



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Tuesday, 26 May 2026

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Questions without notice

Public housing—debt to commonwealth

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs. Minister, the final report of independent economist Saul Eslake once again highlighted the unreasonable and unfair treatment of the ACT regarding the historic housing debt. Did you or any of your cabinet colleagues formally request forgiveness of the ACT's historic public housing debt to the commonwealth, as part of discussions with your federal Labor colleagues regarding the federal budget?

MS BERRY: I think I have sent a letter, more recently, and I publicly said it at an announcement in Belconnen that included affordable housing with Clare O'Neil standing right next to me. So, I can say I have, absolutely—and over the years sent many letters and had many conversations. Immediately before this budget? I cannot recall. I will double check. But I have, certainly, on every other occasion.

MR PARTON: Minister, did the federal government formally respond to requests and explain why it continues to refuse forgiveness of this debt, or did these calls just fall on deaf ears?

MS BERRY: No, they have responded.

MS BARRY: Minister, will you table all letters and correspondence which request forgiveness of the housing debt, and any federal government response?

MS BERRY: I can do that. I think I might have already done something, but I will do it again.

Canberra Hospital—duress alarms—behavioural assessment unit

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, to your knowledge, are the duress alarms in the emergency department at the Canberra Hospital currently functional?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: To my knowledge, the duress alarms are currently functioning, and I have not seen a code that would indicate that that is not the case today, but it does occasionally occur that duress alarms in various parts of our health system cease functioning. That incurs a code yellow, and work is quickly undertaken to address that. There are business continuity plans in place for when that occurs, and staff well understand those plans and are provided with alternative arrangements.

MR PARTON: Minister, were the duress alarms functional or did they indeed function in the way that they were designed to in the behavioural assessment unit on the day of the siege in April?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, I would again strongly encourage the Leader of the Opposition to stop referring to this as a siege. That does imply deliberate action on the part of the individual involved, and as I have said multiple times in this place—

Mr Parton: A point of order on relevance—

MR SPEAKER: She has got plenty of time, Mr Parton. I think she is just making a comment, and then I imagine that she is going to turn to the answer.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

As was indicated at the time, a code black was called in relation to this incident, and that process occurred in the way that it is intended to. As far as I am aware, the review—and what I have been advised about this—did not indicate that there was anything that did not occur as it should have in terms of the way staff responded to this incident—

Mr Parton: Did the duress alarms function?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: This is not a matter of duress alarms. This is a matter of calling a code black.

Mr Cocks: A point of order. The question was indeed about duress alarms and their functioning. The minister, if not going to the question of duress alarms, is not answering the question.

MR SPEAKER: Minister?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take on notice the question of whether the duress alarms were functional that day. But the key point, Mr Speaker, I think, is that a code black was called in exactly—the staff did everything right in relation to this matter. They responded to an incident of a knife being drawn by removing themselves from danger and calling a code black and eliciting a police response, which was absolutely the right thing to do, and those processes worked as they are supposed to.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, what knowledge do you have of any outages in the duress alarm system since the opening of the new emergency department, and can you provide advice as to how many days the system has not been functional?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Castley for the supplementary. As I indicated in the response to the first question, there are sometimes occasional outages in the duress systems across our facilities. So I will take on notice how many times the duress system has been—I will review the *Hansard*, because I cannot remember if Ms Castley asked about the entire critical services building, or just the emergency department or just the BAU. I will review the *Hansard* and take that question on notice.

Levies and taxation—gambling revenue

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Gaming Reform. The report from Mr Saul Eslake says that the ACT collects less revenue per head of population from gambling taxes than any other jurisdiction except Western Australia. We raised around \$165 per person less than the national average and we might be missing out on \$60 million or \$80 million in tax each year. Mr Eslake further notes that if the ACT raised more taxes from gambling, there would be no adverse impact on our share of GST revenue. Minister, how much revenue are we missing out on because we tax

gambling less than the national average?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. I will take the question, as Treasurer. Obviously, we note Mr Eslake's final report that he has provided to the Assembly's Select Committee on the Fiscal Sustainability of the ACT. The government will be providing a response to the committee. We will take all of Mr Eslake's suggestions seriously and provide a response to the committee. That will include a response to his suggestion around revenue opportunities, including gambling taxes.

I am not sure that we have the information that you are requesting on hand, but I will take it on notice and see what potentially we could provide; otherwise we will respond more formally in the government's formal response to the committee.

I do note that there is substantial work underway at the moment in relation to reform of gambling, and reform of the club sector. When the government responds to Mr Eslake's report, it will be in that context. Noting that there is a lot of change that is underway, particularly around gaming machines, we will need to take that into account in relation to the pace of reform suggested by Mr Eslake.

MS CLAY: What would be the positive impacts for our community if we raised gambling taxes?

MR STEEL: There could be a range of different effects, and those will need to be considered by the government more fully, in understanding Mr Eslake's suggestions. Of course, we have seen the federal government recently respond to the federal inquiry into the work that they are doing, particularly further work that they are doing at the federal level around taxation settings. There can sometimes be unintended consequences with changes to tax, and we will need to more fully understand those. We will consider what Mr Eslake has put forward. We have not ruled anything out. We will provide a fully considered response back to the Assembly's committee.

MR BRADDOCK: Treasurer, for comparison, how much of the net revenue from gambling is currently returned to the community sector through the mandatory requirements?

MR STEEL: With the review of clubs that has been underway, there are a range of requirements that are already there, particularly for clubs that have gaming machines, to provide a return to the community. When we are talking about changes to gambling taxes more broadly, and gaming machine revenue, we would need to think about the broader settings that apply. I am happy to take that question on notice. I want to flag that there are a range of different, complex, moving parts that government needs to properly consider, as we continue to work through recommendations from the review that has been underway. I look forward to working with Dr Paterson on that.

