



DEBATES
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

DAILY HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

5 March 2025

This is an **EDITED PROOF TRANSCRIPT** of proceedings that is subject to further checking. Members' suggested corrections for the official *Weekly Hansard* should be lodged in writing with the Hansard office no later than **Tuesday, 18 March 2025**.

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Wednesday, 5 March 2025

MR SPEAKER (Mr Parton) (10.01): Members:

Dhawura nguna, dhawura Ngunnawal.
Yanggu ngalawiri dhunimanyin Ngunnawalwari dhawurawari.
Nginggada Dindi wanggiraldjinyin.

The words I have just spoken are in the language of the traditional custodians and translate to:

This is Ngunnawal country.
Today we are all meeting on Ngunnawal country.
We always pay respect to Elders, female and male.

Members, I ask you to stand in silence and pray or reflect on our responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory.

Light rail—stage 2—update Ministerial statement

MR STEEL (Murrumbidgee—Treasurer, Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, Minister for Heritage and Minister for Transport) (10.02): I rise to update the Assembly on the delivery of light rail stage 2 into Woden. It is an exciting time for public transport in Canberra. Construction is underway on light rail 2A, delivering the first extension since stage 1 of Gungahlin to Alinga Street.

The project, as we all know, has been a point of contention in this place and in our broader community. Canberrans continue to back light rail, though—and that is why we will keep on delivering it. I know those opposite do not support the project. We understand that they choose to try to obfuscate and jeopardise this work. But we will not stop. The city will not stop growing. We need mass transit solutions for our city, which is only going to grow.

Labor knows that a growing city needs a modern and sustainable transport network. We understand that we need to make these investments now so that we do not end up in future traffic gridlock. Light rail is more than just a transport project; it is also a housing project. We have always been clear about that. Already, we have seen the benefits of stage 1.

Five years on, we are seeing our government's policy in action. Introduction of the service reveals the positive contribution light rail has made to Canberra, supporting the construction of more housing, increasing public transport patronage and reducing congestion. Light rail has delivered billions in additional construction work along the alignment, thousands of new homes and thousands of local jobs. It is clear that this is the preferred mode of public transport that Canberrans wish to use, with more and more people in our city choosing to live along the alignment. Business growth along the corridor has also increased, with the largest benefit occurring in Gungahlin and suburbs adjacent to the city centre.

Our first mass-transit system, through the delivery of stage 1 of light rail, represented a vision for Canberra as a connected, sustainable and vibrant city. So far, we have seen \$2.3 billion in construction has been given development approval or currently under consideration in suburbs directly adjacent to the light rail stage 1; more than 18 million passenger trips since the start of operations in 2019; more than 6,000 new dwellings along the light rail corridor since 2016; and an 18 per cent reduction in daily volume of motor vehicles compared to 2016.

Before we embarked on starting construction on the next stage of light rail, we made significant planning and investment decisions in the work required to make sure the benefits of the project were maximised. One of those investments was the raising of London Circuit. While this is a significant standalone project in its own right, we knew we needed to create an at-grade intersection for light rail to make its way onto Commonwealth Avenue. This project is now entering its very final stages, with construction works due to be completed mid this year.

The permanent north-south alignment of Commonwealth Avenue to London Circuit is now in place, and works are underway to connect in the now raised east and west connections onto London Circuit. This project, along with light rail, will create a better environment for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport. Raising London Circuit highlights the important shift that we are making in Canberra—away from infrastructure that only prioritises cars and towards projects which support a range of different ways to move around.

Another key investment was the procurement of new light rail vehicles and onboard energy storage systems to install on the existing light rail fleet. This allows us to deliver wire-free running within both the stage 2A and stage 2B alignments and grow our fleet to maintain the “turn up and go” service frequencies during peak periods, which we know makes light rail an attractive travel choice for Canberrans.

We also completed the expansion of the existing light rail depot at Mitchell in September last year, which will house and maintain our expanded fleet and facilitate the creation of 80 local jobs with our local operator Canberra Metro. Four of the new light rail vehicles have been delivered, and Canberrans may have noticed three of these are out delivering services between the city and Gungahlin. This has enabled work to commence on the retrofit program for the existing fleet. We are on track to have our new and existing fleet ready for when testing commences on stage 2A.

As the Assembly is well aware, the city to Woden corridor is the next stage of our city-shaping light rail network. We are moving to create a north-south public transport spine for Canberra, which will continue to expand, connecting Canberra’s key employment, residential and commercial hubs. This is evidenced by a clear appetite by both business and the community to deliver this important city-shaping project, that provides thousands of local jobs, supports the construction of more homes, removes congestion from our roads and encourages more people to take public transport. With our population predicted to approach 750,000 by mid-century we are preparing to prevent future congestion and provide greater ease of movement throughout our city.

Light rail stage 2A includes the construction of 1.7 kilometres of new rail line from Alinga Street to Commonwealth Park, a new bridge over Parkes Way and three new

stations for the city, including Edinburgh Avenue, City South and Commonwealth Park stops. Once complete, the new rail connection will unlock housing and commercial opportunities and bring Canberra's CBD closer to the lake. Already we have seen investments from the private sector jumping at the opportunity to invest in and around the extension of the line. Construction is due to be complete in 2027. Light rail services will connect Gungahlin and North Canberra to City West, the ANU, New Acton, Commonwealth Park and Lake Burley Griffin, with operations expected to commence around quarter one of 2028.

However, we know that construction work will cause some impacts to our local traffic network. We have set up, through our Disruption Taskforce and other arms of government, a centralised place where everyone can visit to access the information they need, when they need it. We have been up-front that there will be some disruption associated with this once-in-a-generation infrastructure project. Already we have implemented a largescale communications and advertising campaign to make sure Canberrans are aware of the impacts and what they need to do to avoid them.

From Wednesday 12 March, the eastern side of London Circuit will close to regular traffic. This will also include some lane reductions on Northbourne Avenue between Alinga Street and Vernon Circle. The closure of sections of London Circuit east will allow service relocations to be undertaken in the roadway and streetscape improvements to be completed prior to the road reopening to traffic, expected in late 2026. As works are completed across the alignment, sections of London Circuit will be re-opened to support and maintain the local access through the area.

Access will also be maintained to businesses along London Circuit—and I will provide information to the Assembly later today on the extensive work done by the government to ensure businesses are actively engaged and communicated with throughout this period. Variable message signage will also be in place around the city to alert approaching drivers about the closures. I encourage all members and the broader community to visit builtforcbr.gov.au/travelimpacts for detailed information about the project.

As construction progresses for stage 2A, so does the planning and design work for stage 2B, to continue light rail through to Woden. Our current focus is the environmental impact statement, or EIS. The ACT government officially submitted the draft EIS to commonwealth and territory environmental agencies in December 2024. The project team is now actively working through the feedback from both agencies on the draft EIS, prior to public exhibition.

Similar to the extensive community consultation process we conducted last year, public exhibition on the draft EIS will invite Canberrans to have further say on the design considerations, such as light rail stops, active travel, landscaping, heritage matters and opportunities to improve the public realm and general amenity across the five stage 2B precincts: Commonwealth Avenue, Parliament House, inner-south, Yarra Glen and Woden. We anticipate public exhibition will occur around the middle of this year, and I look forward to updating the community and the Assembly on this next stage of engagement soon.

Finally, last year, I tabled in the Assembly the timeline for light rail stage 2B project.

Though I will table this timeline again, as a reminder, the indicative phases and milestones for the project remain the same. Those are: from now to mid-2025, work will progress on the final concept design and environmental approvals; and from mid-2025 to mid-2028, we will progress detailed design and planning approvals, with potential opportunities to undertake early and enabling works from 2027, subject to future decision of government. In parallel, mid-2027 to mid-2029, we will finalise and consider the business case, undertake main works procurement and award a contract for main works. Timing for construction will be validated during procurement, but is estimated, based on benchmark projects, to take in the order of four years, with testing and commissioning for a period of up to 12 months post construction completion.

I look forward to continuing to update the Assembly as the light rail project progresses, demonstrating that we are investing in this critical city-shaping infrastructure that will benefit Canberrans for generations to come.

I present the following paper:

Update on Light Rail Stage 2—Ministerial statement, 5 March 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Urban Forest Act 2022—review update Ministerial statement

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (10.12): I am pleased to provide the Assembly with an update on the commencement of the review of the Urban Forest Act 2023, together with adjustments we have already made to ensure the legislation is fit for purpose.

I acknowledge the considerable interest from members in the Assembly and the broader community, which is one of the reasons for updating in this way today. This legislation and its predecessor, the Tree Protection Act, has played a critical role in protecting and enhancing the ACT's urban forest and supporting our ambitious canopy cover target. A strong, resilient urban forest is integral to our city's sustainability, livability, and climate resilience, and the act has been highly regarded for its role in safeguarding trees, enhancing the urban forest, and promoting a greener future for Canberra.

When the act was first created, we acknowledged that it represented a significant change and was, and still is, nation leading. Being the first to move on regulating something as complex as a living urban forest means we need to test approaches and adjust as appropriate. It is important the legislation supports a whole-of-government approach and ensures that tree protection and canopy growth efforts do not inadvertently hinder other government priorities or create a burden that is unintended or inconsistent with the policy objectives. One year into its operation, we have listened to the community about opportunities to improve the workability and the need to revisit how it is

interacting with ACT government priorities and objectives as a whole. This is why the government made the election commitment to bring forward the review of the act ahead of the legislated review; so that work would be undertaken this year. The completion date of this review is December this year.

It is important to acknowledge the very positive impact the Urban Forest Act has already had in making clear to the community and developers that trees and canopy protection are a valued part of our city's planning framework. The objects of the act make clear our commitment to protecting and enhancing the urban forest; increasing urban canopy cover to mitigate climate change impacts; promoting biodiversity and ecological resilience; ensuring community engagement in urban tree management decisions; and supporting sustainable urban development that integrates green infrastructure. These objects are worthy and commendable, and the government does not shy away from them. The legislation speaks to those objects.

However, the operation of the act has naturally provided us with a clearer understanding of how it is interacting with other legislation, together with feedback from the community and industry perspectives of its interactions. For example, the government has made substantial investments in tree planting programs. These efforts are working in tandem with the act to deliver on our Urban Forest Strategy. However, we must ensure that the act remains practical, not overly complex or cumbersome, and does not inadvertently result in premature tree removals or regulatory inconsistencies. In response to questions regarding the impact of the act on tree retention, we believe that the legislative framework has contributed to greater awareness and compliance regarding tree protection.

There is, however, more work to be done to ensure that the act is achieving its full potential in driving positive behavioural change. Feedback from peak bodies, industry leaders, community members and other government agencies, captured in an issues register maintained by the Urban Treescapes team, is the basis for Transport Canberra and City Services commencing their internal evaluation of the act's operation. This evidence-based approach will ensure that any legislative amendments introduced in the Assembly are practical, targeted and responsive to real-world challenges.

Key areas of focus include modifications to the Canopy Contribution Framework to provide greater flexibility; reviewing tree removal criteria to ensure fairness and transparency; exploring incentives and alternative mechanisms for canopy replacement, aligned with broader ACT government priorities; strengthening decision-making processes to achieve a balanced approach between urban forest protection and other essential government objectives; and responsiveness and timeliness. While this is an internal review at this stage, targeted consultation will be undertaken with cross-government stakeholders and industry representatives as appropriate to refine the legislation effectively.

Before I close out this statement, it is also worth reflecting on the adjustments the government has already made to assist in ensuring that the act balances growing our urban forest with our other environmental, housing and economic objectives. An amendment in the final sitting week of last term provided for a clear legislative mechanism to process an application to remove trees on public land outside of a development application under the Planning Act. The amendment also clarified the

existing decision-maker provisions.

A regulation later introduced changes for applicants seeking to remove a protected tree by introducing an exemption from entering into a canopy contribution agreement for homeowners who have 30 per cent or more canopy cover and insufficient planting space on their block, and changes to the requirements for homeowners who have space to replant some trees. The amendments also provided that an owners corporation for a units plan are taken to be homeowners for the purpose of entering into an agreement when the removal of a protected tree is on common property and not associated with development work.

Last month, I remade the instrument for tree removal criteria to include new criteria for removing public trees. The new criteria are about enabling sensible decisions about removal and where all other reasonable remedial treatments and risk mitigation measures have been determined to be ineffective. This includes where the pruning is required for vehicles, machinery or equipment to access a construction site or other leased or unleased land to undertake construction works, if all other practical alternatives have been considered and determined to be ineffective and the decision-maker is satisfied that the access is required, or where an activity is associated with essential access to leased or unleased land, where an existing access point requires upgrades to meet compliance under the Australian Standards or Municipal Infrastructure Standards and/or to provide for essential accessibility requirements. Another circumstance is where a proposed activity is to remove a juvenile tree and the decision-maker is satisfied that the tree can be replaced like-for-like with an advanced juvenile tree in close proximity to where the tree is to be removed.

As we progress through this process for the broader review, we remain committed to striking the right balance between achieving the objects of the act and supporting broader ACT government priorities. We look forward to working collaboratively across government and with key stakeholders to ensure that Canberra's urban forest continues to thrive for generations to come. I commend this statement to the Assembly.

I present the following paper:

Review of the *Urban Forest Act 2023*—Ministerial statement, 5 March 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Women—status of women and girls in the ACT Ministerial statement

DR PATERSON (Murrumbidgee—Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Minister for Women, Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, Minister for Corrections and Minister for Gaming Reform) (10.20): As Minister for Women and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, I welcome the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate International Women's Day, which takes

place on Saturday 8 March, by providing a statement to the Assembly on the status of women and girls in the ACT. As the new Minister for Women, it is an absolute honour to make this statement for the first time.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the ACT and pay my respects to their elders. I also acknowledge any families and people with a traditional connection to the lands of the ACT. I want to acknowledge the strength, resilience and leadership of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their work for the rights and equality of First Nations women and girls and, indeed, their contributions to the rights and equality of all women and girls in our community.

Before I begin this statement, I refer to women and girls using these terms inclusively, and I am speaking of cis and trans women, including non-binary and gender-diverse people. This is a statement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, LGBTIQ+ women, women of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, women with a disability, senior women and young women. This is a statement for all women and girls in our community.

In Australia and in the ACT, we have made significant progress towards achieving gender equality. In 2024, Australia ranked 24th globally for gender equality on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, an improvement from 26 in the world the year before. While Australian women have a life expectancy of approximately 85 years, ranking 10th globally, women in the ACT enjoy the highest life expectancy in the country, at 85.7 years. Women in the ACT have made significant achievements in political leadership. Over half of my colleagues and members in the Legislative Assembly are women, showing our community's continued support for women leaders.

However, despite this progress, this work is far from complete. Consultation on the development of the Third Action Plan 2023-26, under the ACT Women's Plan 2016-26, identified the top concerns for ACT women are domestic and family violence, balancing work and caring responsibilities, and sexual harassment. We know that two in five women in Australia have experienced intimate partner violence since the age of 15. We also know these rates are far higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, for women with a disability and for LGBTIQ+ women. The national gender pay gap remains at 21.8 per cent and is even wider for women from diverse backgrounds. Every day, Australian women spend an average of one hour and 19 minutes more than men doing unpaid work, including child care and domestic work.

At the same time, this past year has seen a significant action for gender equality. Around the country, tens of thousands of people came together to call for an end to violence against women and national cabinet committed new funding and actions to accelerate the work under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children. The ACT government has now, announced today, signed onto the Renewed Partnership Agreement. The ACT and Australian governments will each invest \$6.134 million, for a total of just over \$12 million, over the next five years.

It is surely no coincidence that the United Nations theme for 2025 International Women's Day is "March Forward: For ALL Women and Girls". Based on the review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that will take place during the United

Nations 69th Commission on the Status of Women, the theme focuses on turning promises into progress for women and girls. The theme highlights that we must take action to make gender equality a reality and we cannot afford to be complacent.

The ACT government remains absolutely committed to achieving gender equality. We are now almost halfway through the Third Action Plan, which is the final action plan to be delivered under the ACT Women's Plan. The Third Action Plan identified initiatives to deliver meaningful change for women and girls in our community. I will now take this opportunity to talk about some of the achievements.

In 2024, we continued to integrate gender equality into the ACT budget, one of our most important structural policy tools. This work began in the First Action Plan. Since 2019, the ACT government has published an annual Women's Budget Statement to update the community on its gender responsive policies and highlight new and existing initiatives aimed at improving the wellbeing of girls and women in the ACT. We are also working towards better supporting all parts of government to consider how their budget proposals will meet the various needs.

In another significant piece of work under the Third Action Plan, in 2024, the ACT public service released the Gender Equality Strategy 2024-29 to set up the direction for the service's collective gender equity journey and demonstrate our commitment to equal outcomes for people of all genders. The strategy demonstrates our understanding that, as a large local employer, the ACT public service itself plays a leading role in women's economic participation as an employer of choice. Currently, women make up 65 per cent of the ACT public service workforce.

This year, experts and community leaders from the Ministerial Advisory Council on Women have continued to work with the ACT government to improve the intersectional approach to the Third Action Plan, with this being a focus of their two-year term. Nationally, there is increasing attention to women's health and structural gender inequalities in the health system. We are continuing to work to improve health services and outcomes for women and people with a uterus.

Implementing mandated minimum ratios in maternity services will support a sustainable workforce to ensure maternity care services are women- and person-centred and meet future demands. Work is also underway to review and plan models to expand midwifery-led and midwifery-coordinated continuity of care, which will improve access, equity and outcomes for women and birthing people. In addition, a cultural advisory group has been formed to co-design a birthing on country model of care to strengthen outcomes and satisfaction for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and birthing people in maternity services.

The ACT is also working closely with the commonwealth and other state and territory governments towards the goal of eliminating cervical cancer by 2035. The implementation of the National Strategy for the Elimination of Cervical Cancer in Australia will ensure that women and people with a cervix have inclusive and equitable access to vaccine screening, pre-cancer treatment and cancer management services.

Due to language and other practical barriers, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have lower access to breast screening. Breast Screen ACT is

engaging with the Commonwealth Cancer Screening in culturally and linguistically diverse women's campaign to deliver targeted breast screening and health education in various languages to these women in partnership with community groups.

