention of the Assembly that there are at least five. If they have contacted my office—and I

understand that Mr Parton has said that they have—they will receive a response from my office. It does take some time—around a four-week period—to provide a response once we receive advice on the individual circumstances of individuals from various directorates—the Suburban Land Agency in this circumstance. People always get a response from my office as quickly as we possibly can, but it is usually around four weeks. I will follow up with my office, following today, and chase down any that have not been responded to, as per Mr Parton’s suggestion, and I will provide him with advice on that.

MR PARTON: Minister, why have some buyers’ emails been totally ignored for much longer than four weeks when it comes to correspondence regarding this scheme?

MS BERRY: I would have to check that that is the case. I do not believe that that is the case, but I will investigate with my office to ensure that people who have emailed my office are getting the attention that they deserve, and that is that they are responded to within as reasonable a period as possible and as soon as we possibly can, given that the investigations that need to take place are on individual circumstances and that can vary across the board. But I will take this on notice for Mr Parton. I do not know that I would need to come back to the Assembly with that information; I might just provide that to Mr Parton’s office.

MR CAIN: Minister, did you only respond to these individuals once the Liberals and the buyers made this information public?

MS BERRY: That is the most ridiculous suggestion. I respond to all stakeholders—constituents and otherwise—who contact my office, and I always will, regardless of the sometimes difficult circumstances that arise or that they bring to my attention. I completely refute the suggestion from Mr Cain.

Housing—Affordable Home Purchase Scheme

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. Minister, last month in the chamber I asked a series of questions regarding the Affordable Home Purchase Scheme and its apparent failures that have left low-income Canberrans in severe financial and mental stress. Indeed one is about to become homeless this month. You suggested that, despite the original government promises to these constituents, these delays were beyond the ACT government’s control. Of course, there are many ways that the ACT government could have and should have provided some relief. It has come to our attention that some of the smaller builders who were offered this work had very limited capacity and, as such, did not have the scale to cope with the significant rise in build costs. What due diligence did the SLA do on the ability of the chosen builders to actually deliver the product?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Parton for the question. Whilst I am not aware of the individual builders that he is referring to, I am obviously confident that the Suburban Land Agency does do its due diligence to ensure that a builder and developer contractor can provide the building work that is required. Of course, there are circumstances that might arise that may not be initially identified. We have seen that through a couple of construction companies that have experienced financial difficulty and in a very short period of time have had to put their businesses into administration. I can assure

members that that due diligence does occur. However, given Mr Parton's interest in this matter, I will seek some further advice from the Suburban Land Agency and provide the process of that due diligence and the work that the Suburban Land Agency does, for Mr Parton's information.

MR PARTON: Minister, what message do you have for the individual who, together with his partner, is going to become homeless at the end of this month, regarding the failure of the Affordable Home Purchase Scheme?

MS BERRY: I have, on a number of occasions now, expressed my sympathy to the individual that Mr Parton is referring to, and anybody who has been impacted by this time frame. However, I will say again that the ACT government's relationship in these circumstances ends when the purchaser of the land has their agreement with the developer. That is when the relationship with the ACT government ends. It then becomes the responsibility of the purchaser and the developer. In this circumstance, unfortunately, information that should have been known to the purchaser was not made available to them, and I am sorry that that has occurred. We have encouraged everybody to get legal advice. Unfortunately, it looks like, in this circumstance, that advice has not covered off all of the detail within the building contracts or time frames. Those are not things that the ACT government can control. Those relationships are legal ones and contractual ones between builders and purchasers of land. What I can do, as I said previously, is ensure that that information is clear and up-front, so that there is further clarity for the purchaser and for the developer as well.

MR CAIN: Minister, can the builders who have been granted the builds under the scheme actually build and deliver the affordable homes at the price sold?

MS BERRY: That is a question that I could not possibly answer. It is a hypothetical. It would depend on the individual circumstances.

Transport Canberra—bus fleet

MR PARTON: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Acting Transport Minister. Minister, as per the article in the Canberra Times last week, the Custom Denning buses that were delivered to Transport Canberra in October 2023 have yet to enter passenger service.

In a June 2023 media release, there was an indication that the buses would be in service by November of last year. Given it has now been nearly six months since the first Custom Denning bus was unveiled with great fanfare to the public at the Belconnen Depot, are you able to explain this lengthy delay?