Canberra Institute of Technology—executive salaries

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations. The former CEO of the CIT Leanne Cover collected an estimated \$1.2 million in total remuneration, having been stood down on two years of paid leave while she was being investigated for serious corrupt conduct. We have heard a lot about

the CIT's financial struggles which have been used to justify rising course costs, including a threefold increase in fees for some programs, such as the Diploma of Remedial Massage, and the discontinuation of a languages program for years 11 and 12 students that only cost \$124,000 to run. Given these financial difficulties and having just recruited a new CEO on a salary package of over \$440,000, Minister, why in February this year did the CIT seek to recruit a new deputy CEO, also on a salary package of over \$400,000 per year? And did the board consult you about this?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. As members in this place would know, and it has been called for in a range of new recommendations, the CIT has in recent times been seeking to restructure the executive at the CIT. That has led to a change in personnel and the creation of some new positions. I would have to check my records as to whether I was officially informed in correspondence from the board. I was, however, aware of the creation of that new position. That recruitment process, as I am aware, has been going well.

Regarding some of the suggestions Mr Emerson has made, I would not necessarily link them directly. The CIT has been experiencing a range of cost pressures in recent years, whilst also experiencing a decline in enrolments. The CIT, as an institution, is not able to nimbly respond to some of those pressures, due to its enterprise agreement and the structure of the CIT as a government entity. So, whilst I appreciate that the CIT has been experiencing some challenges, I do not think all of these events are as connected as Mr Emerson would like.

MR EMERSON: Minister, are you aware that earlier this month some 40 CIT executives were flown to the TAFE Directors Australia Convention in Brisbane? And does the government consider that to be an appropriate use of taxpayer money?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. I was not aware of that conference and I did not receive an invitation.

Mr Parton: A mad invite, hey?

MR PETTERSSON: It sounds like a heck of a party, Mr Parton. Day-to-day operational decisions for the CIT are the responsibility of the CIT board, as well as the CEO. I am happy to take on notice further information and potential justification for expenditure of that nature on behalf of the member.

MS LEE: Minister, does your government support this level of executive-level staffing expenditure at the CIT, noting that the 2025 annual report shows that the CIT's average staffing level exceeded its budget by \$3.2 million?

MR PETTERSSON: Mr Speaker, could Ms Lee repeat the question?

MR SPEAKER: Ms Lee, could you repeat the question, please?

MS LEE: Minister, does your government support this level of executive-level staffing expenditure at the CIT, noting that the 2025 annual report shows that the CIT's average staffing level exceeded its budget by \$3.2 million?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Lee for the question. As I alluded to in my first answer, there was a range of changes to executive staffing at the CIT, seeking to reduce the size of the executive.

Health—performance

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, the final report on the ACT's fiscal sustainability confirmed that health spending is the single-largest driver of the ACT's structural budget pressure, while outcomes are consistently falling when compared to other jurisdictions—not to mention that morale and culture are at record lows, occupational violence is rampant and the ACT is one of worst performers in delivering elective surgery within the recommended wait time. Minister, how does this Labor government justify continued runaway spending without clear evidence of improved systems or any improvement in outcomes?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mr Parton for the question but I do not think he characterised Mr Eslake's report and its commentary about health correctly. Indeed, what we have seen in the health system over recent years is that our emergency department has significantly improved, to become the best emergency department performance among all of the smaller jurisdictions, and our culture and morale have significantly improved, according to the independent surveys that we get done on a regular basis. We have seen an ongoing improvement in relation to that, and anecdotal feedback supports that as well, not only from our staff but also from patients, who regularly come and see me at mobile offices and say that they not only got excellent treatment from our world-class hospitals but also were impressed by how happy the staff seemed in providing that treatment and, although they are working hard, seemed to be working collegiately together.

We are seeing an improvement in elective surgery performance and a reduction in waiting lists in that regard. We obviously had some disruption during COVID 19, but Canberra Health Services has delivered years record elective surgery growth over three of the last four years. This year we are on track to deliver around 17,500 elective surgeries and to deliver our election commitment of 70,000 elective surgeries over four years—the same level of commitment that the Canberra Liberals made in the last election. So none of the pieces of information that Mr Parton included in his question actually stand up to scrutiny. I would suggest that I do not think he has characterised Mr Eslake's commentary accurately in asking his question.

MR PARTON: Minister, can you identify for the Assembly any specific health programs or administrative areas that are currently under review for efficiency savings?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: In the 2025-26 budget we included \$13 million to support efficiency measures right across our health service. An example I can provide to the Assembly and Mr Parton—as I have done on numerous occasions—is in our outpatient services. In planned care, which covers elective surgery and outpatients, the introduction of the integrated operations centre has provided greater visibility of our waiting lists. The work that is currently underway is about ensuring that there is more consistency in the way that waiting lists are managed, an increase in the number of first appointments that people are able to access, by ensuring that those patients who are stable are able to be referred back to their general practitioner for ongoing support, so

that more people can get their first appointment as an outpatient, recognising that about 180,000—I think that was the last number I saw—outpatient appointments are delivered every year by Canberra Health Services. So it is a very big operation that we are talking about here.

That is just one example of increased efficiencies in our health service—ensuring that there is more consistency in the way that our services are delivered, to get through a larger number of patients and support our teams in doing that through workload reduction as well.