The year 2024 also saw debates about reproductive rights surface both nationally and globally. I am proud to say the ACT government remains strongly committed to leading the nation in removing the cost barriers to having an abortion. In 2024, the ACT expanded the Accessible Abortion Scheme further to include no-cost medical abortions at selected general practices. Services are now available across north, south, and central Canberra, reducing travel barriers for those accessing the scheme. To improve access to abortion medication and information, the Health (Improved Abortion Access) Amendment Act 2024 was passed in July last year and allows qualified nurse practitioners and midwives to prescribe abortion medication. The amendment also requires health practitioners who conscientiously object to abortion to transfer a person's care or provide information on abortion providers.

We know we must design and improve our public spaces with women and girls in mind. Public spaces that are inclusive, safe, comfortable and well-managed are just some of the benefits of adopting a gender-sensitive urban design approach and will benefit all Canberrans, regardless of gender. In 2023, Transport Canberra and City Services developed the Gender Sensitive Urban Design Guideline Framework and supporting toolkit, which has been applied to the design of Monash, Calwell, Lanyon, Macquarie, Evatt and Narrabundah shopping centres. The Suburban Land Agency is also using the framework and toolkit for its land development projects and place activation programs.

Representing women in our city spaces makes their contribution publicly visible and sends a signal that women and girls are valued in our community. On 1 August 2024, the 40th anniversary of the commencement of the National Sex Discrimination Act was commemorated with public artwork at Old Parliament House Senate rose gardens. The artwork honours the architect of the Sex Discrimination Act, the Hon Susan Ryan AO. Susan Ryan dedicated her life to public service, serving as a senator for the ACT and a minister in the Hawke government.

Ending domestic, family and sexual violence continues to be a significant priority for the ACT government and myself as minister. The prevalence of gender-based violence in our community continues to be unacceptable, with almost 40 per cent of women experiencing physical violence and more than 20 per cent experiencing sexual violence since the age of 15. We remain committed to working across the continuum of responses required, holding perpetrators to account and ultimately preventing violence. I will talk more to this detail when I deliver the annual Safer Families Statement and the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Statement later in 2025. However, I would like to share some key achievements from this year.

The government continues to work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to implement recommendations from the *Long yarn* report, prepared by the Domestic Violence Prevention Council Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Expert Reference Group. This report confirmed the relevance of the original 12 recommendations from the *We don't shoot our wounded* report and calls for a greater focus on cultural safety, healing and engaging with men and boys as both victims and perpetrators of family violence.

The ACT government continues to invest in five Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to provide services ranging from early intervention, healing and recovery, responses and system advocacy. These organisations ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls who have experienced violence now have a range of culturally responsive services available to them. The Health Justice partnerships continue to provide free and confidential legal assistance to people at risk of domestic family violence in both the ACT hospitals and Child and Family Centres in Gungahlin, West Belconnen and Tuggeranong. We are also supporting the Domestic Family Violence Crisis Service to establish a specialist domestic and family violence case manager in the ACT Child and Family Centres to better respond to this issue in our community.

In December 2024, ACT Policing commenced the Domestic and Family Violence Intervention Unit to investigate high-risk domestic and family violence matters. The unit will work with victim-survivors and the Canberra domestic and family violence sector to improve reporting experience and hold offenders accountable. The team comprises of investigators, intelligence officers and a dedicated victim advocate who will receive domestic and family violence training.

We know discriminatory attitudes and beliefs about gender roles are a key driver of domestic, family and sexual violence, and these attitudes are evident even among young people. Schools are a critical environment for attitudinal change. They offer an opportunity to build communities where young people develop attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that support gender equality and value women and girls. In 2024, the Gender Equality in Schools initiative focused on respectful relationships education. The initiative supports schools to deliver a whole-of-school approach to prevent domestic, family and sexual violence by creating a culture of gender equality. Support includes professional learning, advice on curriculum materials and resource development about gender-inclusive practice.

Early childhood educators also play a powerful role in creating and sustaining gender-inclusive and equitable learning environments where all children can thrive, unhindered by rigid gender norms. In 2024, in partnership with early childhood researcher and academic Dr Red Ruby Scarlet, the Education Directorate designed a training program for early childhood educators. The learning resources focus on respectful relationships and gender diversity.

We are looking to work to advance gender equality not only within ACT schools but also within our workplaces. In the workplace, the gender pay gap is directly linked to gender discrimination, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work and industry gender segregation. That is why we have initiatives underway to improve the representation of women in industries traditionally dominated by men. The Academy of Future Skills delivered by the Education Directorate aims to increase girls engagement in science, technology, engineering and maths—or STEM—learning in ACT public schools. At the 2024 Space Industry Work Exploration Program, 68 per cent of the industry guest speakers were women, helping girls and young women to see themselves represented in the space industry.

Since 2022, the Education Directorate has delivered the Understanding Building and

Construction Program in partnership with the Community Services Directorate and the National Association for Women in Construction. Thanks to the ACT government's election commitment to double the program, participation is expected to increase to 10 public schools, involving up to 2,220 students across years 8 to 10 annually. The Women in Construction Procurement Policy allows the ACT government to leverage its purchasing power to support the construction industry's considerable efforts to increase diversity and the numbers of women in its workforce. This policy is focused on long-term change, encouraging suppliers to develop gender equity plans for their organisations and projects.

To attract underrepresented cohorts to the growing renewable energy industry in the ACT, CIT and its partners introduced scholarships for women to undergo renewable energy training. In 2024, 11 scholarships were awarded to women to study renewable energy and allied courses. CIT also hosted its inaugural Women in Trade dinner, attended by 50 women apprentices from diverse trades.

The ACT government collaborated in 2024 with other jurisdictions, including the Australian Sports Commission, to update the National Gender Equity in Sports governance policy. The policy sets a target for 50 per cent of board directors to be women or gender diverse by no later than 1 July 2027. This initiative reflects the gender diversity targets which have been in place in the ACT government-funded sporting boards since 2016.

When women and girls have safe, appropriate and affordable housing, it creates stability and enhances their safety, economic equality, wellbeing and public participation. This is one reason that budgeted funding from the ACT homelessness sector is approximately \$36.6 million for 17 organisations to deliver 33 specialist programs. Of that, \$6.3 million has been allocated to six services to deliver programs specifically for women and children at risk of experiencing homelessness. I am pleased to report construction has now commenced on the Ginninderry Women's Housing Initiative, a build-to-rent-to-buy initiative, providing more affordable housing options for financially vulnerable women.

In addition to housing, it is important that people can access safe services that are accessible and inclusive. The ACT government is committed to providing comprehensive and gender responsive care for women engaged with ACT Corrective Services, with services tailored to acknowledge the unique challenges they face and that are designed to ensure their safety, wellbeing and rehabilitation. The ACT government and I recognise that women offenders are a significant minority in the correctional service system and often have complex needs, with high levels of complex trauma, experiences of family and sexual violence, and come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Women at the Alexander Maconochie Centre have access to a wide range of meaningful and rehabilitative programs, services, activities and education. This includes therapeutic interventions, educational workshops and practical service support such as legal advice, financial counselling and reintegration services. Over the past 12 months, ACT Corrective Services have made enhancements to the women's compound, a purpose-built space with the needs of women detainees in mind, as part of the work to enhance the environment and foster a more conducive atmosphere for rehabilitation in the women's community centre, which has received key upgrades. These include

upgrades to an additional gym area; the continuation of building a library; an expansion of a DVD library; new equipment and furniture in a shared kitchen; an information hub, which serves as a safe space for information sharing but also can be used to complete administrative tasks; a transformation of the hairdressing area to become multifunctional, a space for both of hairdressing and mindfulness activities; and upgrades to the programs room, with new furniture to accommodate a range of integration and rehabilitation services.

Further upgrades are underway which will enhance the space as well as introducing cultural and artistic elements to support rehabilitation. These upgrades are part of our broader efforts to create a more supportive and rehabilitative environment for women. There has also been an increase in programs available to women. This includes post-custody mentoring, delivered in partnership with the Women's Justice Network, which aims to facilitate smoother reintegration.

Anecdotal reports indicate the improvements made have contributed to an overall increase in positivity and engagement amongst these women, which it is hoped may contribute to more effective reintegration and our overall goal of reducing recidivism. Between September 2022 and September 2024, the daily average female detainee population fluctuated between 27 and 23. As of today, there were 10 women detainees in the AMC.

ACT Corrective Services has finalised its Preventing, Tracking and Responding to Sexual Coercion and Sexual Violence Strategy, which was developed in response to a recommendation from the ACT Custodial Inspector as part of the Healthy Prison Review. This strategy seeks to drive improvements in ACT Corrective Services' ability to prevent, track and respond to sexual coercion and violence, strengthening our response to these issues, including for women detainee. I am excited to be involved in these projects, which I know will continue to support the unique needs of women detainees' successful reintegration into the community.

Finally, in 2024, I am pleased that the ACT government continued its support for free period products for Canberrans. The ACT was the first jurisdiction in Australia to legislate making free period products available. The program is an important initiative to reduce period poverty and support women and people who menstruate to manage their periods in a safe and healthy way in the ACT community. In September 2024, Libraries ACT joined existing locations to become a distribution location. Our public library branches now stock free period products in their public bathrooms.

The many initiatives I have just shared demonstrate the ACT government's ongoing commitment to gender equality. We know governments are not the only ones with the power to create progress. In the ACT, we celebrate and recognise the outstanding achievements of women in our community through our ACT Annual Women's Awards. These are women who are achieving great things and marching forward for all. This week I had the absolute privilege to present the ACT Women's Awards to some amazing members of our community. These women are evidence that anyone can be an agent for gender equality. It is up to each of us to accept this responsibility, reporting gender discrimination in the workplace, challenging gender stereotypes and speaking out for women's rights.

In closing, the ACT government recognises our responsibility and the importance of our role as leaders in the Canberra community. We are committed to taking the structural actions needed to achieve real progress on gender equality for all women and girls in the ACT in all aspects of life. This year we look forward to continuing the progress in partnership with community organisations, schools, businesses, families, individuals and, of course, women and girls.

I present the following paper:

Annual Statement on the Status of Women and Girls in the ACT 2025—
Ministerial statement, 5 March 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (10.43): I rise today to talk about the Annual Statement on the Status of Women and Girls in the ACT. Thank you, Dr Paterson, for sharing that statement. This Saturday, 8 March, is International Women’s Day. The UN’s theme this year is “March Forward: for ALL Women and Girls”, and I think that is a good reminder that we cannot afford to be complacent on gender equality.

Just on the weekend, around the corner from my house, a woman was grabbed from behind while out for a run on Tuggeranong Hill. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for raising that here yesterday. Like you, Tuggeranong Hill is basically my backyard, and it is really concerning that that is happening in our community.

We know that one in five women have experienced sexual violence, and one in three have experienced physical violence. If we look around this chamber now, we know there are women here who have experienced violence. It is really common in our society. I am really proud of the work that the ACT government is doing to reduce violence in our community. We cannot afford to be complacent.

As the minister said, the Third Action Plan 2023-26, under the ACT Women’s Plan 2016-26, identified the concerns of ACT women. The main concerns identified were domestic and family violence, balancing work and caring responsibilities, and sexual harassment.

Mr Speaker, you know what helps with balancing work and caring responsibilities? Flexible work. It was great to hear from the Chief Minister and the Head of Service in annual reports hearings about how flexible work, including work from home and working from hubs, is available for ACT public servants. But that right is now under threat for my former colleagues in the APS. If there is a Dutton Liberal government, he will send everyone back into the office.

Do you know what that will do? It will be detrimental for gender equality. It will be detrimental for families. It will be detrimental for the APS. Flexible work allows families to balance work and care responsibilities. It shifts it from being just a mother’s problem to something the whole family can think about and take into account, rather than it being a gendered issue. It makes it part of everyday life for the whole family. It

helps reduce the gender pay gap. It helps improve gender equality. It helps everyone. We cannot be complacent.

I am proud to be part of a government that has integrated gender equality into the ACT budget and invested in the wellbeing of women and girls here in the ACT. I am proud to be part of a government that is enacting the ACT Women's Plan.

I am sure everyone in the chamber knows that women's health is close to my heart. I have experienced medical misogyny for pretty much my entire life. I spent my teens being told, "Just suck it up. Pain is part of being a woman. Just get used to it." In my post-natal period, I was told, "Just deal with it—some women struggle to be mothers more than others." Actually, there was something physically wrong with me that required medical intervention, and I will now require medication for the rest of my life. But no, I was just depressed and couldn't cope! I know that ratios in maternity services will be revolutionary to care. It would have made a huge difference for me and my family, and I know, going forward, it is going to make a huge difference for families here in the ACT.

This month is Endometriosis Awareness Month. Obviously, I cannot not talk about endometriosis, being one of the one in seven women in Australia who suffers from endo. I am proud this government is working on improving endo services here in the ACT. We were leading the country with the introduction of the Canberra Endometriosis Centre; and, going forward, improving how that centre works with the pelvic pain clinic that is funded by the federal government, will change lives for women and girls here in the ACT.

Further to that, abortion access is women's health care. I am proud to be part of a government that is ensuring abortion services are available to all who want one and ensuring access to contraception, information and options are available to everyone when they need it. We cannot be complacent about women's health care. The gains we have made can be lost so easily. We must keep ensuring the access is there.

Last week I spent time with parliamentarians from across the commonwealth from countries like Pakistan, Eswatini, South Africa, the UK and Antigua. I saw how gender equality is an issue across the commonwealth and across the world. While we are quite lucky here in Australia and the ACT with how far we have come in gender equality, it showed that we cannot take things for granted. Gender equality is something we always need to be working on, and I am proud that we are part of a government that is doing so.

Thank you, Dr Paterson, for the statement today, and the update of how we are going in the ACT. I hope that in my lifetime we can see a time when gender equality is just an ordinary part of life. We cannot afford to be complacent.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Caretaker conventions—Select Committee Establishment

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (10.48): I move:

That:

- (1) this Assembly notes that:
 - (a) sections 20C and 20D of the *Financial Management Act 1996*, which outlines the purpose and contents of the pre-election budget update, and specifically subsection 20D(1)(b) which states that “the purpose of a pre-election budget update for an election is...to give the electorate an accurate picture of the Territory’s financial position before the election”;
 - (b) sections 20C and 20D serve to ensure that there is a symmetry of information regarding the state of the ACT Government’s financial circumstances between the Cabinet, other members of the Government, other non-government Members of the Assembly, candidates for election, and the general public, during an election campaign and any post-election parliamentary negotiations;
 - (c) this is one of the legislated principles that underpins the Caretaker Conventions, which ensures that the ACT Public Service (ACTPS) both is and is seen to be apolitical. The provision of new information to a minister which departs from the assumptions of the pre-election budget update, without also briefing the leaders of other parties, would necessarily be a breach of the Caretaker Conventions;
 - (d) during annual reports hearings on 20 February 2025, the Minister for Health advised that her office received preliminary activity data for July and August 2024 on 4 October 2024 from the Chief Executive Officer of Canberra Health Services, that the organisation was at risk of running above budget due to increased demand. This information was not provided to the representatives of other political parties. The preliminary data was tabled during annual report hearings along with the covering email;
 - (e) the 2024 *Guidance on Caretaker Conventions*, was authored and published by ACTPS, and provided by the ACTPS to the Members of the Legislative Assembly, and made publicly available by the ACTPS. The Caretaker Conventions set out the conventions for the ACTPS to follow during caretaker; and
 - (f) the 2024 *Guidance on Caretaker Conventions* provided advice on “Requests by Ministers of directorates and agencies” (section 3(f)) and “Consultation with public servants by the opposition and recognised parties in the Legislative Assembly” (section 4(f)). The Guidance did not include advice on the provision of factual information to ministers or their offices on the public servant’s own initiative;
- (2) a Select Committee on Caretaker Conventions be appointed to examine:
 - (a) the development of a continuing resolution for the operation of caretaker conventions in the ACTPS;
 - (b) ensuring universal confidence in the apolitical nature of the public sector in the lead up to and during election campaigns;
 - (c) ensuring symmetry of information between parties participating in post-election negotiations on confidence and supply (if applicable);
 - (d) the purpose and timing of pre-election budget updates under section 20D(1) of the *Financial Management Act 1996*, and broad

- availability of any relevant new information about the state of the ACT economy and government finances subsequent to its publication;
- (e) the timing and processes governing how ministers and their non-government counterparts are provided with and/or consulted with where laws require that briefings be urgently provided, or decisions urgently sought;
 - (f) the ability for non-government parties to seek briefings from the ACTPS, exclusive of ministers and their staff, on matters of facts and the machinery of government during a period of up to six months preceding the pre-election period;
 - (g) whether further clarity or guidance is needed in relation to what information the ACTPS may provide to ministers and their offices during the caretaker period;
 - (h) any relevant analysis or critique of the 2024 *Guidance on Caretaker Conventions* as published by the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate;
 - (i) the detailed practices of caretaker conventions as adopted by the Commonwealth and other Australian states, including consideration of the length of the caretaker period; and
 - (j) any other relevant matter;
- (3) the Committee shall report to the Assembly by the last sitting day of 2025;
 - (4) the Committee be composed of:
 - (a) one Member to be nominated by the Labor Party;
 - (b) one Member to be nominated by the Liberal Party;
 - (c) one Member to be nominated by the ACT Greens; and
 - (d) Members of the Fiona Carrick Independents Party and Independents for Canberra Party may also nominate;
 - (5) membership of the select committee to be notified in writing to the Speaker within two hours of this motion passing; and
 - (6) the ACT Greens Party member shall be chair of the Committee.

Mr Speaker, the Greens are staunch proponents of the independent and apolitical nature of the ACT public service. About two weeks ago, when serious concerns arose about the application of caretaker conventions in the health portfolio during the latest territory election, I felt compelled to bring forward this motion. Let's briefly go over the events.

As has been confirmed during the annual reports hearings, in early October, and at the height of the territory election campaign, the CEO of Canberra Health Services supplied the Minister for Health's office with advice that CHS was seeing significantly increased demand within the health system. This demand increase would have significant budget implications.