MS CHEYNE: I appreciate that this is the subject of further discussion tomorrow afternoon with Mr Parton. I would note that as we continue to receive these buses from Custom Denning that they have been and will continue to be progressively added to the fleet, post satisfactory acceptance testing procedures and commissioning activity. I would suggest that Mr Parton reflects back on previous answers that Mr Steel has given on this matter, notwithstanding that he has given a lengthy ministerial statement about the status of these important procurements.

MR PARTON: Minister, are you able to tell us exactly when the four Custom Denning buses will join the fleet and go into service, and are you planning another glittering ceremony to announce this?

MS CHEYNE: I am not planning a ceremony, Madam Speaker. I think I have got enough to do. I will probably have to take it on notice, Madam Speaker, and I will at least answer it tomorrow, if not through an amendment that I anticipate I will be bringing to Mr Parton's motion.

MR CAIN: Minister, will any additional Custom Denning buses to be ordered by Transport Canberra experience similar delays?

MS CHEYNE: What I can share is that along with the delivered 12 battery electric buses that the 26 Scania and Bus Tech vehicles are part of facilitating the retirement of the noncompliant Renault buses as they are received. The original contract for the lease of 26 low-emission buses was awarded to Scania, with Bus Tech as their contracted body manufacturer, on 28 March 2022, and it did have an original delivery timeframe of between July and November 2022. Again, Madam Speaker, this has been canvassed many times in this place by Minister Steel. There has been, not surprisingly—and particularly noting Ms Lee's own motion that is coming on imminently—supply chain issues. They are affecting industries across the world, Madam Speaker, and—

Mr Parton: Are you supporting the motion?

MS CHEYNE: I support things that are sensible. The remaining 16 Scania Bus Tech vehicles are now expected to be received progressively through the first half of this year, hopefully, Madam Speaker, taking into consideration that there is still potential for the schedule to change due to the ongoing supply chain issues that are being encountered. We continue to manage the current contract parameters with the supplier and to ensure that any further issues, potential delays or areas of concerns are articulated at the earliest opportunity so that we can manage this between our contracting parties.

Economy—tourism

MS ORR: My question is to the Minister for Tourism. Chief Minister, Tourism Research Australia recently released data for 2023. What did the data reveal?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Orr for the question. The data revealed that Canberra tourism continues to break records. The latest figures show record growth in visitor numbers and record expenditure in calendar year 2023. During the year, the ACT welcomed 5.8 million visitors who spent \$3.8 billion in the territory's economy, making this the highest ever visitor expenditure in a 12-month period, surpassing 2022's expenditure by \$770 million. When we compare it to the last four years, pre-COVID, back in 2019, visitor numbers have nearly recovered to what was then a record year in 2019 and expenditure has grown significantly to be up by 35 per cent. We welcomed 5.63 million domestic visitors who spent \$3.33 billion in 2023. We had the highest number of visitor nights, highest-ever expenditure and the third-highest number of domestic visitors in the ACT in a 12-month period.

MS ORR: Chief Minister, how does this performance compare with other states and territories?

MR BARR: I am pleased to say we led all states and territories in domestic overnight visitor growth and we had the second-highest total expenditure growth, which was driven by a very strong domestic market. As I mentioned in answer to an earlier question, New South Wales remains the main source of domestic visitors for the ACT, unsurprisingly, accounting for two-thirds of our overnight visitors and three-quarters of our day-trip visitors.

Beyond the domestic market, international visitors more than doubled year on year to 2023 as the post-COVID recovery continues. In the last few years, we have seen very strong growth in our international markets, particularly the ones we have been prioritising. Visitors from India are back and above pre-COVID levels and our top-four markets—the United States, the United Kingdom, China and India—are responsible for around 40 per cent of all our international visitors.

MR PETTERSSON: Chief Minister, what is needed to ensure this strong growth continues in the future?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Petterson. There are three key elements. Firstly, we need to continue to enhance our offering for visitors—new tourist attractions, new hotels and improved public transport in our busiest tourist district, the National Triangle. Secondly, we need to make it cheaper and easier to get to Canberra. Air and rail connections are a priority. And, thirdly, we will need to continue marketing and promoting Canberra in our domestic and international priority markets, and that includes partnerships with airlines, hotel groups, sporting organisations, cultural organisations, and the national cultural institutions—all of the partnerships that we have been implementing over the last 10 years that are delivering record levels of tourism expenditure in our economy. Why is this important? It translates into tens of thousands of jobs for Canberrans. That is why we have smashed our 250,000 jobs target for the total number of jobs in our economy and have done so early, and we are on track now for 300,000 jobs in the ACT economy by 2030.

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