MR COCKS: Minister, are Canberra taxpayers receiving better value for money on health expenditure compared to other jurisdictions of a similar size and what comparative cost and outcome data have used to form that view?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: We know that historically the ACT has been a relatively high-cost jurisdiction. When we look at the National Efficient Price and the cost of delivering a National Weighted Activity Unit of health activity, we are seeing that cost coming down as we have seen those efficiencies flow through the system from things like the integrated operations centre. But we do have more work to do, and I have been very upfront about that.

We also have relatively well-paid staff—and I recognise that we are currently in an enterprise bargaining process. Many of our doctors, nurses and midwives are well paid compared to those in other jurisdictions. That reflects the fact that we are a high-wage jurisdiction more generally. That was something that was reflected in Mr Eslake's report when he commented on the socio-economic make-up of the ACT households and community. As we have talked about multiple times, we also face challenges in terms of economies of scale, which do make it hard for us to deliver health services—

Mr Cocks: On a point of order, Mr Speaker: the question was very clearly about the costs compared with other jurisdictions of similar size and value for money, specifically.

MR SPEAKER: I think the minister did go to that. She has been giving explanations saying that the costs are higher and the reason is that we have a higher wage base and people get paid more. She then explained that there is an attempt to bring those costs down. So, whether you agree with her or not, I think she has been relevant, Mr Cocks.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Thank you. The one thing I would add—I did miss the part of the question about compared with small jurisdictions—is that the Independent Health and Aged Care Pricing Authority is currently undertaking a piece of work that the ACT drove to better understand the cost base of small jurisdictions.

Health—New South Wales residents

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, the Eslake report highlights that the ACT health system continues to absorb significant costs associated with treating New South Wales residents while the financial compensation arrangements fail to cover the full cost of care. Minister, given the report noted that more than 20 per cent of services delivered by ACT hospitals are provided to New

South Wales residents, how much did this funding gap cost the ACT taxpayer in the last financial year?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Thank you to the Leader of the Opposition for the question. I will take the question on notice in terms of the exact gap, but what we do know is that New South Wales pays us at the National Efficient Price, which in 2024-25 was \$6,465 per national weighted activity unit. In that year, the ACT did have a particularly high estimated price of \$8,370, or 29 per cent higher than the National Efficient Price. Now, that is coming down, as I mentioned earlier, and that was an unusual year in relation to the calculation of the ACT price.

We have moved towards activity based funding, which is another efficiency measure we have taken to help us to better understand the cost of delivering services to ensure that is transparent to the clinicians who deliver those services. Clinicians are by nature competitive, so when they can see the data and the information more transparently, that will help us to engage them in the process of increased efficiency.

I can also say, in relation to our relationship with New South Wales, that the most recent cross-border agreement that I negotiated with the former health minister, Mr Hazzard, was a significant improvement. Previously there was a cap on the growth in activity that New South Wales would fund. We got them to remove that cap on growth so that now at least they fund all of the activity that we deliver for New South Wales patients at the National Efficient Price. But they do not contribute to capital expenditure, which is a point that Mr Eslake has made. We have delivered a \$660 million Canberra hospital expansion and we are investing in a new Northside Hospital, and, under current arrangements, New South Wales will not contribute anything towards those billions of dollars of capital that we are spending on new hospital infrastructure. We will keep making that argument.

MR PARTON: Minister, can you detail the formal representations that you or the Chief Minister have made to your New South Wales counterparts so that the ACT is reimbursed fairly for the cost of treating New South Wales residents?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: As I indicated in my answer to the previous question, in working with the former New South Wales health minister we did renegotiate a new cross-border agreement which was significantly better for the ACT than the previous agreement. As a result of that, we will see increased funding flowing to the ACT budget from back payments for previous years, as that has worked through the system. So that agreement will make a significant contribution to our budget bottom line for this year and for next year, and that is really, really important.

Now that we have landed the National Health Reform Agreement, we are in the process of working through a renewed New South Wales-ACT cross-border health agreement. Our officials are having those conversations. I have engaged informally with the current New South Wales health minister about that, and I will be engaging more formally with him, but we needed to await the outcome of the National Health Reform Agreement before we undertook those. So we extended the New South Wales ACT agreement for a year.

In addition, why we are so keen to ensure that the Independent Health and Aged Care

Pricing Authority does the work so that we can get the small jurisdiction multiplier for the National Efficient Price into the National Health Reform Agreement is because, at the moment, we have an additional \$75 million this year, and expected next year, from the commonwealth government. That \$75 million recognises the impact of small jurisdiction costs and lack of economies of scale, but we do not get the same funding flowing from New South Wales. If that feeds into the National Efficient Price, it means New South Wales will also pay us that multiplier, and that is why we have had incredibly strong advocacy from the ACT, from the Chief Minister, from the Treasurer, from myself and from our officials, to have that process take place.

MS LEE: Minister, noting your answer, why, despite having been in government for over 20 years, have negotiations failed to secure, at least at a minimum, the cost associated with treating a New South Wales resident in the ACT?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will refer Ms Lee to my previous answers and all of the work we have done and the significant improvements that we have achieved over the last few years.

Transport—roads and active travel

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Treasurer.

Treasurer, I refer you to the report by Mr Saul Eslake on the fiscal sustainability of the ACT's finances, which in chart 48 on page 68 shows in the expense category of roads, the Commonwealth Grants Commission's estimated "level of service" provision ratio was 120.9 per cent in 2024-25. Noting that Mr Eslake's report says we appear to spend more on roads than the Grants Commission assesses that we need, and less on public and active transport, why are we not spending more on transport?

MS CHEYNE: Certainly, I can explain why we spend so much on roads: it is due to the design decisions that were taken with our city. It is due to the Y-plan. It is due to the fact that we have satellite towns. It is due to the fact that our roads were built wider, that they were built to a national standard and that there are distinct satellite cities—as you may appreciate, Mr Speaker, and which we all represent—it is quite a distance to travel between some of those. Those were deliberate decisions that were made to a particular standard at the time, and that costs the ACT government an awful lot of money to maintain.