In normal circumstances, outside of caretaker, this sort of contact and advice would have been entirely correct and a responsible thing for the CHS leadership to do. But we were in the middle of an election campaign, and we were in the middle of the caretaker period, and hence the problem.

I would like to draw members' attention to sections 20C and 20D of the Financial Management Act 1996, which outlines the purpose and contents of the Pre-Election Budget Update, and specifically subsection 20D(1)(b) which states:

The purpose of a pre-election budget update for an election is—

...

- (b) to give the electorate an accurate picture of the Territory's financial position before the election.

To drive this point home: the whole point of the Pre-Election Budget Update is to ensure that there is a symmetry of economic information available to the government, other participants in our electoral system and, most importantly, the voters. When CHS provided new and additional information to a government minister about the health system demand that would significantly impact on the territory's financial position—information that once provided simply could not be unheard—it produced an asymmetry of information which could have influenced how parties acted and communicated, both during the election campaign itself and during post-election parliamentary negotiations on supply and confidence.

If no decision was required of the minister in the middle of the caretaker period, then the question must be asked: why was the information provided? On that question, I am yet to hear a convincing answer. In fact, I have come to the view that it should not have been, and the concerns expressed by other parties in this place indicate that a majority of members hold a similar view.

I do not know to what extent the new information influenced how Labor behaved when the Greens approached them to discuss possible power-sharing arrangements after the election, and that in itself is also a problem. In an environment where GP bulk-billing rates are at record lows and a policy package from federal Labor is increasingly looking like it will not actually do anything to help that problem, every imbalance of information becomes relevant. This incident, particularly given the lack of any decision to remediate it during the election campaign by either making the information public or providing briefings to the other parties, has exposed the leadership to possible accusations of political bias.

In the spirit of ensuring the ACT public service is beyond the perception of bias, the Greens suggested response to this problem is this motion for the Assembly to clearly express what apolitical behaviour is expected from the ACTPS during caretaker so that we can ensure there is confidence in the apolitical nature of the ACTPS. The public service is ultimately responsible and answerable to Canberrans, represented through this Assembly, not just the executive. If the parliament has concerns about the way the caretaker conventions are being written or applied, then the parliament has a responsibility to put its own minimum guardrails around the issue, rather than relying on the public service to come up with their own.

We can and should, as a legislature, clearly articulate the Assembly's expectations of what that impartiality looks like. Ultimately, the caretaker conventions are bigger than the ACT public service; they are bigger than the government of the day. They go to how the ACT public service interacts with the other entities in our democratic system.

My motion sets up a select committee to examine the caretaker conventions and calls on the Assembly to clearly specify its expectations of the ACT public service in how it interacts with political parties in a non-partisan fashion. If it achieves what I hope it will, it will bring into the Assembly's control some high-level rules for how the ACT public service should behave in the lead-up to and during election campaigns so as to ensure it is beyond any perception of political bias.

Yesterday, Mr Barr raised a couple of issues that I am also very happy for the select committee to look at. He spoke of the timing that financial information is released in the Pre-Election Budget Update and how that intersects with the timing of the election in October. These are issues that the Greens do not have a definite position on right now. But at the request of his office, I included reference to these issues in paragraph 2(d) of my motion. However, I should note that these are matters governed by particular pieces of legislation. Such changes would need enacting in their own right subsequent to the select committee reporting and the government and/or the Assembly responding to the recommendations that the committee has made.

Regarding the length for the caretaker period—that is another issue about which I do not have a fixed view. I think it is entirely reasonable that, if a committee is going to be examining the nuts and bolts of the caretaker conventions, it is a question they should also examine at the same time. Hence, I draw Mr Barr's attention to paragraph 2(i), which specifically includes this item in the terms of reference.

I hope that I have support from all parties in this place in passing this motion today. Here is the sweetener for the government: if the Assembly is in control of the caretaker conventions, the Assembly cannot be upset at the government if it turns out they are lacking in the future. That is a benefit the government does not have right now with respect to that 2024 guidance and what happened during the 2024 campaign. Everyone will benefit from this: the government, the ACT public service and, most particularly, the voters of Canberra, as they will be sure that the ACT public service is entirely free of any perception of political bias.

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (10.56): I thank Mr Braddock for bringing this matter forward and for his constructive engagement on the content of the motion this morning. He did, in his concluding remarks, touch upon a few points that I asked to be included in the committee's consideration, because I think they are relevant structural facts that do go to the heart of the operation of the pre-election period.

At its heart, this resolution, I hope, is seeking to address a broader range of issues than being a kneejerk response to one particular issue that has excited certain members in recent times. I take great heart from Mr Braddock's contribution and, indeed, from the content of the resolution that will go to address some of the broader issues that are in play for the territory that do relate to the duration of our caretaker period, which is excessive; the timing of our election; and the vagaries of the Hare-Clark system, which do mean that there can be quite a gap between election day, the declaration of the poll and the first sitting of the Assembly. These are some ACT-specific quirks, in so far as it is highly unlikely that the caretaker period will end on election day, because of the proportional representation system and the unlikely event of any one party winning a

majority in their own right. It has happened once in the history of this place, and I take from that that it is unlikely to be a regular occurrence. That then stretches out the caretaker period to the longest in the nation, stretching nearly to two months.

I note the self-government act means that ministers are in place, including the Chief Minister, until a new minister is appointed, and only the Chief Minister can appoint new ministers. We have a quirk in our system where, as Minister Gentleman experienced, you can be not elected on election day, but you continue on as a minister until the new minister is appointed, which is often sometime after polling day. Minister Gentleman was in the position of not knowing whether he was elected or not for most of that duration.

I want to be clear in my remarks today that I think there is a perception or a desire from some that the caretaker period signals the end of government and the end of ministerial responsibility; it does not. Ministers remain and must continue to perform their duties through to election day and often beyond, under the self-government act. I cite the 2020 election period and caretaker period, when we were in the middle of a global pandemic. The idea that ministers would say “alright, that’s it; caretaker has kicked in, and for the next two months no-one is doing anything or receiving any information” in the middle of global pandemic, would not have been a workable situation. And nor would government by committee, where there would have been three, or four, or five—in the context at this parliament—individuals deeming to want to make decisions during such a period.

These issues will need to be considered. That is why I appreciate in Mr Braddock’s resolution that there is an extended time for this committee to consider these matters over the duration of this calendar year and, I would presume, a considerable time for the Assembly to then absorb the recommendations and findings from the committee before seeking to undertake any actions.

Turning now to the public service itself. To be clear, under the Westminster system, the public service is part of executive government. I do want to draw the Assembly’s attention to point 2(f) of Mr Braddock’s resolution, which seeks to make the public service a creature of the parliament for a period of six months preceding the pre-election period. That, in my mind, is a try-on. It is a massive breach of Westminster conventions and is something we could not possibly support. However, it is in the resolution. We are not going to oppose it today, but I need to be clear from the outset that that proposition is one that would fundamentally undermine the established practices of Westminster government and executive responsibility in this jurisdiction, and it would be subject to legal challenge. There is just no way that that could be allowed to happen in the context in which it is purported in this motion, a point I have made to the Greens party when they were raising these sorts of issues in the lead-up to the election—so, to be fair, this is a consistent Greens position. And to be fair, Mr Braddock, you will have heard me express what I have just said, and other Greens members and certain Greens staffers who have been pushing this will be aware of our position in relation to this matter.

More broadly to touch upon other points that Mr Braddock highlighted around the timing of PEBU and the timing of our election, he is right that changing that will require changes to other pieces of legislation. But if the outcome is a structural position where

the Pre-Election Budget Update does provide the most up-to-date information available to the Treasury, then the timing of that update, on the assumption that we are having a fixed election date in the spring, would require either the PEBU to be pushed right back very close to polling day, or the polling day itself to shift by some weeks. There may be merit in pursuing that in that the alignment of all of the quarterly financial updates that are mandated in other areas of the Financial Management Act could occur in parallel and inform a Pre-Election Budget Update, but that does reduce the possibility of there being any material change.

I do note that Minister Stephen-Smith touched upon this yesterday, and I will repeat that information provided did not materially change the PEBU. Decisions that the government can subsequently take after the election, to be brought forward in the appropriation bill, do make that change, and it would have been open to the government to not do that and to simply operate within the existing budget. But, as would be patently clear to everyone, that would have meant winding back a range of services.

There are and there will continue to be many demand-driven programs across the operation of the ACT public sector, where the government has no control over the level of demand for a particular service, and there is an automatic flow of funds into a particular area as a result of simply who presents for that service. That, I imagine, will always be the case into the future.

If the point and the principal public policy issue that has been raised in this motion is that the information in the PEBU should be timely, then the PEBU date will need to change a little to reflect that September-quarter information, which would normally be provided within 45 days of the end of that quarter, so you are then into early November, which is obviously past the election. What we would then need to consider if we want an alignment there is that the election date would need to shift. There could be a valid argument for that, in light of our formal caretaker period overlapping with school holidays and a long weekend, and its proximity now to the Queensland election, where the two elections are a week apart.

I think there is an argument and a discussion to be had about potentially shifting the PEBU date and the election date in order to achieve, I think, the desired public policy outcome that Mr Braddock has put forward. That is obviously a decision that will require the collective agreement of the Assembly, but it is one I think the committee should examine because it may provide an elegant, long-term fix to the issues that Mr Braddock has raised.

More broadly, I do take the point in relation to the potential for the development of a continuing resolution in relation to caretaker conventions, but I do urge caution that, if we are going down the path of codification here, inevitably issues will arise that fall outside of what is codified at any point in time, and this debate will be revisited in future parliaments. Debates about codifying conventions, caretaker or constitutional or others, have been played out in Australian democracy over the course of our nation's history and will undoubtedly continue to do so. But there are risks in seeking to codify because you will not be able to codify every possible circumstance, and I raise the COVID pandemic as an example—that if a codified set of caretaker conventions made it impossible to manage such a public health emergency, the territory and the people of Canberra would have been in a very, very difficult position, and, potentially, public

health would have suffered considerably during that period.

Having made those observations, I want to close by again thanking Mr Braddock for a sophisticated and sensible level of engagement with the government on this matter. May this set a benchmark for how we may be able to collectively respond to issues as they arise. I appreciate his approach prior to this motion being listed and his willingness to consider some of the arguments that I have put forward this morning.

I wish the committee the best of luck in its deliberations. The issues they will be grappling with are ones, as I have mentioned, that have been fraught throughout the history of our nation. Good luck to those who volunteer, and I look forward to reading your report and recommendations at the conclusion of your deliberations, which I think come on the last sitting day of the year in December. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

MS CASTLEY (Yerrabi—Leader of the Opposition) (11.08): I would like to thank Mr Braddock for moving this motion. As I think all members are aware, the issue underlying this motion and my own motion yesterday is that of election integrity. Thanks to what we learned in annual report hearings, we know for certain that Labor had access to information from the public service during the election period which should have been shared with other parties and with the community, but it was not.

In particular, Rachel Stephen-Smith, as the caretaker minister, was told about serious risks to the solvency of Canberra's health and hospital system. She was told then, four days before pre-poll began, and chose to keep this secret. She did not share this with the shadow health minister. She did not share this with the Greens health minister, and she did not share it with the community. That decision was wrong.

Ms Stephen-Smith: The Greens had the mental health minister at the time.

MS CASTLEY: All part of the health system; well done.

Mr Hanson: The health spokesperson.

MS CASTLEY: Especially for a minister—

Ms Stephen-Smith: Mental health minister. The Greens had the mental health minister.

MS CASTLEY: Mental health minister; that is right. That decision was wrong, especially for a minister, and a political party, that was once committed to the principles of integrity, honesty and transparency. It meant that voters were making decisions at the election without being fully informed about the territory's health or budget position. We can see how serious the risk was, because the government has had to bail out the health system to the tune of \$300 million.

There is a clear political advantage that Labor has enjoyed because of the secrets it kept from the community. That is outrageous. It is unacceptable, and it ought to be unlawful. There is clearly something wrong with the system when a minister can choose to keep this secret and suffer no consequences at all.

If a minister can keep these kinds of secrets from the community in an election without breaching the rules, the caretaker conventions, the Ministerial Code of Conduct or the Assembly code of conduct, it is time to change the rules. That must be the purpose of this inquiry. We need to understand what has happened. Why did the minister feel that it was legally and morally appropriate to keep these matters secret? And how should the rules change to ensure that this never happens again?

We are supporting the motion today, and I am very much looking forward to seeing the outcomes from this select committee at the end of the year.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (11.11): I am supporting Mr Braddock's motion and share the concerns held by multiple people in this chamber about the apparent lack of clarity in the application of our caretaker conventions. Impartiality of the ACT public service is fundamental to a healthy and thriving democratic system that represents and addresses the needs of Canberrans. With this in mind, my minor amendments seek to ensure that there is a level playing field to the greatest extent possible for non-incumbent members.

Democracy thrives on competition. The particular composition of this Assembly's crossbench is evidence of that. Competition is made possible only when the playing field is levelled to the greatest extent possible for non-incumbents. We want new entrants to democratic contests to bring new ideas, informed by the best available evidence about what is happening and what is not happening on the ground. I implore the select committee that is being established by this motion to ensure that special privileges are not afforded unnecessarily to incumbent parties and members.

Non-government parties, members and candidates should all have access to the information needed to develop evidence-based policies, to engage in a constructive public debate about how to drive better outcomes for Canberrans, to make informed decisions about which ideas should be supported and which should be discarded, and to hold our government to account in delivering for our community.

Canberrans should have confidence that our public service exists to serve them, the public. That is why it is vital for the ACT government to remain impartial and share information in a way that serves our entire community, not just those in power. I seek leave to move the amendments circulated in my name together.

Leave granted.

MR EMERSON: I move:

1. In paragraph (1)(c), after "without also briefing the leaders of other parties", insert "and any non-party Members".
2. In paragraph (1)(d) after "this information was not provided to the representatives of other political parties", add "or candidates."
3. In paragraph (2)(f) after "the ability for non-government parties", add ", Members and candidates".

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (11.13): I will speak to the

motion more broadly. I want to respond to a couple of points that have been made. I want to start, as others have done, by thanking Mr Braddock for bringing forward this motion.

I strongly support this inquiry and I think it is timely. As the motion indicates, while the *Guidance on caretaker conventions* covers circumstances where ministers seek advice, and is very clear that ministers can both seek and receive factual information in relation to their portfolios, as part of their ongoing role as ministers during the caretaker period, the guidance does not cover or is actually silent on what information should be provided proactively to ministers and their staff during the caretaker period.

I would emphasise, as the Chief Minister has done, that ministers do continue to play a role in the day-to-day management of government during the caretaker period. While Ms Castley has sought to portray that entirely as an advantage, I certainly know that, as health minister during the 2020 election campaign, while there was a global pandemic underway, it was not always an advantage to have to receive briefings from the directorate. I did in fact participate in ministerial council meetings as an observer during that time because there was a global pandemic. I did speak regularly to the shadow minister at that time; if any decisions needed to be made, of course, that would have bound a future government, the shadow minister would have been involved. But not every piece of information would have been required, under the caretaker conventions, to be shared with everybody—

Ms Castley: Giulia was included in those conversations?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Giulia Jones, the then shadow minister, was in fact an excellent colleague during the global pandemic—

Ms Castley: It's good that you gave her a heads-up.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: and very supportive of the bipartisan approach that was taken. The only point I am making—and somehow Ms Castley has taken offence at this point—is that ministers continue to have a role, as the Chief Minister said, during the caretaker period. In that role, they continue to receive information from the public service. The broader point I was making—and I do not know why Ms Castley has taken offence at this—is that I think Mr Braddock is exactly right, and there needs to be some additional guidance for the public service as to what information should be provided and in what context.

I have already stated multiple times that Ms Castley is grossly misrepresenting the information that was provided to my office. It has been tabled, so there is no excuse for this. The information that was provided was activity data from July and August 2024—activity that occurred prior to the caretaker period. The data simply demonstrated what I had been saying for months—that the hospital was very busy, and the health system was very busy. That is why ACT Labor's first major election commitment was for 800 more health workers.

That is why we talked about the need to expand our health system, with new health centres across the city and a new north side hospital. It took the opposition until the last week of the campaign to commit to building a new north side hospital for the fastest

growing part of our city.

I want to put on the record again that Ms Castley is completely misrepresenting the information that was provided. But Mr Braddock is right; some further guidance is needed, or there is a need to look at the question for public servants, so that they have absolute certainty, to the greatest extent possible, and taking the Chief Minister's point that codifying everything in an environment that is necessarily uncertain is a challenge.

I want to respond to a couple of things that Mr Braddock said, however, particularly in relation to the negotiations with the Greens in the remaining caretaker period between the election and the swearing-in of new members and the formation of the Labor government. I would point out to Mr Braddock that, in the situation we faced after the 2024 election, all ministers held information that had previously not been available to members of other parties. There were three Greens ministers in the last term of government, and each of those individuals held information that would not necessarily be available to members of the other party. Each of those members continued to be ministers, as the Chief Minister pointed out, to the end of the caretaker period.

I will provide just one example with which Mr Braddock would be familiar, and it would come as no surprise to anyone. There was significant discussion between the parties about the Greens' commitment to the establishment of multiple safe havens across the community. On that matter, the Greens would have, and should have, held significantly more information than Labor. So this is not all one-sided.

ACT Labor, however, was consistently clear about the demand pressure on the health system. Both the former Minister for Mental Health and the leader of the Greens, as a member of the Expenditure Review Committee in the last term of government, were well aware of these pressures. Indeed, the leader of the Greens was part of the decision-making process as to what assumptions would be made in the 2024-25 budget and in an environment of uncertainty about commonwealth-state negotiations. That uncertainty continued during and subsequent to the caretaker period.

I was surprised to hear Mr Rattenbury describe the decisions made in the 2024-25 budget about the treatment of expectations of commonwealth revenue as a gamble. I do not agree with that assessment. Mr Rattenbury, on reflection, may also not agree that he was part of a gamble that was taken, and may reflect that in fact we were operating in an environment at that time of considerable uncertainty about commonwealth-state negotiations and about the activity decisions that would be made by the larger jurisdictions. Our projections, on the advice that we had received at that time from the national health funding body, proved not to be accurate.

I absolutely commend Mr Braddock's motion. I look forward to this inquiry providing greater certainty for our public servants so that they are not drawn into future debates about information that they may provide. I do think that some of the characterisation that has led to this point has been grossly inaccurate, and I felt that I needed to correct the record on that.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (11.21): I will speak to both the amendments and the motion more broadly. I was a public servant in the Australian public service for over 20 years. I was a public servant through the 2001 election, the 2004 election, the 2007

election, 2010, 2013 and 2016; and, technically, in 2019, I was a federal candidate. No-one is more acutely aware of the importance of caretaker conventions than someone who has been a public servant and then chosen to contest a federal election. It is absolutely critical that a government and a public service embody not only the letter of the caretaker conventions but its spirit as well.

The Chief Minister raised his concern about potential codification of caretaker conventions and what that could mean. No-one is more acutely aware of the risks that are associated with codification and the potential inflexibility. That is why it is so important that we have a committee that can look at this. This is fundamentally a question of trust. Canberrans went to an election. We have a much higher representation of public servants here in the ACT, people who understand the caretaker conventions and who believe in the information that is provided to the public, than anywhere else in the country. People in Canberra thought that the information they had going into the election was accurate, clear and absolute.

As a question of trust, when a matter has been brought to a minister and they are told, “There is a risk around whether the amount of money that’s been provided for services in the hospital system will be enough to get them through the year,” this idea of potential insolvency requires a decision. There is a decision involved in how you handle that information. It is a decision that involves both the public service and the minister, and I would contend that that is a fairly significant decision. Clearly, my contention and position and that of the minister are different. That is why this is such a critical issue for a committee to dive into. It is absolutely essential that we can maintain the trust of the Canberrans who elect us to this place.

The Chief Minister also made a number of comments. From where I sit, it sounds a little bit lawyerly, with a lot of the response here, because this is not just about technicalities. It is a fundamental question that the Assembly and this committee will have to deal with. He brought up the suggestion that our caretaker period is longer than in any other jurisdiction, by stretching out to nearly two months. In fact, if the Chief Minister looks at the federal caretaker conventions, unless there is an early election called, the caretaker conventions kick in three months ahead of the federal election.

Ms Stephen-Smith: That’s not true.

MR COCKS: It is absolutely true. It is in the *Guidance on caretaker conventions* that I have sitting in front of me.

Ms Stephen-Smith: We’re less than three months from an election, and they’re preparing a budget. It cannot be true.

MR COCKS: To be clear, that is three months ahead of the expiration of the House.

Mr Barr: Which is in September.

MR COCKS: The point is that there is a three-month provision there, unless something happens otherwise. Caretaker provisions are intended to be able to extend for a longer period than just a matter of a few weeks. The problems that we are dealing with here happened in the immediate period right before an election, right before people were

making their decision—in fact, days before people were walking into polling booths to make their decision around who would lead the ACT government and around who could be trusted to manage the finances of the ACT.

Going directly to Mr Emerson’s amendments, we will not be opposing those amendments, but I want to note that they do present some particular challenges, even beyond the raft of issues that the committee will already be dealing with. In particular, it would be difficult to imagine a scenario where a government was required to brief over 100 candidates on every decision that was made. On that front, clearly, this is something that the committee will have to deal with. You cannot create a carve-out for a single independent or a single party.

There must be a sensible way through this that makes sure we are getting the information that people deserve when they walk into a polling booth, and that an incoming government, of whatever stripe, is not hamstrung or unreasonably left trying to pay for promises it has made on the basis of faulty information. That is the core issue that this committee needs to deal with.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (11.28): I will talk briefly to Mr Emerson’s amendments. The Greens will also be supporting those, in the interests of ensuring that we have a broad range of voices in establishing this committee. I will echo the concerns that Mr Cocks has raised—and I have already raised some of these questions with Mr Emerson—regarding the practicality of how we might be able to operate that. I am sure the committee will be able to turn its mind to it, and I look forward to seeing how it responds to that.

In responding to some of the points that Mr Barr made during his discussion points, he talked in terms of how the public service is a creature of the executive. I point out that the federal Public Service Act includes as objects “to establish an apolitical public service that is efficient and effective in serving the government, the parliament and the Australian public”. They have managed, in their public service, to be able to be more than just a creature of the executive and to serve both the parliament and the Australian public while having regard for the Westminster conventions in Australia.

I also note, in terms of the section that Mr Cocks was referring to, that there is a section of the caretaker conventions that includes the provision of information to non-executive members three months in advance; hence, that is why I have tried to incorporate and give effect to having the committee examine that question, as part of my motion. Finally, I would note that conventions are strongest where they are utilised regularly and also tested. That has happened in the Australian parliament, where we have seen regular turnover of the government.

In closing, I would like to thank all members here today for their support. Having a continuing resolution on the caretaker conventions will allow us to have demonstrably the best set of conventions in the country, and maybe even across the whole of the commonwealth of nations. This Assembly’s support for that objective improves my own confidence that we truly value the ability of our public service to serve the government of the day, no matter what the government’s political persuasion may be.

I would also like to remind people of what is happening in the United States of America,

where a fascist president—and yes, I did go exactly there—has empowered a tech billionaire to wreak havoc in their public service. The Republicans are stacking all sorts of government boards and even the courts with people who will facilitate the dismantling of democracy in the USA. We need to move in the opposite direction here in the ACT. I commend my motion to the Assembly.

Amendments agreed to.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

Better Regulation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025

Ms Cheyne, pursuant to notice, presented the bill, its explanatory statement and a Human Rights Act compatibility statement.

Title read by Clerk.

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (11.32): I move:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

Today I am pleased to present the Better Regulation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. The bill delivers on this government's continued commitment to better regulation in the ACT and builds on the work of the previous Assembly. I will take the opportunity to briefly outline some of the achievements in the last Assembly.

Last term saw the introduction of automatic mutual recognition for individual occupational licences in the territory to increase flexibility for businesses and individuals, delivering savings on registration fees, paperwork and time. We delivered efficiency and cost savings to Canberra businesses by amending the regulatory processes for responsible service of alcohol certification and training. We reviewed the regulation for employment agents, which led to the passing of legislation to remove the requirement for employment agents in the ACT to be licensed for this low-risk industry.

We made amendments to the noise standards for the city centre entertainment precinct to nurture and protect entertainment venues, including live music. We also introduced a wealth of reforms to the night-time economy to reduce liquor licence fees, to encourage businesses to extend trading hours, to reduce the administrative burden on businesses, and to encourage diversity in night-time economy business models.

Regulatory reform is not necessarily about reducing regulation. It is about finding solutions with stakeholders, including businesses, communities and regulators, to make regulation better. It is about strengthening the integrity of our laws while removing unnecessary and unwarranted burdens that take time and money. This approach goes beyond simply cutting compliance time; it is ensuring that the time spent is truly effective, promoting best regulator practice and performance for the benefit of everyone.

The bill I am presenting today is the first of what I intend to be several legislative changes over the term of this Assembly to achieve better regulation, both with amendment bills like this one today and with a series of repeal bills, which I am sure will be music to Mr Cocks's ears.

Among the key objectives will be continuing to make government interactions simpler, faster and fit for purpose. Today's bill will remove outdated references to cheques, it will modernise record-keeping requirements, it will remove unnecessary regulatory burden, and it will make legislation more accessible.

The act of completing a statutory declaration is intentionally cumbersome, with the intention to promote truthfulness and accuracy, and to discourage fraud. Although historically these instruments were fit for purpose, our changing business landscape and digital economy have facilitated progressive alternatives.

The Better Regulation Legislation Amendment Bill will amend the Architects Act 2004 to remove a provision which allows the Architects Board to require a complainant to verify all, or part, of a complaint via a statutory declaration. This amendment, supported by the Architects Board, is designed to make the complaint process more accessible and less cumbersome. It is important to note, however, that the Architects Board will retain an obligation to investigate complaints, and that the Criminal Code applies to false and misleading statements.

In light of the decline in cheque usage nationally, the Better Regulation Legislation Amendment Bill is also modernising the use of language in our legislation to make it clearer. First, in a reform supported by the ACT Electoral Commission, the Electoral Act 1992 will be amended to remove the references to payment methods, including a banker's cheque, in relation to a candidate's nomination deposit to reflect payment method neutrality.

The bill will amend the Associations Incorporation Act 1991 to remove the requirement for association rules, other than model rules, to specifically require how cheques are drawn and used. This aligns with the comprehensive better regulation revision of the model rules that was undertaken during the term of the previous Assembly.

In addition, the Domestic Animals Act 2000 and its associated regulation will be amended to remove unnecessary references to cheques and update language in relation to payments that are not honoured or are reversed or cancelled, ensuring the legislation is clearer to understand and regulate.

A number of amendments are proposed to the Agents Act 2003 to clarify legal provisions in relation to electronic records, tightening the safeguarding provisions to provide for the backup and storage of electronic records, ensuring that protective practices are enshrined in our legislation.

This bill will amend the Fair Trading (Motor Vehicle Repair Industry) Act 2010 to remove references to an industry advisory committee that is obsolete. I recognise that many of the regulatory issues in the sector arise from the sale as well as repair of motor vehicles; so, while a committee will be removed from the statute book, government agencies will continue to meet and work with stakeholders to better understand industry

requirements, as we have been doing for a very long time now. Indeed, just the other week I received some wonderful feedback from a relevant stakeholder about just how accessible and responsive Access Canberra has been to some of the concerns they raised recently.

The security industry plays a vital role in ensuring the safety of Canberrans at events that take place in the territory all year round. Key safeguards are in place in the Security Industry Act 2003 to ensure that individuals working in this sector are licensed and regulated. The Better Regulation Legislation Amendment Bill will further strengthen this by adding a provision to ensure that, once a licensee voluntarily surrenders their licence, that licence is cancelled on the day stated in writing by the Commissioner for Fair Trading. This is about improving the integrity of the licence process, and it will reduce the potential for fraudulent activity.

This bill will also amend the Waste Management and Resource Recovery Act 2016 to require the waste manager to make information relating to the registers for waste facility licences and waste transporter registrations available to the public.

Promoting access to government information is guaranteed as a right under the Freedom of Information Act 2016. Only a subset of information about service providers collected in the registers will be shared, which will include items of information such as the business name, telephone number and the email address associated with the business. Accordingly, these registers will compile public information for the benefit of the community, and the amendments enable easy access to information to any member of the public.

The bill also removes an obsolete provision for the requirement for GPS fittings on registered waste transporting vehicles, reflecting that there are other, less intrusive methods to achieve effective regulatory compliance.

Finally, this bill will reform the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2020 to remove “or disinterment” from the definition of licensee receipt. This is because the disinterment of cremated remains does not create an ongoing maintenance obligation, so it is not consistent with the purpose of the Perpetual Care Trust.

While this first Better Regulation Legislation Amendment Bill focuses on minor and technical reforms, it signals an intent by government to continue to examine the statute book for outdated, unnecessary and outmoded provisions. I look forward to bringing further reforms in the future, as this government continues to focus on making Canberra a great place and where it is easy to start up, run and grow a business, as well as helping all Canberrans to undertake easy interactions with government agencies.

I commend the bill to the Assembly.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Hanson**) adjourned to the next sitting.

Justice and Community Safety Legislation Amendment Bill 2025

Debate resumed from 6 February 2025, on motion by **Ms Cheyne**:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (11.41): This bill is an omnibus bill which makes minor, technical and, in my opinion, non-controversial legislative amendments in the portfolios of the Attorney-General and the Minister for Gaming Reform.

The bill amends several pieces of legislation with minor and technical updates, correcting incorrect cross-references, updating language and removing redundant references to the Family Court, because it is no longer called that alone.

The acts amended include the Crimes Act 1900. It inserts two notes that reference a list of offences covered by other laws. The Fair Trading (Fuel Prices) Act 1993 is amended to update references to commonwealth legislation. The Fair Trading (Motor Vehicle Repair Industry) Act 2010 is amended to correct references to a division. There are similar corrections in the Gambling and Racing Control Act 1999, the Gaming Machine Act 2004 and the Jurisdiction of Courts (Cross-vesting) Act 1993. The Land Titles Act 1925 is amended, as I mentioned earlier, to remove references to the Family Court, which is now called the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia. It also changes an ambiguous reference in the Major Events Act 2014.

I note that the briefing, interestingly, was driven by parliamentary counsel in this case. That is, obviously, an unusual practice because normally a briefing would be driven by someone from the department. That indicated to me, and confirmed to me, that this was really minor and editorial in nature. I appreciated the response to a question I asked. It is fairly obvious to me, particularly having regard to my own legislative background, that parliamentary counsel themselves have the ability to make minor and technical editorial changes to legislation without bringing it before this Assembly. I asked why they chose to take this approach, rather than use their in-house editorial powers. It was comforting to hear that there is a bias towards transparency from our parliamentary counsel. I think that is a very healthy approach to take.

I thank the minister for the briefing that I received on 28 February, just last week. I note the scrutiny committee report this month. Again, I am speaking in my role as shadow attorney-general, not as chair of the scrutiny committee. It made no comment on this Justice and Community Safety Legislation Amendment Bill, which, as has been noted, amends various pieces of legislation to address minor and technical issues.

The Canberra Liberals will be supporting this bill. I again thank the minister for the briefing provided by her staff.

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (11.44): The ACT Greens support the Justice and Community Safety Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. This omnibus bill makes minor, technical and uncontroversial amendments to legislation that is the portfolio responsibility of the Attorney-General and the Minister for Gaming Reform.

It is important that we regularly review our legislation to ensure that it is simple, consistent, coherent and contemporary. This bill is a fine example of the kinds of amendments that should be made to ensure that the ACT's legislation remains of the highest standard. For example, it corrects minor typographical errors, updates

cross-references and definitions, and updates amendments that are consequential to other amendments.

I have considered the bill, its explanatory statement and how it does not engage any human rights under our Human Rights Act, and we have no qualms with supporting it today.

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (11.45), in reply: In closing, I thank members of the Greens and the Liberals for their engagement with this bill and their support for it. As you have heard, Madam Assistant Speaker, it makes amendments to nine pieces of legislation to improve their operation—minor and technical amendments to laws which primarily fall within my portfolio, as the Attorney-General, as well as the portfolio of the Minister for Gaming Reform.

It is about making the amended legislation easier for members of the community to read, understand and apply. The amendments effectively increase the readability and accessibility of our legislation. They update cross-references within legislation to ensure that ACT legislation referring to legislative instruments in other jurisdictions remains current and coherent, update notes to ensure they remain as accurate and helpful to the community as possible, remove redundant or obsolete definitions, and make minor updates to the language to enhance consistency throughout the ACT statute book, and to align with the renaming of important federal institutions, which Mr Cain drew out earlier. Further detail on each of these minor and technical amendments can be found in the explanatory statement to the bill.

Although these amendments are of a technical nature, they are important. Individually, they are insufficient to justify the presentation of separate amendment legislation, but, taken together, they make important progress in improving the overall quality of the ACT statute book. This enhances accessibility for all Canberrans, ensuring our legislation is accurate, up to date and presented in line with current drafting practice.

Legislation can sometimes be challenging to read and understand. Where this is the case, it can create a barrier to accessing legal information and, indeed, justice. Legislation that is out of date or incoherent, such as including outdated cross-references, can exacerbate these issues. This has important flow-on consequences for access to justice, as it can make it harder for individuals to comprehend and to comply with the legal obligations.

Amendments such as this sustain the high quality of legislation in the territory. I thank the Parliamentary Counsel's Office for leading the briefing with Mr Cain and his office. I very much appreciate his thanks to them as well. Indeed, he was exactly right; it is important that, while these may fit in the category of dull but worthy, we are transparent about these changes. That, again, also speaks to allowing anyone who is interacting with changes to the bills that we are amending to see exactly why, through the explanatory statement that we are providing, and bringing this to the attention of all members in the Assembly. That is certainly my intent going forward.

Parliamentary counsel have been absolutely first rate, in my experiences with them, as

a member in this place and now as Attorney-General. They are working incredibly hard on a very busy program, as is the way of the start of a parliamentary term. I greatly appreciate Mr Cain, in particular, singling them out. I, too, wish to put on the record my acknowledgement of their ongoing commitment to ensuring that our statute book is fit for purpose and in providing me with such support and great advice in this early stage of the term. I commend the bill to the Assembly.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Bill agreed to in principle.

Leave granted to dispense with the detail stage.

Bill agreed to.

Sitting suspended from 11.50 am to 2.00 pm.

Questions without notice

Minister for Health—conduct

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. As we learned in annual reports hearings, you were aware of serious insolvency risks with Canberra's health and hospital system during last year's election, but you failed to disclose this information to the opposition, the Assembly or the community. Notwithstanding the establishment of the committee earlier today, there are still questions to answer. Minister, who did you inform about these risks prior to the election?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I absolutely reject the premise of the Leader of the Opposition's question. I refer her to the comments I made in the debate earlier today—

Ms Castley: Point of order. The question was who did she inform? That was not really a comment.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: There was a preamble.

Ms Castley: The question was who did you inform?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am rejecting the preamble to the Leader of the Opposition's question—

Ms Castley: Right. It is good to have clarity.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: —and the assertions that she made in that preamble, which are completely factually incorrect and I refer her to the comments that I made this morning.