MR BRADDOCK: Treasurer, how much is the government currently projected to have spent on road maintenance by the end of the current financial year? And how does this compare to its expenditure on path maintenance for the active travel network?

MS CHEYNE: I will take it on notice, Mr Speaker. We get asked this question relatively regularly, and it is usually published in our annual reports. But let me see if we have got anything to update from the most recent response that I would have given.

MS CLAY: Minister, has the ACT really got bigger road distances to travel than other states which have much larger geographic areas to cover?

MS CHEYNE: For the size of our city, yes.

Public schools—New South Wales residents

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, the Eslake report highlights that ACT schools are educating a significant number of students from New South Wales, yet there is no equivalent cost recovery or compensation mechanism for these cross-border students. Minister, why is the government funding the education of out-of-jurisdiction students without securing appropriate contributions from New South Wales?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Lee for her question, and I would say that this is an historical arrangement that the ACT government has had, with New South Wales students getting a public education in ACT public schools. We still get funding under the school resourcing standard for these students to be educated in our schools, and we do provide pathway schools for New South Wales students so that they have a school that is their “priority enrolment area” school, if you like—for New South Wales schools—because we are part of a region of towns, with the ACT being the primary education provider in this region. Although I would note that New South Wales has now started to build more schools across areas where there were no schools previously, areas such as Yass and Murrumbateman, and of course we are seeing schools in Jerrabomberra and Googong as well.

MS LEE: Minister, have you quantified the impact this has on resources available for ACT students, including class sizes, staffing and program funding? If so, will you table that information?

MS BERRY: Well, schools are funded on a per student basis. So I am not sure that the quantifying of funding that Ms Lee is talking about could be done on students that are already funded on a per student funded basis.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, have you ever picked up the phone or made any approach at all to your New South Wales Labor counterpart to negotiate reimbursement or funding contributions from the New South Wales government?

MS BERRY: No, I have not, but I am happy to work with the New South Wales government if that would be appropriate. Although, I would note that I do not believe that there are any other jurisdictions that provide funding to cross-border enrolments, so it would be unique.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr Barr: The GST is adjusted to reflect this—

Mr Parton: And you’re only a new government! Like, settle in and then maybe work out what to do.

MR SPEAKER: Just ignore him, minister.

Mr Parton interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Mr Parton!

MS BERRY: He loves the attention, Mr Speaker.

The GST is meant to balance out all of those arrangements across jurisdictions. So it would be unique if the ACT were to step into that space. However, I am happy to have those conversations if the New South Wales government would be wanting to do that.

Alexander Maconochie Centre—performance

MRS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for Corrections. The ACT spends \$805 per prisoner per day, far more than the average Australian expenditure of \$436, yet the government's own AMC master plan says that the current situation at the prison does not support reduced reoffending, and that almost 75 per cent of ACT detainees have previously been incarcerated. Minister, why are Canberrans paying the highest prison costs in the country for a prison system that the government itself says is not properly supporting rehabilitation?

DR PATERSON: Can I ask the member to repeat the question? I am not quite sure what she was asking.

MRS MORRIS: Sure. The ACT spends \$805 per prisoner per day, which is far more than the average Australian expenditure of \$436, yet the government's own master plan for the AMC says that the current situation at the prison does not support reduced reoffending, and that almost 75 per cent of ACT detainees have previously been incarcerated. Minister, why are Canberrans paying the highest prison costs in the country for a prison system that the government itself says is not properly supporting rehabilitation?

DR PATERSON: I will take the facts in that question, Mrs Morris's data, on notice, because I would like to fact-check some of that. It does not sound quite right. I also think it is a whole lot of data that is taken from different sources. I will take on notice and report back to the Assembly on the recidivism rate in the ACT, as well as the cost per day for a detainee.

Mr Cocks: A point of order, Mr Speaker. Under section 118AA, I am not convinced that the minister, in taking the data on notice, is actually attempting to answer the question, which is: why are Canberrans paying the highest prison costs in the country for a prison system that the government itself says is not properly supporting rehabilitation?

MR SPEAKER: I think the fact that she has taken it on notice—

Mr Cocks: She has taken the data on notice, Mr Speaker.

DR PATERSON: I will take the question on notice.

MR SPEAKER: I think she has taken the question on notice. We will wait and see what comes back on notice, and look at it then, Mr Cocks, and litigate the issue further. By virtue of the fact that she has taken it on notice, that is probably what you get from

118AA, anyway. So we will await that answer.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, have you taken any steps to reduce the ACT's most expensive per prisoner cost at the AMC since you became the minister in 2024?

DR PATERSON: Absolutely. We are significantly invested in supporting our ACT correctional services to support detainees, so that we reduce recidivism in the ACT. There has been a whole range of investments in programs, educational offerings and supports for detainees within the AMC over the last couple of years. We have established a detainee reintegration and education board, which is going through a procurement process to see that there are a whole range of other programs and educational opportunities for our detainees. We have the Confiscated Assets Trust funding, which has now been put towards a work release program, as well as literacy and numeracy education and testing for detainees. We have CIT coming into the AMC, which is a really significant achievement, and we hope to keep working with our partners at CIT to see this continue.

We are also heavily invested in supports and housing programs for people when they are released from prison. We recently attended a justice reform initiative roundtable looking at post-custody employment opportunities for detainees. We will continue to have those discussions in terms of how we can make it easier to support people post release in employment and in getting their lives back on track.

MS BARRY: Minister, isn't the AMC exactly the kind of policy-driven fiscal failure that Mr Eslake has warned about?