In relation to who I informed, I did not inform anybody, because I was provided with some factual information about increased presentations in July and August 2024, prior to the caretaker period, that were consistent with what I had been saying publicly about increased demand on our health system, how busy our health system was and, therefore,

why the first ACT Labor election commitment was to 800 additional health workers; why ACT Labor was absolutely committed to the building of the new northside hospital and additional health centres across our city; commitments in the second case that the Canberra Liberals never matched, and in the first case, took the Canberra Liberals until the last week of the campaign to confirm that they were committed to building a new northside hospital for the fastest growing area of our city. The way that the Leader of the Opposition has described this information is completely and utterly false.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, did you give any consideration to the political impact of disclosing this information before the election?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I did not, because this information was entirely consistent with everything we had said about how busy our health system was, in line with our health systems around the country. I would point the Leader of the Opposition, for example, to the experience in Tasmania. The Liberal government in Tasmania, at their mid-year review, had to add an additional \$350 million to their health system in their mid-year review process through their mid-year review budget process—a decision that I am sure was taken through a proper governmental process in line with advice from officials. That would have taken some consideration of the options that were available to government about whether to add funding to the system or whether to, as other governments have done, take some very difficult decisions about constraining the system and reducing activity in the system. Those decisions—even the opportunity to take decisions—was not being requested through the caretaker period, and the implications of that were absolutely unclear from data that was only from July and August, during a very busy winter period, that I had already told the public was a very busy winter period.

MS MORRIS: Minister, did not the decision to withhold this information lack transparency and integrity?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: No, this information was not withheld, and I reject that question.

Canberra Health Services—funding

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister. The insolvency risks being faced by Canberra Health Services are ultimately the result of the government's inaccurate forecasts about health demand this year. Were you ultimately responsible for these forecasts? If so, why were your forecasts so wrong?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Again, I absolutely reject the way that the Leader of the Opposition has characterised this. There is nothing in Mr Peffer's email—which she has a copy of—that suggests an insolvency risk. That is absolutely a false representation of the information—the factual information—that was provided to my office during the election campaign.

Every year, you project forward activity and funding for a future budget. You do that in May, at the latest, and you set your budget. For the 2024-25 budget, we set a budget for Canberra Health Services that increased funding by six per cent from 2023-24 to 2024-25. The Canberra Liberals, of course, keep saying that we flatlined the budget.

But that is because the Canberra Liberals, in their media release, made clear that they actually do not understand that it is Canberra Health Services that delivers health services to the ACT. In their media release—their gotcha media release, out of annual report hearings—they included the ACT Health directorate budget, which is not about service delivery and has not received additional funding; the most embarrassing technical blunder that you could possibly make as a shadow health minister for more than two years and as a shadow Treasurer. They are so fortunate that this has not been picked up in the media, because it is so embarrassing!

MS CASTLEY: Minister, do you have confidence in the ability of ACT Health and CHS to accurately forecast health demand? If so, why?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: It is not possible to 100 per cent accurately forecast health demand, because things change. I do not know if Ms Castley remembers, but a few years ago we had a global pandemic! That was not included in our health demand forecasts. So 100 per cent accurately forecasting health demand is not possible. Officials do their best, and they generally do a very good. I would note that Mr Peffer's email, as tabled to the committee the other day—and which Ms Castley has a copy of—specifically says, "These are preliminary numbers only." So not only are they numbers for July and August, but the email itself says that they are preliminary numbers only.

MR COCKS: Minister, how can you assure us that your forecasts informing this year's budget will be reliable given that, over recent years, the forecasts across health, including both CHS and the health directorate, have been so far out?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Zero Growth himself, who has mistaken six per cent growth for zero growth in health system funding—

Mr Hanson: Mr Speaker, I believe that we are to refer to each other in a parliamentary way, by name not by nicknames; otherwise, we can start making them up, too. If that's going to be the standard, I've got some doozies!

MR SPEAKER: I think Mr Hanson does make a fair point. Members, before we get back to the answer to the question, if you can remember it by the time we get there, at the start of this term, I did suggest that I would be trying to make things more sensible—or more boring—in this chamber and that I do not want to see bullying from this side to that side. But I would suggest that it does go both ways.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, you are correct: I am having trouble remembering exactly what the question was. But I can advise the shadow treasurer, who indicated publicly—

Mr Hanson: Mr Speaker, sorry to be technical, but could you ask her to withdraw her slur?

MR SPEAKER: Mr Hanson, I think I have made the point. I am not going to ask her to withdraw. I would just ask members to be mindful.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: If it is helpful for Mr Hanson and Mr Cocks, I am happy to withdraw. I just make the point that the shadow treasurer mistook six per cent growth

in CHS's budget for zero per cent growth—which is a pretty tragic error if you are indeed putting yourself forward as the alternative treasurer.

Obviously, every year, we have a look at what we expect the health system to deliver and we set our budget accordingly. In this year, we are going to need to make some difficult decisions to ensure that our budget remains sustainable into the future. Every year, every government is in this circumstance. I am absolutely confident that, with all the information available to us, our officials are doing their very best job of forecasting what that demand will look like into the future. But it is not possible to be 100 per cent accurate in those forecasts all the time.

Canberra Health Services—surgeons

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. How many orthopaedic surgeons have resigned their positions in the ACT so far this year, and what are the reasons they have given for their resignation?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take that question on notice.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, how many surgeons have contacted you or the CHS CEO expressing their concern about proposed changes to visiting medical officer contracts?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Clearly, I will have to take that question on notice because I will have to consult with the CHS CEO to answer it.

MS BARRY: Minister, what will be the effect of these resignations on the ACT's ability to train junior doctors and surgeons, and on the accreditation of specialist training units?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Barry for her supplementary question. I am confident that there will not be any impact on training for our junior medical officers. One of the things that I have been having conversations about with the surgeons I have met, and also with the leadership of Canberra Health Services, is making sure, to the extent that we are in a level of dispute about visiting medical officer arrangements—and I would emphasise at this point that we have been very clear that nobody's contract is being changed, nobody's contract is being withdrawn and that anyone whose contract is due to expire in the next six months will be offered a six-month extension of their contract, while we work through the circumstances. This is the same unit, actually, that Ms Castley was criticising the government for in the last term, late last year, where accreditation for supervision of what are called "PGY1" and "PGY2", the first and second year of internships, had been withdrawn. We have regained that. We are really confident that we will retain that accreditation, and we will continue to work with the orthopaedic surgery team to ensure that specialist accreditation is also retained, and that is part of the conversation that we are having with that craft group.

Homelessness—Central Intake Service

MR RATTENBURY: My question is to the minister for housing and homelessness. Minister, the Central Intake Service provides vital services for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. My understanding is that the current contract expires on

30 April. Has a new contract been awarded?

MS BERRY: No, it has not been awarded yet. Once that decision is taken, I will make sure that I let the Assembly and members know. That process is continuing. As I said, as soon as I am able to, and when I am provided with that information, I can share it with others.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, when will the government be awarding the new contract, given that the end of the current contract is now only about seven weeks away?

MS BERRY: As I said, once I know, I will be able to provide that information. I will double-check the date on which we were planning for the new contract to take over, and I will come back to the Assembly with that.

MR SPEAKER: You are taking that on notice?

MS BERRY: Yes.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, is it acceptable that there is no certainty for the service provider and, subsequently, for the clients about the future of this service?

MS BERRY: No, I absolutely disagree with the context of that question. We have gone out to contract. We have made the homelessness services community aware that we have gone out to contract. Any contract change, of course, means that there will be a change in a service, and we will make sure that we advise the community once that decision has been made. There is still some time ahead for us to be able to make an announcement about who the new contractor is. But this is a contract change. We will go through the processes that are appropriate and inform the community when we can.

Hospitals—elective joint replacement program

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. What was the cost to taxpayers of your decision to move the elective joint replacement program from the Calvary John James Hospital to the Canberra Hospital and then back again to Calvary John James Hospital?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the question on notice to ensure that I am correct. As far as I am aware, there was no cost to that; in fact, what we have delivered is a significant saving in the elective joint replacement program. We have made a decision to insource this program because we were not satisfied with the price that we were getting from Calvary John James. I had had previous conversations with representatives of the orthopaedic surgery area around what we would like to see in terms of pricing, and we had not been able to achieve that previously.

With the decision to in-source that program, we are still working to ensure that elective joint replacements can be delivered in the new critical services building, which has expanded theatre capacity at Canberra Hospital. It opened in August 2024—at the time the biggest health infrastructure investment since self-government—so we have the capacity, now, to insource joint replacements. As a result of that conversation with Calvary John James, they have come back with a significantly improved price, and we

are going to continue to work with them in partnership on the elective joint replacement program.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, what is the total cost of the decision, including the resourcing required to manage front-end organisation; theatre staffing; management of infrastructure; provision of ward services, including additional doctor, nursing and physiotherapy staff; post-surgical rehab; and back-end follow-up?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, I seek your guidance here. I am not sure what decision Ms Castley is talking about, given that I have just indicated that we will continue our partnership with Calvary John James to deliver the elective joint replacement program. I do not know what decision she is referring to, so I am not able to answer the question.

MR HANSON: Minister, what effects has your change of mind had on the approximately 500 elective surgery cases that are conducted by this unit each year?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: None.

Early childhood education and care services—safety

MR HANSON: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. The Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services shows that per 100 NQF—National Quality Framework—approved childcare services, the ACT has recorded 235 serious incidents across all service types. This is a 24 per cent increase from the previous year's figure of 189.9. The national figure for 2024 is 148.1. Minister, why have serious incidents increased by 24 per cent in a year?

MS BERRY: Thank you for that question. ACECQA, which is the organisation that regulates the early childhood education and care sector, is working closely with services to make sure they are applying the national law, and that includes complaints that are made. Regarding those numbers increasing, I can say that, anecdotally, it is a result of the Productivity Commission's work in drawing attention to the regulations in early childhood education and care services. Reporting of those incidents is increasing, as is appropriate, but what we want to see is a reduction in those incidents occurring, and that is where the role of the regulator, ACECQA, comes in. I cannot specifically say whether there is a reason that we have been able to identify for those numbers being higher than others, but, if I have any advice available, I will make sure I present it to the Assembly.

MR HANSON: Minister, why does the ACT have the highest number of serious incidents per 100 childcare centres in Australia?

MS BERRY: I refer Mr Hanson to my previous answer. If I have data that is more accurate than just anecdotal, I will provide it to the Assembly.

MS BARRY: Minister, what is the government doing to address this unacceptable rate of serious incidents?

MS BERRY: That is the work of ACECQA, which is the regulator of early childhood

services in the ACT. It plays an important role in both regulating and supporting services to provide safe and accessible early childhood education to children in our community.

Waste—recycling

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. We are currently sending our household recycling interstate and we are building a new recycling facility intended to be operating in 2028. Current arrangements do not recycle many standard items. I am worried the new recycling facility also will not recycle many standard items. I am worried about soft plastics, plastic bags, many hard plastics used in standard packaging, small pieces of paper, disposable coffee cups, drink lids, bamboo plates and cutlery, bioplastic plates and cutlery and blister packs for pills. Will the new recycling facility recover these items?

MS CHEYNE: I feel like we had an identical question in the last sitting week and I think I took it on notice and provided that answer, so I might take that on notice again Mr Speaker, just to make sure that I am not misremembering nor saying something out of turn. I know I have previously advised Ms Clay, including at the annual report hearings, that soft plastics is something that we are working on a solution nationally with the federal government. This is because, quite honestly, the ACT does not have the amount coming into it that would have an own-industry be suitable for undertaking that recycling and turning it into another product. The issue we are facing nationally is that we have not seen a product yet that currently makes up for the cost of recycling it. As is always best practice, it is reduce first, and this has really been the focus of governments, including our own, that we seek to reduce the use of these plastics with recycling being a costly option.

MS CLAY: Will the national scheme be mandatory so that big corporations like Coles and Woolworths will participate and pay their way?

MS CHEYNE: I do not think that discussions have advanced far enough on that one at this stage, but if I am mistaken, I will correct the record.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, when will the ACT government run public consultation on local and national recycling arrangements to see what Canberrans expect from their government on recycling?

MS CHEYNE: Again Mr Speaker, I will take that on notice to make sure that the answers have been consistent to questions that have been answered recently.

Future of Education Equity Fund—school students

MS TOUGH: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, I understand the 2025 Future of Education Equity Fund application round is open. Why is this such an important program?

MS BERRY: Thanks very much for that question and your interest in equity and the equity fund across ACT schools. It is an important fund that provides supports to eligible families on low incomes and independent students, all the way from preschool

to year 12, with one-off annual payments to help cover the costs associated with schooling, such as uniforms, sport equipment and activities, tuition and music lessons. The equity fund supports eligible families of students enrolled in all ACT schools—so non-government and other approved forms of education as well. Payment rates are \$400 for preschool students, \$500 for primary school students and \$750 for high school and college students.

Last year, the equity fund provided more than \$3.3 million to more than 5,700 financially disadvantaged students. We know that that has made a huge difference in their and their families lives. The 2025 round of the Future of Education Equity Fund opened on 2 December 2024 and, as of 28 February 2025, 2,229 applications have been approved for payment in the 2025 round, which is approximately \$2.7 million of allocated funding to families, with \$2,590,850 successfully paid into bank accounts for families to be able to access.

MS TOUGH: Minister, what sorts of things does the program fund?

MS BERRY: Thanks for that supplementary. The Future of Education Equity Fund provides eligible families with the option to apply for a one-off annual grant, as I said. It covers costs that are associated with school—things like school uniforms, school excursions, sport equipment and activities and music lessons. When I hear from families who have been able to access the funds and the difference that it makes in their lives and their children’s lives we know that it is an important part of how the ACT government is supporting people in the ACT, particularly at a time when costs are rising.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how do families and carers access the fund?

MS BERRY: Thank you for that supplementary. Families and carers can access the fund through the SmartyGrants online application form on the Education ACT website. Families can also talk with their schools for further information or support. They might have a trusted person that they have a relationship with where they can get supported to access the fund. Once the application is submitted, we try to get the money into people’s bank accounts as quickly as we can—taking into account pay periods and accessing bank details et cetera—but, in some cases, it might take up to six weeks. Applications for the 2025 round will remain open all the way up to 28 November this year.

Domestic and family violence—safer families assistance payment

MR EMERSON: My question is for the Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence. We know that one of the primary barriers keeping women from escaping violent situations is financial dependency. The narrow scope of the available federal support payments creates a gap for women who have been homeless for more than 12 weeks and those experiencing violence other than intimate partner violence.

The ACT government’s \$2,000 safer families assistance payment helped fill that gap. A prominent local women’s safety provider told me that this payment had been discontinued in December. Government officials, during recent committee hearings, indicated it was more like January or February but later confirmed on notice that it did

end in December. They also indicated they consulted community service providers about it but later said on notice that, in fact, the community sector had to contact the government to be provided with information.

Minister, when were you consulted about funding for this program being exhausted, and did you take any steps to keep this potentially life-saving program open through to the end of the financial year?

DR PATERSON: I will take on notice when I was made aware that this funding was not continuing. Basically, this is a grants program that runs each year for \$2,000 for applicants who are victims of domestic or family violence. The fund was around \$363,000 for victim-survivors, with no admin costs included in this figure. What has happened is that that money has been fully allocated, so the fund ceased at that time. I acknowledge the inconvenience and distress this caused. When I was made aware, I was very prompt to provide that advice to the community sector advocate who you are talking about. I will continue to advocate for these types of services and grants to support victims of domestic and family violence.

MR EMERSON: Minister, as part of your continual advocacy, will you commit to urgently reinstating this payment, given what you referred to in your statement this morning as, I quote, “unacceptable” levels of gender-based violence.

DR PATERSON: What I will commit to is that we have a range of programs and services funded to address domestic and family violence, so I will continue to advocate to see grants like this and other programs fully functioning in the ACT.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, are you committed to increasing the level of funding for this program in the upcoming budget so that it lasts all the way through to the end of the financial year, given that funding for the program has now been exhausted early in three consecutive financial years?

DR PATERSON: That is a matter for budget consideration.

Domestic, family and sexual violence—strategy

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence. Minister, it is my understanding that the ACT government did a period of consultation and committed to a new ACT Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy. Unfortunately, from what I have heard from the community, the consultation on the strategy fell short of community expectation, and they have not heard much since. I understand that there was a communication sent out recently to the sector and that this might have included an indicative time frame. Are you able to share this time line and what it entails for the strategy?

DR PATERSON: The ACT government is strongly committed to developing a comprehensive, evidence-based ACT Domestic, family and sexual violence strategy. This strategy will guide future work and investment to prevent and respond to domestic, family and sexual violence.

Consultation to develop this strategy will occur through this year in three phases. It will

focus on victim-survivors and the critical frontline organisations with expertise in preventing and addressing domestic and family violence. As we develop the strategy, we will also develop a monitoring and evaluation framework so that we can track our progress in addressing domestic, family and sexual violence, and learning what is working and what needs to change.

MISS NUTTALL: Can you please share what expertise the consultant, who I understand will be engaged on the strategy, will be bringing to the strategy and whether this position will be funded through the Safer Families Levy?

DR PATERSON: There is a procurement process underway at the moment. I will take that on notice, as to where the funding is coming from.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, what will you do differently in the next round of consultation to make sure consultation meets community expectation and the strategy is delivered in a timely fashion?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. I have been very up-front and explicit with frontline service providers in the ACT about how committed I am to working with them to progress an ACT Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy. This is incredibly important work. I worked very closely with the sector in the previous term of government, and now in my role as the Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence.

Ministers—code of conduct

MR COCKS: My question is to the Chief Minister. The *Ministerial code of conduct* for the ACT seems to be no longer available on the internet. Indeed, even the link from the *ACT Cabinet Handbook* now leads to a CMTEED message, which says that the page was removed, renamed or does not exist. So I must ask you this directly: does the *Ministerial code of conduct* contain any requirement, suggestion or implication that ministers should respond to inquiries from constituents or other MLAs? Is there a timeframe that you would consider reasonable to expect a response?

MR BARR: I am just checking now to see whether that document is available online. I will confirm that in a moment. If it is not, I will ensure that it is available online.

In relation to the second part of the question, it will obviously depend on the nature of the approach to the minister, either from a constituent or from another member of the Assembly. The timeframe would vary depending on the inquiry. It could stretch to months; it could be a matter of hours, depending on exactly what the request is. It is impossible to give a definition that at this point it is no longer meeting the *Ministerial code of conduct* because the issue could be quite complex.

Common courtesy would suggest that an acknowledgement of an issue being raised would be an appropriate first step, together with—if it is possible to give one—an indication of a potential time frame. But I recognise that not every issue would necessarily lend itself to that sort of response; others you could address quite quickly.

MR COCKS: Chief Minister, are you aware that one of your ministers has responded

to almost no ministerial representations from the opposition—I think, since coming to government, there is a grand total of two times that they have done so—and, if so, when were you made aware?

MR BARR: I must confess, I do not personally track each piece of correspondence from other members of the Assembly to other ministerial offices. I would expect colleagues to be courteous in their responses, but I would also expect members, in raising issues, to be similarly courteous.

MS CASTLEY: I have a supplementary question. Chief Minister, will you direct the Treasurer to begin providing responses to all correspondence regarding his portfolios in a timely manner, or should we inform constituents who contact us that we cannot guarantee a response from this government?

MR BARR: I expect colleagues to respond appropriately, but I acknowledge that certain issues may take longer. We are certainly in an era of public engagement. When I started my career, an expectation was for around 28 to 35 days, and things would arrive in the mail. I am old—I acknowledge that. Now there is an expectation that things will be responded to within 28 to 35 seconds. I think that we need to acknowledge that some issues are complex. I do not know the nature of the representations, but I am sure the Treasurer's office, together with other offices, will endeavour to respond as quickly as they can.

ACT Climate Change Strategy

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water. Minister, with the current Climate Change Strategy expiring this year and a new strategy being required, the Climate Change Council has stated that the new strategy will need to incorporate more climate adaptation strategies as well as mitigation strategies. What climate adaptation strategies is the government considering?

MS ORR: I thank Mr Braddock for his question. It is a very timely question, given where we are with climate change—the changes we have already seen to our climate and the need to put in place more action around adaptation, as well as continuing to transition to net zero and mitigating what we can continue to mitigate. As Mr Braddock pointed out in his question, we are in the process of looking at a new Climate Change Strategy, noting that the one that is in place finishes at the end of this year. We will continue to look at that. It is a bit early and I cannot pre-empt or make any policy announcements during question time, but I can assure the member that adaptation and questions of what is an appropriate and achievable response to adaptation are certainly forming part of the current consideration.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, how would the government balance the requirement to continue emissions mitigation whilst also favouring climate adaptation strategies?

MS ORR: At the risk of announcing new policy initiatives, I will not list anything that would specifically go to the question that Mr Braddock asked, but, if he has any ideas, I am more than happy to engage in a conversation. Now is a good time for Mr Braddock to have that chat, given we are in the early scoping of the new strategy and what it could

look like. I am more than happy to hear whether he has some ideas that he wants to contribute.

MS CLAY: Minister, what action have you taken so far on recommendations from the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, the Climate Council and the ACT Climate Change Council to cover scope 3 emissions from general consumption?

MS ORR: I think that is a bit different to the substantive question that Mr Braddock asked, but I will take the detail of the question on notice. We have also provided a number of responses to Ms Clay on this topic previously through other avenues.

MR SPEAKER: I assume you are taking—

MS ORR: The action on scope 3 emissions.

Aged care—respite

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for Health. The ACT has a shortage of respite beds, and long wait times of four to six months, yet the ACT government is closing 15 beds at the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre. When Burrangiri's 5,475 nights of respite care are no longer available, where will people go for respite before your facility for Carers ACT is built?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Carrick for the question, and I look forward to debating this matter this afternoon where we have a substantive motion on the table. As Ms Carrick has indicated, Burrangiri has been providing respite services for some time. As I have publicly said on a number of occasions now, and as has been agreed previously with the service provider, this physical facility needs to close to be refurbished. That would need to happen, even were we to subsequently, after the refurbishment, continue to fund a respite service from this facility. But the facility itself will need to close for refurbishment no matter what decision we take. That is not an easy decision.

I have asked the health directorate to work with the Canberra Health Services, which run a step down from hospital program. We looked at other options to fund respite care through the health directorate, through an ad hoc program with other providers. All of these documents have been subject to a freedom of information request, so that process of thinking through what the alternative policy options were will become clear. It became apparent in thinking that through that Canberra Health Services already runs a very similar program where they buy beds from residential aged care facilities to provide that hospital step down respite, which is what a number of the people who have provided their experience of Burrangiri have talked about. So if we were going to do something to purchase beds, it would make more sense to expand that Canberra Health Services program than to do a separate ad hoc program.

MS CARRICK: The Canberra Hospital website indicates that two to four patients in a ward may share a bathroom. Is the ACT government expecting a small respite facility to provide more bathrooms per patient numbers than it provides in its own hospital?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Well, two to four patients sharing a bathroom does occur. As Ms Carrick might be aware, as we have developed new hospital facilities and particularly the Critical Services Building, it is more and more the expectation that there would be fewer people sharing a bathroom. My understanding is that this 15 bed facility has four bathrooms, and that is not what we would expect the standard to be for something like respite care.

The bigger issue, as I have repeatedly indicated, and as I said in response to the first question, is that this facility would have to close anyway to undertake the refurbishment that is required. The Salvation Army's existing contract was coming to an end—in fact, it was extended through to the end of June 2025, in order to provide that transition, to provide certainty for the Salvation Army and to provide certainty for their staff. All that is happening now is that this debate is creating significant uncertainty for the staff at Burrangiri. We deliberately provided an extension and a period of time for The Salvation Army to plan its transition out of Burrangiri so that that facility could be refurbished. We have looked at alternative policy options and determined at this point that this service will not be funded, but we are happy to have a conversation about alternative options.

MR EMERSON: Minister, what level of consultation was undertaken with the specific people affected by the closure of Burrangiri to determine where exactly they will be able to access timely respite care from 1 July?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: It is a very interesting question actually that Mr Emerson asks because this is generally a facility that people use for a short period of time. Most people who would be accessing respite in this facility would not be doing it for years at a time, so the cohort of people using the facility will actually change over time. However, we do work closely with the Health Care Consumers' Association and Carers ACT and I have had a conversation with Carers Act about this decision and the reasoning for it, and also about what they look for in respite facilities. I would strongly encourage, if they have not already, both Ms Carrick and Mr Emerson, to have a conversation with Carers ACT about what respite looks like in a variety of circumstances.

Mr Speaker, if I can just add, I have talked previously and Ms Carrick mentioned, that we have an election commitment to work with Carers ACT to find them a site to establish a respite facility, which I note they have indicated would not require ongoing ACT funding. So what they need is support to find a site for that. We are also working through a process to establish a dementia care facility in Curtin. That process is working its way through the system, but it is publicly understood that it is on the table. Part of that may be the availability of respite, but what it indicates is that there are multiple other funding opportunities that are available for this type of service.

Gambling harms

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Gaming Reform. Minister, with the footy season kicking off, do we expect to see a rise in gambling harm and advertising on television?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question.

This time of year is an exciting time of year for many people, with the NRL season commencing just last weekend and the AFL season commencing on Friday. However, this time also sees a significant increase in sports betting advertising. Australians lost \$32 billion a year in gambling—the highest in the world. On average, Australians lose 20 per cent more in online wagering than any other nation. These losses undoubtedly increase during the seasons of our major sporting codes. Gambling harm from online wagering is also higher than other forms of harm, with 22.5 per cent of people who participate in online gambling experiencing harm. The 2019 Gambling Prevalence survey reported that 21 per cent of ACT adults participate in online gambling, an 8.4 per cent increase in participation compared to 2014. We expect to see this increase in the next survey.

Gambling also impacts other portfolios that I have. We know that, during major sporting events, rates of family and domestic violence increase.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, the government recently released a listening report into gambling advertising. What were its findings?

DR PATERSON: The listening report on limiting child and youth exposure to gambling advertising in the ACT was released last month and reports on feedback from a discussion paper released last year. The listening report presented comments on two models. The first option was based on the South Australian model, which restricts advertising on radio from 6 am to 8.30 am and TV between 4 pm and 7.30 pm Monday to Friday. Option two goes further and includes weekend restrictions between 6 am and 8.30 pm in addition to the timeframes in option 1. We found that 99 per cent of people who made a submission support stronger restrictions.

These are not the only options that the government is considering. Feedback received from the listening report called for a total ban on gambling advertising, similar to the ban on tobacco advertising. This is also a recommendation from the *You win some, you lose more* report for the federal government. I look forward to continuing this work and hearing more from members of the community as this work progresses.

MR HANSON: Minister, how many millions of dollars do the Labor Clubs rip out of Canberrans' pockets each year playing their pokies?

DR PATERSON: That question is not in line with the original question, which was on online wagering.

Mr Hanson: On the point of order—which I presume is what the minister is saying—in answer to a question that she was asked, she was referring to the effect on the Canberra community of gaming in the ACT. My question directly goes to the impact of gaming in the ACT community.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Hanson, I do not believe that the question is sufficiently related to the primary question.

Mr Rattenbury: On the point of order, Mr Speaker: the original question was actually about gambling harm, and Mr Hanson's supplementary question was also about

gambling harm.

Dr Paterson: It's about gambling advertising, actually.

Mr Rattenbury: To repeat the question, he actually asked whether at this time of year “we expect to see a rise in gambling harm” when the footy season starts—or something like that.

MR SPEAKER: I am ruling that the question is not sufficiently related to the original question.

ACT Policing—Deputy Chief Police Officer

MS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services. An internal AFP message recently informed staff of the sudden departure of the ACT's Deputy Chief Police Officer. Minister, what involvement will your office and the ACT government have with the AFP's appointment of a new Deputy CPO?

DR PATERSON: I think that is a matter for the Chief Police Officer.

MS MORRIS: Minister, what steps will you take to ensure that local ACT police officers with longstanding experience in local policing strategies will be considered for the role?

DR PATERSON: It will be a merit-based exercise. I would encourage them to get in touch with the Chief Police Officer if they are interested in the role.

MR COCKS: Will you ensure that local operational knowledge and a demonstrated understanding of Canberra be factored into the selection criteria for the Deputy Chief Police Officer, given you are the minister?

DR PATERSON: That is a question I would recommend that the Canberra Liberals put to the Chief Police Officer. He would be the person who is recruiting—

Mr Cocks: Point of order—just on relevance. The question was around actions the minister will take in her role as minister, not in general what the CPO want to see.

MR SPEAKER: Minister?

MR PARTON: It is a matter for the Chief Police Officer.

MR SPEAKER: Thank you, Dr Paterson.

Bimberi Youth Justice Centre

MS BARRY: My question is to the Minister for Children, Youth and Families. The Inspector of Custodial Services *Healthy centre review of Bimberi Youth Justice Centre* described your government's description of Bimberi as a “human rights compliant” facility as a hollow statement. Last week, at a social policy committee hearing, officials advised that risk mitigation is prioritised over individual needs. Minister, do you agree

with your officials that security concerns should trump human rights at Bimberi?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank the member for the question. This government proudly places human rights front and centre in everything we do. I do note the observations of independent oversight bodies. The reason that the ACT government funds independent oversight bodies is to get unvarnished feedback to ensure that we can provide a facility that is fit for purpose. We are in the process of considering a response, and we will respond fulsomely when we do.

MS BARRY: Minister, why is it that the official visitors and the Inspector of Custodial Services can highlight deficiencies in human rights practices over many years, but your government did nothing about them?

MR PETTERSSON: The ACT government has a great track record of accepting, agreeing to and agreeing in principle to the recommendations made by these independent oversight bodies. This is largely a question of implementation. The implementation of some of these recommendations requires budget resourcing. Sometimes there are questions of resourcing about developing relevant policies. Noting that Bimberi is a facility that needs to operate 24-7, 365 days a year, as a secure facility, implementing some of these recommendations is not always straightforward. But our commitment to implementing agreed recommendations remains.

MR EMERSON: Minister, did you or your office personally contact Bimberi after receiving the Inspector of Custodial Services' report, asking whether or not children would be permitted to hug their parents?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank the member for the question. I have been to Bimberi. I have spoken to the hardworking staff at Bimberi. I have been well briefed on that issue. It is an issue that was raised immediately with me, when that report was released. By the time the discussion in this place caught up with those facts, decisions had already been made to change that policy at Bimberi.

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

Supplementary answers to questions without notice Ministers—code of conduct

MR BARR: I am delighted to advise the Assembly that the crisis has been averted: the link to the Ministerial Code of Conduct is indeed working. There are two ways to access the document. You can Google it and it will take you directly to it. It is also available within the *Cabinet Handbook*. There is a section which links directly to it. So, whichever way you seek to find the information, it is available on the Open Government information website.

MR STEEL: I want to respond to the same series of questions. The Chief Minister was asked about correspondence within my portfolio—specifically, the Treasury portfolio. I understand that some representations have been made by members of the opposition that relate to a range of waiver requests and active grace payment requests that sit with me, as Treasurer, with responsibility under the Financial Management Act. These requests necessarily require assessment by the Treasury. I do not believe there is a

particular time frame that they need to be assessed by. But what is required is suitable due diligence in relation to these requests, which are often complex and require assessment in order for a decision to be made by me, with reference to the criteria in the act and based on advice by the Treasury. As a result, these types of requests often take quite a long time. I will undertake to have my office provide an update to Mr Cocks and other opposition members on the status of outstanding representations.

I understand that some other representations have been made by the opposition which relate to tax administration. Tax administration, under the administrative arrangements, does not sit with the Treasurer; it is the responsibility of the finance minister. Those pieces of correspondence have been provided to the Minister for Finance. I encourage the opposition to look at the administrative arrangements to be clear about who they are sending correspondence to, to make sure that they get a response within the shortest time frame possible, by going to the minister who is directly responsible for that particular portfolio area.

I will come back on any outstanding correspondence. As noted by the Chief, common courtesy would suggest that the opposition should get in touch with the relevant minister and perhaps have a conversation about any outstanding correspondence. I would be happy to assist them to provide any information about the potential time frames for responding to that correspondence.

Domestic and family violence—strategy

DR PATERSON: I have a bit of a response to Miss Nuttall's question around the strategy and funding for the strategy. The funding will come from the Safer Families package, which totals \$16.146 million, of which the levy provides a \$9.53 million offset. The Safer Families Levy is not allocated for specific work; it is an offset for a broader package. As we have discussed previously, funding for frontline services is significantly more than the total amount of the levy.

Homelessness—Central Intake Service

MS BERRY: I confirm that the Central Intake Service contract expires on 30 April. As those contract negotiations are currently under evaluation, I do not have a firm date for when the new contract will begin. However, I can commit to the ACT government working with suppliers to ensure a smooth transition.

Roads—Molonglo River Bridge

MS CHEYNE: Regarding Mr Cocks's line of questioning yesterday regarding Cotter Road and what I have personally done to ease congestion on it and around there, while I still do not have my stop-and-go sign, I can provide some further information. First of all, we have a variable message sign on Cotter Road, just after Streecon Drive, which shows the travel times to the city via Parkes Way or Adelaide Avenue. That is making use of the CCTV and other real-time data that the Traffic Management Centre gets to advise people to perhaps take a different route if they are seeing some blown-out times.

Also, we have an election commitment to explore options to improve public transport and traffic flow on Cotter Road, from Streecon Drive to the Tuggeranong Parkway.

There have been a number of completed works on or near Cotter Road in recent times. They are detailed on the community paths website. Indeed, in the design phase at the moment is shared-separated active travel infrastructure along Streeton Drive, from Cotter Road to Mulley Street, which would be an upgrade of the C5 principle route.

Waste—recycling

MS CHEYNE: Regarding the questions asked of me today by Ms Clay and Mr Braddock, I will confirm this evening. I will review the transcript of today's question time to ensure that everything is covered, but I am of the belief that all of those questions have been answered relatively recently. I refer the members to the answers on page 132 and 142 of the *Hansard* of 5 February, regarding the response to question on notice 85, and page 45 of the transcript from the annual report hearings for the Standing Committee on Environment, Planning, Transport and City Services on 11 February. If there is anything missing from that information that has not been addressed from the questions that Ms Clay asked, I will provide further information tomorrow.

MS CLAY: Minister, I do not believe we have ever had any information on when public consultation was done. I suspect there may also be some other gaps in that information.

MR SPEAKER: You can take that up directly with the minister. Thank you.

Caretaker Conventions—Select Committee Membership

MR SPEAKER: I have been notified in writing of the following nominations for membership of the Select Committee on Caretaker Conventions: Ms Castley, Mr Rattenbury and Mr Werner-Gibbings.

Motion (by **Ms Cheyne**) agreed to:

That the Members so nominated be appointed as members of the Select Committee on Caretaker Conventions.

Light rail stage 2A—construction impact

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (3.01): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

(a) on 6 June 2018, a motion was agreed in this Chamber, noting:

- (i) the Government acknowledges that these are significant construction projects which have caused disruption to local businesses and community, but will have significant community and business benefit when completed;
- (ii) the ACT Government provided funding to the Canberra Business Chamber for the Light Rail Business Link program which provided ongoing communications, industry collaboration and business

- support programs, to mitigate impacts to business along the light rail corridor; and
- (iii) focused business support was provided including:
- (A) installing new temporary signage around the construction zone to direct pedestrians to local businesses;
 - (B) social media promotion involving producing and hosting video clips of individual local businesses, banners and promotional signage;
 - (C) contracting local businesses as preferred providers for event catering, flu immunisation and participant rewards, e.g. free coffee at a local cafe for attending the light rail tour; and
 - (D) removing fencing as soon as possible to allow for improved pedestrian amenity and street appeal;
- (b) on 31 July 2019, a motion was agreed in this Chamber, noting:
- (i) the original business case for Light Rail Stage 1 promised to deliver a net economic benefit to the ACT community;
 - (ii) in response to an Assembly resolution on 6 June 2018, the Government tabled a report entitled *Business Impact Assessment of ACT Government-led construction activities in Gungahlin* in September 2018, which included lessons learnt that could be implemented to reduce impacts to businesses during future construction projects; and
 - (iii) the Light Rail Project Delivery report published in June 2019 provided the initial post-implementation review of the City to Gungahlin light rail, including assessing and reporting on key lessons learnt;
- (2) further notes that:
- (a) works associated with Light Rail Stage 2A Extension will lead to road closures around the western side of London Circuit for up to three years;
 - (b) these closures have already had an adverse impact on local businesses, including:
 - (i) a drop in trade by up to 40 percent;
 - (ii) noise pollution;
 - (iii) dust generation because of construction activities;
 - (iv) limited access for foot traffic, including inadequate accessibility for wheelchairs, prams etc; and
 - (v) reduction of road access and nearby parking; and
 - (c) these closures have also adversely impacted access to the Magistrates Court and City Police Station; and
- (3) calls on the Government to:
- (a) incorporate lessons learnt from the previous stage of light rail construction, for Stage 2A and all future stages;
 - (b) consider adjusting all rates, fees, and other charges to businesses in the vicinity of construction who have been adversely affected, proportionate to the impact of construction, especially where the benefit of a licence or

permit is diminished, for example, outdoor dining permits;

- (c) provide a quarterly report to the Assembly on all business consultation, including what consultation occurs, who attends, issues raised, and outcomes; and
- (d) include words to the effect of “London Circuit is open for business” in future advertising of the Light Rail Stage 2A Extension.