DR PATERSON: I did not read Mr Eslake's recommendation on the prison. We have a prison system and, like every other jurisdiction, it is a costly system, and that is why we are focused on reducing recidivism and reducing the crime in our community. We have seen a year-on-year reduction in crime over a long period of time now, and we will continue to work with ACT Policing to see that continue.

Teachers—enterprise bargaining

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for the Public Service. Minister, last Friday, AEU members went on their first strike in 15 years and stopped work for two hours that morning. You would have appreciated the sea of red when thousands educators showed up and not only filled the entire Ainslie Football Club but overflowed onto the oval and marched to the ABC radio station in droves. They are frustrated because, 10 months later, the government has not responded to their log of claims for educators and school assistants. Why haven't management representatives responded to all of the AEU's claims?

MS BERRY: I will take that question. I am the Minister for Education and Early Childhood and am responsible for the enterprise agreement. I understand that the Education Union and their members are frustrated with the process taking so long, and so they have voted to take industrial action, and very successful industrial action. The union should be proud and the members should be proud of the turnout that they achieved for that work. What I can say is that the Education Union and the directorate are meeting frequently. I have already directed the Education Directorate to meet with

the Education Union as frequently as possible, with as much clarity around the claims that the Education Union is seeking on behalf of its members. I am meeting with the Education Union at least once a week, but my office and I have been in contact with them almost every day, if not every day, following the industrial action. We are all absolutely focused on getting the best possible outcome. Negotiations take some time. It is a complex matter, although I appreciate the frustrations that the Education Union and its members are facing right now. But our focus and the Education Directorate's focus is to try to get the fairest outcome we can, so I hope to continue those negotiations with the union.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, how much more would it cost to support the AEU's full log of claims across teaching staff and school assistants?

MS BERRY: I could not even quantify that amount. It would be significant. However, that does not mean that the government just says no to those kinds of negotiations. As Miss Nuttall has suggested, there are a number of claims. They are complex. Some of them would require significant investment that would be beyond the ACT government's ability to fund in any case, but certainly not with the budget in the situation that it is right now. The Education Directorate is continuing to work with the union to understand their needs and the requests from their members and is working through those in detail. That is taking some time.

MS CLAY: Why has the government only provisioned for a three per cent pay increase, which is below inflation?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will answer as the Minister for the Public Service. In relation to the broader enterprise bargaining process and the way that enterprise bargaining works in the ACT, we have a core and then we have 18 agreements that have different stream negotiations, of which 17 are currently under negotiation. The three per cent per annum pay rise over the next three years was offered as part of the core process, so it is right across the ACT public service, and that includes the teaching and learning support workforce. In fact, it is projected by federal Treasury and the Reserve Bank that inflation will return to the expected rate of 2½ per cent over the next three years. Should that occur, it will in fact be an above-inflation rate of pay increase over the next three years, which is the period of the enterprise agreement.

Obviously, we recognise that people have been facing cost-of-living challenges as a result of inflation in the post-COVID period over the last few years. That has also had an impact on the ACT budget, as Ms Clay is well aware, as chair of the fiscal sustainability committee. We are in challenging fiscal circumstances. The pay offer that we have made is the best that we believe we can do in the current fiscal circumstances of the ACT government, but we recognise that we need to make a pay offer for our very important public service staff right across the ACT public service, including our teachers and learning support staff.

Transport Canberra—bus drivers

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for Transport. Minister, prior to the 2024 election, Labor promised Canberrans the world to achieve re-election. One of the many promises made by your party was to hire 350 new drivers to support an expanded bus

network. With transport funding declining, have you also abandoned this promise specifically to increase the number of drivers by 350?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question, but I reject the premise of the question. We did not promise the world at the 2024 election. The Chief Minister was very clear about that. That was in contrast to the opposition, who of course continued their “magic pudding” economics that has been smashed by Saul Eslake’s report—the idea that somehow you can spend more and tax less.

Mr Cocks: Point of order, Mr Speaker. While I would like to just reject the premise of the minister’s answer, what I would actually like to do is to raise a concern that the minister is in fact debating the question once again.

MR SPEAKER: I would just make the point, Mr Cocks, that, if you are going to be a bit smart in your questioning, you can expect a smart answer.

Members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: I call the minister to order—

Mr Barr: You just got a scowl, Mr Speaker!

MR SPEAKER: That would be unparliamentary, and I am sure it would not happen. Anyway, on the point of order, Minister, I would ask you to be directly relevant and to not debate the question.

MR STEEL: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Of course, we are continuing to work on delivering our election commitments that we made for the term. We are coming up to halfway through the term, and we have gone through one budget thus far and we will have another one that I will hand down in June, where we will continue to make progress across a range of different election commitments.

Work is being undertaken by Transport Canberra to continue to recruit a driver workforce, which currently includes over 1,000 employees, including 848 permanent full-time and permanent part-time drivers and 242 casual employees. Since 1 January 2026, we have already had 25 drivers graduate through our training programs. Transport Canberra continues to run courses, commencing every two weeks, with up to eight trainees on each course. Two recruitment campaigns were held in 2025.

MR COCKS: Mr Speaker, I will try again. Minister, are you walking away from your promise to recruit 350 new drivers while the transport budget falls because your budget is in a bad position?

MR STEEL: No, we are continuing to work on our election commitments across the board, including for transport. Work continues to recruit more drivers, and we have undertaken a range of different training courses, with two recruitment campaigns that were held in 2025—in March and September. The latest campaign, in September, received 557 applications. We have a “come and try day” coming up, where you can go along and try out driving a bus around the training course—an opportunity for people to get a hands-on experience and join the ranks of Transport Canberra to deliver the

services that our community needs.