Today I am bringing forward this motion as I have heard from many businesses that they are doing it tough. They have seen a dramatic drop in trade, and it is simply due to the government’s actions. Light rail construction has had a devastating effect on their ability to operate their business.

Today we are going to talk about the businesses impacted by the road closures on London Circuit. All of us here would be very familiar with a lot of the businesses along London Circuit. These businesses include restaurants, cafes, bars, law firms, hairdressers, barbers, recruitment agencies, dry cleaners, and a whole bunch of other businesses. These businesses employ a range of staff, from waiters and chefs to solicitors, receptionists, and the like. For any one of these businesses, there is a real person relying on an income—for people to put food on the table for their families; for students who are studying, to pay their way through university; or maybe it is supporting an up-and-coming entrepreneur. They offer employment opportunities that contribute to a stable and thriving local economy. All of these businesses also provide a service to the community.

When government limit their ability to operate at full capacity, their employees’ ability to support themselves and their families is limited. They are also depriving customers and clients of their services. I recall having a very similar conversation in the chamber back in 2018, and again twice in 2019. It feels a little bit like history repeating itself. In 2018, our government acknowledged that their construction had an impact on local businesses and the community, to the point that the government responded to business owners’ cries for help by installing new and free signage to direct pedestrians to local businesses. There was social media promotion of individual local businesses and the production of banners and promotional signage. The government even contracted local businesses as preferred providers for events, flu vaccinations and participant rewards. And the government’s goal was to remove the fencing as soon as possible. It is clear to me that the government accepted responsibility for the impact that their construction had on local businesses back in 2018, so why not now?

Something that I am curious about is that, during stage 1 of construction, the government worked with the Canberra Business Chamber to engage with businesses. They did this through the Light Rail Business Link Program. The program provided a platform for businesses to raise their concerns and issues. Areas which business owners believed the ACT government could improve on included financial support and compensations for revenue loss, working with landlords to hold rent prices during construction, better signage and fewer road closures, just to name a few. These issues were captured in the government’s business impact assessment, which was the result of one of my motions back in 2018. What is more, the *City to Gungahlin light rail project delivery report* said:

The ACT Government will incorporate these findings when planning for future

construction activities ...

Why, then, are these lessons that were learnt not being implemented today?

We have heard from the Minister for Transport that any support to businesses will be non-financial in nature, but that is one of the main issues that businesses raised—financial support and compensation for revenue loss—and the government committed to implement the feedback provided.

Last month, the *Canberra Times* referenced the Canberra Business Chamber Chief Executive, Greg Harford, as saying:

... it was “really important” affected businesses were given good support from the ACT government.

He went on to say:

We have suggested that the best option would be some form of relief from rates and land taxes during the period of construction.

However, the government has ruled out any financial compensation for businesses impacted by the government’s light rail construction, despite there being provisions under the Financial Management Act that allow for government support in the form of waivers and other discounts. Why consult with the Canberra Business Chamber, why ask for feedback, why document lessons learnt, and why tell the community you will do things differently if you are just going to repeat the same old mistakes?

Businesses in Gungahlin and Mitchell are still reeling from the devastating impact that the construction had on them during stage 1 of light rail, and many of them have closed. Now we are just starting to see the same issues affecting businesses in the city. Businesses are seeing a 40 per cent drop in their trade. They have to deal with dust and noise pollution on a daily basis. We are also seeing limited access by foot traffic and inadequate access for people in wheelchairs and with prams, and we are seeing road closures and nearby parking fenced off.

Let’s explore the drop in trade for just a minute. Business is already seeing a drop in trade of 40 per cent. Imagine the compounded effect over three years. That sustained and compounding loss is going to take its toll. Even if they make it through three years of construction, the likelihood of a business recouping that compounding 40 per cent loss each year for three years is going to be highly unlikely.

Yesterday, the Minister for Transport said that construction workers attending local businesses will make up for the losses in trade. Will the construction workers be getting their hair cut on a weekly basis? Will they be getting their dry cleaning done every second day? Will they be visiting the physio and also solicitors? Somehow I do not think so. Let’s be honest, construction workers who might grab a burger or a sandwich for lunch are not going to make up for the 40 per cent drop in trade. What we are seeing is local businesses being gutted. It is clear to me that the government continues to leave a trail of destruction for local businesses along the light rail corridor. This started in Gungahlin, and I fear that it will continue all the way to Tuggeranong.

Local businesses are the backbone of our economy. Not only do they provide local jobs; they also drive innovation and growth. When local businesses are doing well, the business owners normally invest back into their business, and this investment drives more innovation and growth, which is, overall, beneficial for our local economy. Further to this, money spent locally is circulated locally. When we spend money at a local restaurant or cafe, those business owners typically buy their supplies locally, and this further boosts our local economy. These are just some of the reasons businesses are our hope for a better Canberra.

The minister said that they are running a large-scale communications and advertising campaign, but he said the key message is to avoid the impacted area. That is why our final call-on message is to tell people that London Circuit is still open for business. We support development and we want to see development happen and we want to see Canberra grow, but the reality is that the government have to take responsibility for the impacts of their light rail construction on local businesses. These businesses are having a massive drop in trade. They are being affected simply due to lack of access and lack of parking, and it is a direct result of the government and light rail construction, so the government needs to take responsibility for it and provide support for these businesses to help them get through it.

That is why I am calling on the government to incorporate the lessons learnt from stage 1 to stage 2A of light rail construction. I want them to look at the value for money that local businesses are getting for all the rates, fees, government charges and licensing that they are paying, be open and transparent about any issues that are being raised by local businesses, and look at how they plan on addressing these concerns. And, as I have already said, I want the government to change their advertising campaign and include words such as: “London Circuit is still open for business.” Their current campaign, saying to avoid the area, sends the wrong message.

I am asking the government to have the integrity to honour their undertakings and support the businesses impacted by this light rail construction. Canberra business owners expect the government to take responsibility, because the government have impacted their ability to earn a living. The ACT government need to lift their standards because Canberra deserves better.

MR STEEL (Murrumbidgee—Treasurer, Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, Minister for Heritage and Minister for Transport) (3.12): I am pleased to speak on this motion and what the government is doing to support businesses, as we undertake this major city-shaping infrastructure work that is occurring in the public realm, particularly on the eastern and western sides of London Circuit.

Labor built light rail, and we have already seen the positive outcomes from light rail stage 1. We are now getting on with the job of bringing it south, and that does mean it needs to move through the southern part of our central business district. The other parts of the alignment, all the way down to Woden, do not have a significant interaction with businesses in the same way that stage 2A does.

Already the next stage to Commonwealth Park is bringing the city closer to the lake, changing what was a busy road interchange, at the corner of London Circuit and Commonwealth Avenue, into a place that is welcoming for visitors, residents,

businesses and commuters. This is part of a long-term vision for the city, with the CBD shifting south, providing greater commercial opportunities and opportunities for greater connections through our city.

In my update to the Assembly earlier today, I touched on the work that we have undertaken to ensure that the Canberra community, and our local businesses, have the information that they need to navigate the city during the construction of light rail stage 2A. Whilst light rail stage 2A will bring many benefits to Canberra, I have acknowledged for a long time that construction work will cause some disruption to nearby businesses, which is exactly why ongoing engagement and consultation will remain at the core of this project as it progresses.

Our priority is to help minimise disruption by communicating early and often. We started engaging with businesses along the alignment from as early as 2019, surveying city businesses on their needs and priorities for when construction starts, and those businesses have known that our government has been committed to this project for a very long time. Extensive engagement also took place during the works approval and development application processes during 2023, and the feedback received informed the final design of the project. We undertook extensive engagement during the works approval and development application phases of the project during 2023 to evaluate the potential impacts to business, and we published a summary of the plan to mitigate these impacts as part of the project's works approval.

Since the construction contract was signed in 2023, Infrastructure Canberra has conducted over 220 door-knocking events and have met with hundreds of business owners, over time, to ensure that they are well informed of the project. Additionally, representatives from Infrastructure Canberra continue to meet with local business owners to understand any concerns that they may have in relation to the construction works. Infrastructure Canberra is working with Canberra Metro to communicate with stakeholders along the stage 2A alignment about the upcoming works and the impacts that they may have, which, as I have noted earlier in the Assembly, may change over time as the construction program moves through various phases. As works are completed across the alignment, sections of London Circuit will be reopened to support and maintain local access through the area.

We will continue to include stage 2A works information through the *Light rail construction update monthly look ahead*, which is a newsletter that provides information on upcoming works, potential traffic closures and alternative traffic, cycling and pedestrian routes, with distribution to businesses within the construction footprint and through online publication. This information is now available through a new interactive construction map, published on the builtforcbr.act.gov.au website.

On top of ensuring Canberrans can easily navigate to businesses within the city, we have also implemented several measures to ensure businesses were actively engaged and communicated with in the lead up to and throughout the construction period. A city construction information group was created for the project in July 2024 as a forum for construction information to be shared with impacted stakeholders throughout the life of the project. Meetings with this group are held every two months and the latest group meeting was attended by over 20 business owners and allowed for some great suggestions and feedback to be given to the project team. Feedback from the community

and businesses on these works will continue to inform how the project can be delivered as construction starts.

Following feedback, we have already improved accessibility around the construction zones, ensuring there is sufficient wayfinding for people using wheelchairs; adjusted traffic arrangement near Bailey's Corner to maintain a loading zone for businesses in the area; added more wayfinding signs to ensure people can locate the businesses that they want to visit, as well as the ACT courts and police station; and improved our variable message boards strategy to ensure that drivers and cyclists can easily find their way around with the traffic changes. Infrastructure Canberra is also engaging closely with business owners within Bailey's Corner area regarding the closure of the eastern section of London Circuit to general traffic from next Wednesday. Infrastructure Canberra is working with these business owners, alongside Canberra Metro, and Transport Canberra and City Services as well, to ensure appropriate access is maintained for delivery drivers and employees for all businesses.

The ACT government has also developed a Business Partnership Plan specific to the light rail stage 2A project, and that plan is publicly available. The Business Partnership Plan outlines a broad range of initiatives that the ACT government will undertake with eligible businesses, from information sharing and wayfinding through to cleaning and area beautification, catering, business card drops and local procurement opportunities. This was a direct result of the learnings from the first stage of light rail. The business impacts from that were evaluated and this Partnership Plan was developed, which supports initiatives and learnings from that project.

Infrastructure Canberra is already implementing a number of measures under the Partnership Plan to support businesses during the construction phase: dedicated business relationship managers for the project who are directly in touch with city businesses near the construction site and available to them for assistance; wayfinding maps and information have been provided to businesses to share with their staff and clients; communications encouraging local cafes and suppliers to provide takeaway menus and business cards that are placed in the construction site offices and project offices to encourage, of course, the hundreds of people working on these projects to use our local businesses which do remain open during the construction period; and encouraging Canberra Metro staff to use local businesses impacted by construction. We know that whilst—and I did not say, by the way, and I want to correct the record on this—I never said that this would completely make up for the impacts on businesses, but it certainly will help to have hundreds of workers from the project in the city getting a coffee, getting food from local services and potentially using other services.

Infrastructure Canberra is also collaborating with the City Renewal Authority in considering activation initiatives to attract customers to the area during construction and ensure the area remains active, attractive, safe and easy to navigate for the community. This engagement will continue for the duration of the project to ensure business owners are heard and represented during this period of disruption. The government is also continuing to investigate additional support measures based on business feedback, lessons learned from stage 1 of light rail and best practice from other light rail projects around Australia.

In accordance with the *Business partnership policy - ACT government major projects*,

the ACT government does not make direct financial payments to businesses affected by the construction of public infrastructure, nor does the ACT government provide payment relief in relation to rates, taxes, rents or other charges payable to the ACT government. This was the case for both stage 1 and stage 2 of light rail, so the claim by Mr Milligan that we made a commitment to provide a waiver of these rates, taxes and rents is simply wrong. It has never been a position of the ACT government to do that, and one of the reasons for that is because many of the businesses along the alignment do not pay these taxes which the opposition has called on us to waive. They are often tenants within a building that is owned by a lessee that pays the taxes, the CIL to the CRA, or, indeed, other rates and charges that the ACT government has. So that is one of the reasons why we are not considering providing a waiver of those. That is not to say that there could not be other practical measures put forward by business that we would consider on a case-by-case basis as they put them forward. Through our Disruption Taskforce and our other arms of government, we will continue to consider a range of initiatives raised by business, such as assisting with parking, product deliveries and transport to ensure that their needs are met.

There is also the opportunity for entities within the construction footprint who currently pay contributions towards the City Centre Marketing and Improvements Levy, the CCMIL levy, which I referred to before, to engage positively with the City Renewal Authority as to how the levy could be spent within the precinct during the construction period to assist during this period. But as I said before, not all the businesses in the area are paying that levy. It is often other organisations who, of course, may be significant beneficiaries in terms of an unearned windfall gain as a result of the construction of the light rail project in the future, who are paying for some of those levies.

So London Circuit is open for business, and it will be open to even more business opportunities because ACT Labor is unlocking the potential by delivering light rail. Already we have seen investments by the private sector, where there has been commitment to purchase land in the area and to invest in significant mixed use precincts, with more businesses that will move into the area around the extension of the light rail line. That has created more space within the CBD for the CBD to expand and to have more business opportunity and more jobs created, which will reinvigorate this part of Canberra, just as we saw the regeneration of parts along the line of light rail stage 1. The motion moved by Mr Milligan notes the *Light rail project delivery report* published in June 2019. This report commented that redevelopment of the corridor, particularly Northbourne Avenue, was already attracting new businesses and commercial operations prior to operations commencing.

I would also draw the Assembly's attention to the more recent reports on the benefits realisation of light rail in stage 1. The *City to Gungahlin light rail benefits realisation — snapshot*, which was tabled in the Assembly in May 2020, found in the first year of operation there had been a consistent increase in footfall along the corridor, including in Civic, Dickson and Gungahlin, indicating higher commercial activity. And particularly for Mr Milligan's electorate of Yerrabi, the report found that Gungahlin had maintained a steady growth in the number of businesses throughout the construction period. The *Light rail five years on: benefits realisation report 2024*, which I tabled in the Assembly in May 2024, found that in the years that followed, business growth had increased by 26.4 per cent in Gungahlin and 19.7 per cent in the city suburbs along the corridor.

So we will be supporting today's motion by Mr Milligan. I should be clear to the Assembly that the ACT government is committed to supporting Canberra's business owners. We will continue to work to provide them with the support that they need now, and getting on with the work to provide them with the known benefits delivered by light rail. What is not clear is what exactly the Canberra Liberals bring to the table as their alternative plan to unlock comparable commercial opportunities for Canberra's CBD through to Lake Burley Griffin. Mr Milligan said he supported development. But the Liberals do not support light rail, so they do not support the development. We do. We want that commercial opportunity for our city. We want that transport opportunity for our city.

I note that while today's motion is worthwhile, it should be acknowledged that what we are agreeing to is, vastly, already the government's policy. It is a domain of accepted and agreed government policy and I encourage the Liberals to support light rail and the businesses, who also recognise the benefits of this project in the long term. We will continue to support them through the construction of this city-shaping project, and I look forward to continuing to update the Assembly as we get on with this city-shaping infrastructure.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (3.27): I rise to speak in support of this motion. Public transport investment is critical to a modern, connected and sustainable city. I know many Canberrans are looking forward to improved public transport options, as they have for some time. While supporting ambitious infrastructure projects, I will take this opportunity to add my voice to those sharing concerns about the impact that this project will have on small businesses during the construction phase.

For years businesses in Civic, particularly in and around London Circuit, have been grappling with the challenges of a pandemic, post pandemic recovery, high cost of living and of doing business, reductions in office day foot traffic and impediments to building a vibrant night-time economy. And yet these businesses have continued contributing to our community and to our city's economy. Now they face years of direct disruption, road closures, reduced foot traffic and uncertainty about how their businesses will survive. What is concerning is that, as the minister indicated in his remarks, the government and, indeed, every resident of our territory, has known about this stage of light rail for a very long time. Yet, as construction begins in earnest, it seems clear that businesses are not satisfied with the level of support being stood up to help them survive this disruption.

It is well known that disruption from major infrastructure projects can force small businesses to close if governments do not step up with real support. Our small business community is already doing it tough. The ACT has the highest small business failure rate in the country, meaning many of these businesses are walking a financial tightrope. Yes, we do also have the highest rate of new businesses, which is a sign of the willingness of people in our community to back themselves, but we need our government to back them as well. Statistics aside, each business closure has a significant human impact. For people who have poured savings, effort and belief into turning an idea into a business and to express a high degree of autonomy over their working lives, to then have that autonomy stripped and those efforts put to waste can be heartbreaking.

We know that the level of poor mental health amongst small business owners in our community is alarming, but this does not seem to be taken seriously, perhaps on the mistaken assumption that every small business owner is well off and doing all right. We also know that our small business population is ageing. Relatively fewer young people feel pulled to start their own business. We can counteract this trend with a government that sees itself as a partner for small business owners, ready and willing to work with them by providing practical solutions to help customers keep coming through their doors. That is why I support Mr Milligan's calls for immediate action.