As we continue to work on delivering our election commitments through the budgets, that will include consideration of the driver workforce that we need to be able to deliver on the other range of commitments we made under Labor's transport plan to deliver more services to the community. We invested in 30 new buses in the last budget and we are going through a procurement process that is underway at the moment for those. Of course, we will also need more drivers to deliver on those commitments. We have a strong pipeline of training underway to be able to deliver those, and there is strong interest in the community in driving for Transport Canberra.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, how are you going to pay for these commitments?

MR STEEL: We will outline in every budget how we are paying for the range of different election commitments that we have made and delivered on. We have made very good progress against our election commitments across the board—not all of which required funding. Some of those commitments were to introduce legislation, undertake reviews and do a range of other policy work. Some of those did have funding attached, and those will be considered in every budget. I look forward to updating the community when I release the budget in June on how we are progressing against funding those election commitments.

Fuel security

MS TOUGH: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, following yesterday's national cabinet meeting, can you update the Assembly on the outcomes for fuel security and what they mean for the ACT?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Tough for the question. Yes, national cabinet met yesterday and heard some encouraging news in relation to national fuel security. We confirm that Australia remains at level 2 of our National Fuel Security Plan. That means supply is continuing at a steady rate, but there is still some pressure and uncertainty in the medium term.

We heard that national fuel reserves are in fact higher now than they were at the start of the war. We now have around 43 days of petrol, 38 days of diesel and 31 days of jet fuel and the equivalent in storage in Australia, and a large number of ships waiting, in fact, to offload their cargo once more storage becomes available. We are also advised that panic buying appears now to have stopped, which is improving supply reliability across jurisdictions, including also here in the ACT. This, of course, is a serious matter for this territory and this nation and our economy. So the efforts of governments at national, state and territory levels to provide confidence in fuel supply into the future have been important in seeing that panic buying ease and now apparently stop.

MS TOUGH: Chief Minister, how do these national developments translate to fuel supply conditions in Canberra?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary. The improved national outlook certainly reinforces that our local fuel supply remains reliable. Any isolated outages of a particular fuel type are resolved quickly as new deliveries arrive. We continue to

closely monitor supply using the new legislative powers that require real time data on fuel stocks and deliveries, and this certainly will ensure that we can respond quickly if conditions change in the future.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Chief Minister, what role has the change in consumer behaviour played, and how prepared is the ACT if conditions worsen?

MR BARR: Look, I think it has been really important that panic buying has stopped. We see this cycle. We saw it with toilet paper during the pandemic and we saw it with fuel hoarding at the beginning of this crisis. It really does have an impact. So if people continue to purchase only what they need, we do reduce pressure on local supply chains and we help maintain steady availability of fuel. This is absolutely critical for diesel dependent industries. So much of what flows into our jurisdiction in terms of fuel, food and the transportation of goods is powered by diesel. That is why there has been a particular focus at the national level on building diesel supplies.

At the same time, though, we need to be well prepared and we have seen a particular response from a segment of the market, particularly those transitioning away from petrol vehicles to electric vehicles, that has reduced demand somewhat. The ACT has the strongest take up of electric vehicles in the country, by a factor of nearly threefold.

We are also well prepared for any future changes with the strength and transparency laws—and I thank this place and Minister Orr for the work to achieve that—and our alignment with the National Fuel Security Plan that ensures we can act quickly, including supporting any future national measures if they are required.

National cabinet will meet again in about three weeks time. This is a rolling program of assessing new fuel supplies and, of course, hoping that there is a breakthrough in the negotiations between the United States and Iran.

Weston Creek Bowling Club—closure

MS CARRICK: My question is to the minister for planning. The impending closure of the Weston Creek Bowling Club threatens the loss of a critical community asset which supports social connection, recreation and wellbeing. It also represents a missed opportunity to transform the site into a broader community and seniors precinct, delivering preventative health benefits, supporting aging-in-place and strengthening community cohesion. Minister, can you confirm whether the Labor Club has sought to deconcessionalise the lease? And will the government rule out any changes that would undermine the site's long-term use as a community facility?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. Certainly, I acknowledge the current situation with the Weston Creek Bowling Club. I have met with the bowling club to talk through the matter, and I understand the concern of members in relation to ongoing access to recreation facilities for their bowlers.

I know that there was a decision made by the Labor Club to close the club at Weston Creek, and there has been discussion between the bowling club and the Labor Club about that, to help inform them to make their future decisions. That is a matter between the lessee and the bowling club.

The discussion that I was having with the bowling club was about whether there would be opportunities on other sites around the area and particularly in Weston Creek, where they could continue their activities. There also has been some interest from other bowling clubs, who have been engaged in discussions with those parties as well.

I will come back on notice in relation to the concessional arrangements on the lease. It was my understanding that the lease was already deconcessionalised some time ago, and, because deconcessionalisation was already undertaken some time ago, I have not received any representations about deconcessionalisation.

That, of course, does not preclude community uses being undertaken on the site. That really depends on future decisions by the lessee as to what they would like to do on the site, or whether they are prepared to sell it to someone else—whether it is a bowling club or another lessee—to be able to undertake further activities on site. It is zoned as CZ6, so it is a commercial zone.

MS CARRICK: Minister, will you progress a clear precinct plan to retain the purpose of the Weston Creek Bowling Club and the Labor Club precinct as a community and seniors hub?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. Certainly, those uses are not necessarily precluded—although aged care, I understand, is not permitted under CZ6, under the current zoning.

The government is not currently proposing a major plan amendment in relation to rezoning the site to allow for uses that are currently not permitted.

We have a further piece of work that is being undertaken looking at some of the CZ6 sites around Canberra associated with the clubs, and that is aimed at supporting clubs to diversify their revenue streams. This site may potentially form part of that, but I do not think it is going to be a specific priority.

You might recall that Labor went to the election making a very specific commitment that we would consider looking at residential or aged care and retirement living uses within the CZ6 zone. But that came with a caveat and that caveat was that we wanted to see no net loss of community and recreational facilities as part of that process. So, the government is undertaking policy work looking at the zone at the moment, but we are not doing just a precinct-level analysis of this one site. We are looking at a range of different sites across Canberra. We do want to see, where possible, those club facilities maintained and then also community and recreational facilities there.

Now, unfortunately in this case, the site has been deconcessionalised some time ago. It is a market lease. It has certain requirements and permitted land-uses under the zoning, and the government is not currently proposing to change that—although there is further work happening in relation to broader clubs' diversification, and on which I will update the Assembly and community.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, do you have a timeframe for any of this work that you are

undertaking?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. We will be undertaking a lot of this work over the next year. I will provide timelines to the Assembly once I am able.

Budget—election commitments

MR COCKS: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, independent economist Saul Eslake’s review of the fiscal sustainability of the ACT was highly critical of the unreliability of the government’s forward estimates, echoing many others, including the former Auditor-General, and last year’s estimates committee report and many other public commentators. Will this year’s budget finally include the full cost of all ACT Labor election commitments?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. We acknowledge Mr Eslake’s report, and we will be responding to that. We have a lot of confidence in Treasury officials and the work that they do in forecasting the ACT’s budget numbers. But in each budget, the ACT government makes policy decisions, and there was a lot of discussion by Mr Eslake about policy decisions—policy decisions that we have taken to support our community during COVID-19 and policy decisions that we are undertaking to support our community now, as our community faces cost-of-living pressure. We will continue to make policy decisions in every budget, and the budget will be adjusted accordingly, based on those decisions. That is what we report on when I hand down the appropriation bill—the amount of extra appropriation that is required to deliver both new policy decisions and the existing funding that is baseline funding that is required for agencies to deliver the services and infrastructure that our community needs.

So, yes, we will continue to look at making policy decisions; that is exactly what a budget is about. And we will prioritise frontline services. We will be responsive to the community, but we will also be responsible in terms of the way that we manage the budget, and we will be taking seriously the suggestions by Mr Eslake.

And unlike the Liberals, we will not be ruling anything out. This is a report that they brought to the Assembly and commissioned through the select committee, and they are the ones that are ruling out the recommendations by Mr Eslake to put the budget on a more sustainable path. We will not. We will take this seriously and responsibly.

MR SPEAKER: Minister, the Liberal Party’s position is not relevant to your jurisdictional area. I would ask that you be relevant. Thank you, Minister.

Mr Cocks: A point of order under 118AA, the question, in fact, was: will this year’s budget include the full cost of all ACT Labor election commitments? While the Treasurer spoke to a range of things that they think about, there was no discussion of whether the budget will include those election commitments.

MR SPEAKER: On the point of order, Minister?

MR STEEL: I talked about policy decisions. That is exactly what our ACT Labor election commitments are.

MR SPEAKER: He might not have been explicit, but he certainly was relevant and he was responsive, in my view.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, will this year's budget include and identify the full cost of public service pay rises?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. It will reflect any decisions that have been made in relation to public sector pay rises.

MRS MORRIS: Treasurer, how will you pay for additional spending—bigger cuts and more debt, or higher fees and taxes?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. Every budget we look to deliver responsibly the commitments that we made to the community at the election, responding to their needs and the demand that we are seeing in the community. I did that yesterday with community service organisations, particularly in the housing and homelessness sector—responding to their needs. We will also outline in the budget how that is paid for over time.

What we will not be doing is making massive cuts to the public service and the services that Canberrans rely on. That would not be appropriate or responsible at this particular point in time in the context of a war that has put pressure on households and our community.

What we will also do is continue the work that we set out in the budget last year to support the territory's sound public finances, based on our updated fiscal strategy. I acknowledge Mr Eslake has made some suggestions around improvements to the fiscal strategy, and we will consider those seriously. But we will show progress against our commitment to support economic growth and employment, returning the budget to operating cash surpluses over the forward estimates period—a path to returning the headline net operating balance to surplus over the forward estimates period, ensuring net debt is at sustainable levels over time.

Levies and taxation—income tax

MR PARTON: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, your New South Wales Labor colleague Chris Minns has warned that bracket creep is eating away at the pay rises of nurses, teachers, police and other workers. You have praised Labor's federal budget as delivering cost-of-living relief. Is Premier Minns wrong, or are Canberra workers also being hit by bracket creep while your government increases rates, fees and charges?

MR BARR: I thought the New South Wales Premier's comments in relation to how many days in the week he worked, either notionally, as he put it, for the government or for himself, was a slight misunderstanding of how a progressive tax system operates. You do not pay the highest tax rate on the entirety of your income. You only pay the tax rate above the threshold in each tax category—

Mr Parton: Have you counselled Mr Minns on this?

MR BARR: I do not need to provide running commentary on every comment of every other first minister in the country.

Mr Parton: I thought they'd appreciate it!

MR BARR: I do not know that they would, Mr Parton, and I do not think it is my role to provide running commentary! But you have asked me a question in question time, so I am responding to it, consistent with the questions I got from the *Canberra Times* and responded to, so I would refer you to that article, which outlined my views. I think the *Canberra Times* journalist did faithfully reproduce my quotes. I wasn't so wild about the headline, but you can't always get what you want with the media.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, is it not the case that while you praise federal tax relief, your own government keeps taking more from Canberra households through higher rates, fees and charges?

MR BARR: I would refer you to the Eslake report, which in fact probably says something slightly different in that regard.

Mr Parton: So you are lowering fees and charges?

MR BARR: The Eslake report is quite clear that, compared to other jurisdictions, the ACT is not a high-taxing jurisdiction, and he does, of course, provide some suggestions in his report that, as the Treasurer said, the government will need to consider over time. I do note, of course, that you have already expressed your opposition to a number of those elements, through interviews on ABC Radio, with the breakfast announcer who is sitting in the gallery now.

Mr Parton: A point of order, Mr Speaker, on relevance. The question is specifically about whether they are increasing rates, fees and charges here in the ACT. It does not go to any comparison with other jurisdictions.

MR SPEAKER: Do you have anything to add, Chief Minister?

MR BARR: In the history of every government everywhere in the world in every jurisdiction, there does tend to be an increase in revenue every year, reflecting growing populations and growing economies. I do not think that the ACT is any different there. We, of course, seek to maintain the lowest possible tax base necessary to provide services to this community. But the demand for services continues to grow and revenue does need to be part of the solution.

MRS MORRIS: Chief Minister, why are you so quick to highlight your good relationship with the federal Labor government when it results in Canberrans getting a very raw deal?

MR BARR: I do not believe it does result in Canberrans getting a raw deal. For those who have been calling for some time for changes to Australia's taxation arrangements as they impact particularly on housing affordability, this budget does provide hope and opportunity for those who aspire to home ownership. That is something that should not just be for some; it should be for more. That is certainly what this budget delivers at a

federal level, as well as a recognition—and this is particularly important for Canberra, because most of the income earned in this city is earned through work. We have the highest level of workforce participation. People in Canberra earn their incomes principally through their labour.

We are a working city—the most productive working city in the nation. Having a commonwealth government recognise that through a further series of tax cuts on earned income is a really important structural change in our taxation system. The combination of the measures within this budget do seek to address intergenerational equity when it comes to the housing market and do seek to reward those who work to earn their income. That is an important change in our tax system.

Domestic, family and sexual violence services—government support

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. Minister, domestic, family and sexual violence remains a serious national issue. Can you update the Assembly on your announcement last week which committed to deliver sustainable support to frontline services?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. Domestic, family and sexual violence is an ongoing national epidemic. It is a shared priority across governments across this country, and the ACT government recognises the really important role that we play in leading the community to address this violence. That is why, as part of the 2026-27 ACT budget, we are investing \$44 million over four years to strengthen our frontline services and provide long-term funding. This funding represents sustainable, tailored support for people affected by domestic, family and sexual violence.

Key investments include: \$18.5 million to provide sustainable ongoing funding for core domestic, family and sexual violence response services, including the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre and the YWCA; \$2.9 million to boost frontline funding for critical services to help meet growing demand; \$6.7 million for behaviour change programs, including funding for EveryMan and Room4Change; \$4.1 million to continue programs supporting children and young people as victims in their own right; \$2.09 million to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims of sexual violence via direct funding to Aboriginal community controlled organisations; and funding to provide tailored supports for the multicultural community, LGBTIQ+ Canberrans and people experiencing financial abuse.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how will this funding allow these crucial services to respond to the needs of victim-survivors?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. This funding is not just about addressing today's pressures; it is also about building a more integrated, sustainable and responsive system that can continue to support people as demand grows. It reflects our commitment to working in partnership with our frontline sector and delivering real change for the community as part of our broader plan for Canberra. The increased funding for DVCS will allow them to continue to deliver critical services, including the 24/7 crisis phone line and the Room4Change program. For the CRCC, it will provide more support for timely access to crisis support and counselling for victim-survivors of sexual violence.

The ACT government also recognises the importance of behaviour change programs for people using violence. We are providing increased ongoing funding to EveryMan to continue their counselling and behaviour change programs, reduce waitlists and ensure the safety of victim-survivors is appropriately managed. This funding also provides tailored support for particular groups, including a range of therapeutic support services for children and young people delivered by Beryl Women and Doris Women refuges and the Australian Childhood Foundation. And we recognise the need for culturally-responsive services. Multicultural Hub will receive \$2 million to continue their Multicultural Women's Service, and a grant pool of \$2 million will be created to support Aboriginal community controlled organisations to deliver services to victim-survivors of sexual violence.

MS TOUGH: Minister, how else is the ACT government supporting victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. The ACT government recognises there is always more we can do to improve our response to domestic, family and sexual violence. Tomorrow I will be tabling the ACT's 10-year Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy, which reflects the full spectrum of work, from primary prevention, including systemic change to address population drivers of violence through early intervention and crisis response, all the way through to recovery and healing. Their strategy will be implemented through a series of action plans over the next decade. Importantly, we are building on what has already been achieved, including the effective domestic, family and sexual violence programs and services currently provided in our community. We continue to explore ways to ensure the ACT's legislative and justice responses to domestic, family and sexual violence are safer, more effective and trauma informed.

We are progressing work towards the criminalisation of coercive control. In December, the Attorney-General introduced a bill which seeks to create a scheme for family violence safety notices, providing police with more immediate ways to protect the safety of victim-survivors.

The ACT government is continuing to implement recommendations from the Sexual Assault (Police) Review. In last year's budget, we invested nearly \$6½ million over four years to establish sexual assault advocates embedded in ACT Policing to provide support for people in their engagement with the justice system. Finally, in this budget, we are increasing investment to support Safer Families Assistance grants, ensuring immediate financial support is available for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence.

Mr Barr: I ask that all further questions be placed on the notice paper. It has been a 75-minute marathon today!