Waiting for business owners to ask for help, as the minister has indicated, as part of the plan, is not good enough. We need a proper support package, beyond assurances of ongoing engagement with affected businesses and of providing information. We can be ambitious about Canberra's future without expecting small business owners, members of our community, to weather another storm alone. Without meaningful action, we risk seeing more empty shopfronts and lost livelihoods in one of our most iconic business districts. I do tend to agree with the government's claims that business will be better when these works are complete, but, in the meantime, let us avoid complacency when it comes to supporting our small business community. I thank Mr Milligan again for moving this motion and I support it.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (3.31): Light rail is a city-defining project that will help Canberrans move all the way from the Gungahlin town centre to the lake by 2028, but we in the ACT Greens would like it to go further and faster to cover the whole city, expediting a route to Woden and starting a plan to reach between Belconnen and the airport. We would also like to see it extended to Mawson and eventually the Tuggeranong town centre.

The benefits remain enormous: smooth, reliable, near-silent transport that is accessible to all Canberrans; the ability to move lots of people at once to school, university, work and special events; they can become the backbone of a denser city where more services are available within minutes from your door, giving you back time in your day to enjoy with your family and friends. If it is a liveable Canberra that we want, we need to continue to invest in light rail, much as the world's most liveable cities have already done. Of the top 20 cities identified by the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2025 Global Liveability Index, only one city in that top 20, Wellington, does not have some form of light rail system. The rest have light rail, metro systems and suburban rail as core to their public transport system.

The process of building light rail inevitably means there will be some disruption, and I want to acknowledge the businesses that, while knowing this disruption will not last forever, may be worried about what that means for their business during the period of construction. As the ACT Greens member for Yerrabi, local businesses have told me that during the construction phase there were definite impacts to their trading, but that, once operational, light rail has been a real boom to their business and that they have seen better footfall than prior to the Gungahlin-City light rail stage 1 opening. So I hope those businesses that are identifying a change in their sales pattern within the Civic area will see a pick up in footfall and business in the way that it did for many businesses along the existing light rail stage 1 route.

As Mr Milligan outlines, we should, of course, take the lessons from the earlier stages of light rail and ensure these are incorporated into stage 2A and, of course, make all businesses as accessible as possible to everyone, including people with mobility issues or people with prams. It would also be helpful to ensure the government ensures any business consultation is followed up when an outcome is delivered, where possible. The ACT government should also work with the business community to assist in promoting businesses along the route, reminding people that they remain open and ready for custom. Perhaps Mr Milligan and I can also support those businesses and go for a coffee or lunch together in one of those identified businesses. The construction and operation of light rail systems—

Mr Milligan: What a date!

MR BRADDOCK: You are not my type!—will continue to bring significant economic benefits to Canberra. The building phase itself creates jobs and boosts local businesses, from construction workers to local suppliers, with significant funding from federal government. Once operational, light rail will continue to support the local economy by providing affordable, reliable transport options for workers, students and tourists. Additionally, the infrastructure investment and continued urban development will attract further investment in Canberra, creating even more job opportunities in the long run.

While the ACT Greens lead the way, it is a positive sign that all parties are uniting and wanting to increase bus numbers and driver recruitment, allowing for a more regular and reliable bus network to help service that Civic centre area. I also look forward to hearing regular updates from Mr Steel on how that is progressing.

Looking ahead, light rail can be more than just the jewel of our motorised transport system. It can be the start of a new way of thinking of how we get around in Canberra. Imagine a city where public transport is fast, green and accessible; where more people are able to live closer to work and amenities, reducing their reliance on private cars. Light rail will help drive a more sustainable, connected and prosperous Canberra, an excellent foundation for business success. As we continue to expand the light rail network, we are on track for a truly future-ready city that will be an even better place to live.

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (3.35): I rise to speak to this motion in my capacity as Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries. The ACT government understands the significant contribution local businesses make to the economy. Small business is at the heart of our strong and diverse economy, creating jobs and driving investment in our city. Thanks to the ACT government's economic diversification agenda over the past decade, Canberra is no longer just a government town. Today, Canberra has more than 36,000 businesses and around 70 per cent of employment in our city, and 97 per cent of our businesses are small businesses employing fewer than 20 people. Together, these small businesses generate approximately \$22 billion to the annual sales and service income in the territory. In addition to their contribution to our economy, small businesses are an integral component in building and maintaining a sense of community in the city. Local

businesses support many of our local community and sporting organisations through sponsorships and promotions in both direct financial terms and through in-kind donations and contributions.

In addition to the dedicated supports relating to the light rail stage 2A works that Minister Steel has just outlined, the ACT government also provides a range of programs aimed specifically at helping local businesses, which are also available to the businesses being discussed today. We know that businesses want their interactions with government to be as simple and accessible as possible. This is why we have put in place a number of initiatives to improve the way we communicate with business to make sure they can get the right information as easily as possible. For example, the ACT Business Hub is regularly updated to provide accessible and current information, bringing together both ACT government and Australian government information, where relevant.

The CBR business newsletter is sent to over 9,000 businesses and provides news about grants, events and programs for business. Some supports are targeted at specific cohorts within our business community. For example, the Badji program supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT wanting to start or grow a business, providing culturally appropriate support to access mentoring and coaching, coworking office space and resources, and connections with existing ecosystem programs.

We also have programs in place specifically designed to support small to medium businesses by providing targeted advice and support. The Access Canberra Business Assist Team provides tailored support to businesses to assist business operators with permits, licences and approvals needed to start or grow their business. The Business Assist Team provides local businesses with a single, initial contact point in government, and the team works across government to connect businesses with appropriate teams that can assist them with their specific matters. This team is committed to a high quality of customer service and it always try to ensure businesses are provided with assistance that is personalised, timely, professional and easy to understand.

Since commencement of the program in July 2023, more than 400 businesses have been supported through this service. The Canberra Business Advice and Support Service provides Canberra-based businesses with up to four hours of cost-free business planning, financial advice, marketing and growth strategies, and legal referrals. Since establishing in July 2023, it has worked with more than 420 business clients, providing advice and guidance on all manner of business inquiries. Businesses at any stage of their journey can benefit from this advice, whether they are just starting, standing up or even winding down.

CBASS can support businesses in establishing solid foundations. This includes guidance and advice regarding business structures, business insurances, employment requirements and financial disciplines. It can also provide guidance on how to: navigate financial pressures; manage cash flow; diversify their offering; market their businesses; and how to manage payment plans with suppliers and debtors. This support service was originally established as a COVID support measure, so it is well experienced in supporting businesses to navigate uncertain and challenging times. This includes strategies to diversify income sources; respond to downturns in customer demand and spending; and pivot to complementary sales and marketing strategies, including e-

commerce, online sales and search engine optimisation. We have consistently heard from the business community that this program is highly valued, in particular they appreciate the personalised, practical and actionable advice.

The current business environment is certainly not without its challenges. The inflationary environment we have seen for the past few years is easing, but its impacts are still being felt, particularly in sectors that rely on discretionary spending. Other factors, like city-building infrastructure projects—like light rail—can also present disruptions in the short term while providing long-term benefit to local businesses and our broader community. I am confident the ACT government has the right supports in place to support businesses to manage and overcome these challenges and to enable them to continue to thrive.

MS CASTLEY (Yerrabi—Leader of the Opposition) (3.41): I rise to speak in support of Mr Milligan’s motion today and to thank him, and also the other members who have spoken today, for supporting business here in the ACT. Can you imagine what it is like to have a business in the centre of Canberra? You have had three years of closures and interruptions from COVID. You have had the loss of business as many city workers went hybrid or remote, and then you have had the surge of inflation, interest rates and ACT government taxes over the past few years, coinciding with the tightest labour market in memory. And just now, when it looks like you might be starting to get through the worst of it, the government gives a few weeks’ notice that they are closing your street for years of roadworks.

This is the reality facing some of the businesses in this area; businesses that you can literally see from the steps of the Assembly. You would think that the Minister for Business would be all over this: that he would be hitting the pavement, that he would be talking to every business owner who had time for a chat to figure out what the government could do to soften the blow and make life a bit easier. But you would be wrong, because the Minister for Business has been invisible on this topic. He has reeled off stats—which you can quickly access on websites—and talks of systems in place to tell businesses to pivot, but none of the businesses I know, or I have spoken to, have heard from him. None of them believe that he understands what they are going through or that he is doing anything to keep the doors open.

As we saw in question time yesterday, he does not even want to take questions about the businesses on and around London Circuit. He does not want to talk about what the government is doing for business because they are not doing enough for these businesses in London Circuit. They have talked of consultation, and, yes, it has happened to a few businesses. Some businesses are lucky enough to have a phone number direct to a group who will answer their calls, but some of the businesses Mr Milligan and I door-knocked had no idea that London Circuit was closing.

To be clear, this motion today is not a light rail motion. It is not a transport motion. It is all about business. You would expect the business minister to be the one to respond and come to the rescue of the businesses he is supposed to represent. It is just not good enough. We ought to be a city that rewards innovation, that rewards risk taking and those who do take a chance to deliver something valuable for the community, whether it is something transformative or something as simple as ensuring people can get a cup of coffee on their way into work. Instead we are a city where these things are taken for

granted, where businesses are nothing more than cash cows for the government that has run out of money and has run out of ideas.

When people walk past the boarded-up shopfronts that we see in Civic, and all around Canberra, or when they wonder why so many of their favourite small businesses have disappeared, they ought to reflect on how we have gotten to this point, because it is not just bad luck, it is bad government. It is what you get from a government that does not just ignore business but is actively hostile to them. One of the business owners said they believe they are being treated with contempt—of course, unless you are a special mate of the Chief Minister, like Geocon or Macquarie Bank!

Business is not just an abstract concept. It is people. It is people with ideas, people with vision and people who are willing to take a chance, who try to contribute something great to our community. It is all about the risks that they are willing to take on, and you see this in every interaction that you have with every small business around Canberra whether it is your sparky that does your electrics, or your plumber that you need to call in the middle of the night sometime, or the cafe owner making your coffee, or the vet who is taking care of your cute little puppy dog. When you turn your back on business, you are turning your back on people, the people who want to build something, and the people who reap the benefits of what is built for them. The Canberra business community deserves so much better than what they get from Labor. We all do. I commend Mr Milligan's motion.

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (3.46): I am reflecting on the annual report hearings with the City Renewal Authority and the Chief Minister, in his capacity as the minister with responsibility for city renewal, under his Chief Minister portfolio. I want to thank Mr Milligan for bringing this motion forward, particularly the “calls on” that consider the imposition of the taxes that these businesses are paying and what happens when they are not able to use some parts of what they are paying a tax for. That seems like an obvious thing to address. With the loss of business, it is about whether they deserve some support from the government.

I explored this with the City Renewal Authority, and I was pretty surprised that Mr Barr said, “Acts of grace and waivers of taxes are in the Treasurer's domain.” This was the Chief Minister speaking. I thought that the lack of concern for those businesses, by an authority that is there to renew the city, was very surprising and very disappointing.

It is called the City Renewal Authority; perhaps, under its minister, it should be called the “city degradation authority”—not CRA but CDA. We might work on that one and see whether his policies really support the name of this authority that he is responsible for.

It is interesting that we are getting some support from across the floor, which is always very good. I do hope that the minister's support for this motion is real and is actioned. We—I am sure, Mr Milligan—will be watching closely to see whether there is real action following this support; or is it just to say, “Of course, we support businesses,” and then nothing changes? We will be watching.

I will make a brief point on something that the transport minister and Treasurer said. He said, “Some of these crown lessees have tenants; who would you reimburse for

this?” That is not really a hard thing to work out, because these costs are passed on. The loss of business is something that the tenant bears.

If the Crown lessee somehow recognises that themselves, you should have a discussion with them and work out who is bearing the real cost of the loss of business. I am sure that, in most cases, it would be the tenant. It is not complicated to work out who you would give relief to, if that was something they were really willing to do.

I call out again to the minister responsible for the City Renewal Authority to take some action on this. He is also the Chief Minister. He should take action to support this. It is not just the Treasurer’s decision. It is not just the finance minister’s decision. It is not just the transport minister’s decision. The Chief Minister needs to own this, and be true to the name that he carries as the minister with responsibility for the City Renewal Authority; or, indeed, should it be retitled the “city degradation authority”?

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (3.50), in reply: I want to start by thanking Ms Castley and Mr Cain for their support today, as well as Mr Emerson. Mr Braddock is back; thank you for your support today. Maybe we can organise lunch at Mezzalira.

Mr Cain: I’ll come.

MR MILLIGAN: A show of hands: does anyone want to go along?

Mr Pettersson and Mr Steel, thank you for your support today. We all in this place talk about this building having integrity and accountability, and it is great to see that this chamber is acting on those principles today. It is really good to see that. We certainly look forward to hearing the different reports that will be coming through from the consultations. We also look forward to having the government build better relationships with business, to better represent them and help them through this period.

We all advocate for business. We want to see business be successful. Certainly, these actions will be a step towards ensuring that these businesses might have more hope of staying open and supporting their employees; they can then put food on their table and keep the lights on.

Once again, I thank everyone in the chamber for supporting this motion. Let us hope that these businesses can survive for three years and still be open after that.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Aged care—Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre

MS CASTLEY (Yerrabi—Leader of the Opposition) (3.52): Together with Ms Carrick, I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

- (a) respite care is a critical element in the aged care service offering, supporting aging Canberrans and their carers so that they can remain in

- their homes for as long as possible;
- (b) respite care also supports other Canberrans exiting hospital that may not be ready to return home;
 - (c) there is a critical shortage of respite capacity in the Canberra region, with demand increasing as the population ages;
 - (d) the Burrangiri Respite Centre in Rivett is operated by the Salvation Army with funding from ACT Health. This centre offers 15 beds as well as day program places;
 - (e) unlike most other aged care respite facilities, Burrangiri accepts people with dementia and does not require ACAT assessments; and
 - (f) the Minister for Health has announced that the Burrangiri Respite Centre was not fit for purpose and would close on 30 June 2025, but has not provided any information about alternative services that will be available after that date; and
- (2) calls on the Government to:
- (a) provide all documents and briefings regarding the effectiveness and suitability of the Burrangiri Respite Centre, including details of estimates for retrofitting the facility;
 - (b) provide information about alternative facilities, including those that are capable of meeting the demand currently serviced by the Burrangiri Respite Centre; and
 - (c) extend the contract with the Salvation Army and delay the closure of the Burrangiri Respite Centre until equivalent alternative respite care capacity is available.

I thank our co-sponsor of this motion, Ms Carrick, and I thank the many constituents who have been in contact with us, spoken to us, from all over Canberra. It was a big issue during the Canberra Show; we had many people come up to us there. Also, we have received many emails. This issue has certainly touched a nerve.

It is easy to see why people feel so frustrated. They do not understand what the government is doing or why. They do not feel heard, or that the government is interested in their concerns. They do not know why the obvious, sensible solution is being ignored. Who wouldn't feel frustrated?

There is no doubt that, when families need respite care, Burrangiri is top of mind. The services they provide are spoken of widely in our community. They may need help for a loved one who is suffering with dementia, and where the carer needs respite, or help with caring duties whilst getting medical treatment themselves. There are day visits as well. This is a service that will leave a massive gap in care for Canberrans, all because the government has said that the building is too old.

Let me make it clear: the people who use the facility have no concerns about the age of the building. It is functional, it is clean, it is sunny, and it has a lovely, welcoming feel. People can leave their loved ones at this facility, knowing that they will get wonderful care. It is also important to point out that the majority of those people who leave Burrangiri are exiting the health system; 90 per cent of them, I believe, get back home. That means they are not going back into the public system, and they are reducing the

burden on our already struggling health system.

The community believe that there is also a deeper concern that this is a sign of how Labor intend to operate this term. Clearly, they want to cut jobs, they want to cut services and they want to sell off community assets, all to help with the government's diabolical fiscal situation. But they do not want to front up to the community about it. They do not want to admit that years of fiscal mismanagement have led to this, and they do not want to suffer the consequences of their actions. It is no way for a government to operate, and it is no way for a leader to behave.

I call on Labor to do the right thing, and to change the course on Burrangiri, at least until an agreeable permanent solution is in place. If they are not willing to do the right thing and change course, they should come out of hiding and explain their decision. That is only fair.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (3.55): I rise to speak about the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre motion. Burrangiri supports carers and the person being cared for, and we need to keep it. We need to care for our carers. Since the Minister for Health announced her decision last month to close the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre in Rivett, I have been contacted by many constituents who are dismayed that the ACT government has decided to close such a vital facility, apparently without any plan to address the shortfall in capacity this closure will cause. I have heard of the struggles Canberrans have faced in finding respite care and the relief they have felt when discovering that they were able to access care at Burrangiri without months-long waiting lists or needing to go through an ACAT assessment. I have heard about the critical role the respite care offered at Burrangiri has played in supporting carers, enabling ageing Canberrans they care for to stay in their homes for as long as possible.

I understand that Burrangiri is, for many people, the only short-term respite care option available and that, should it close, there are no alternatives currently available. As well as removing a critical support for carers, a possible outcome of the closure of Burrangiri will be increased demand for hospital services, which is an unwelcome outcome. I have also heard that, while the building is not new, the facilities at Burrangiri are unmatched in the ACT and the care provided is widely regarded as excellent. Jenny Mobbs, the CEO of the Council on the Ageing ACT, tells me that Burrangiri is ideal for maintaining community engagement and enhancing wellbeing for many Canberrans, including those with health issues or a dementia diagnosis. She also said that there are very few places in Canberra where respite is available without a long wait. I understand that there is a chronic shortage of respite care in the Canberra region, with some residential services having a waiting list of four to six months.

The Salvation Army has advised me that Burrangiri has consistently delivered in excess of 4½ thousand overnight respite days per annum and around 140 day-centre attendances per month. On average, they admit between 25 to 30 new residents every month, with an average of two to four weeks duration. Of their overnight admissions, 40 per cent of have resulted in either reduced length of stay at hospital or hospital avoidance, which is a great benefit to the ACT healthcare system. Around 90 per cent of all admissions are safely discharged back home, which assists in the goal of residents to be able to live in their own home for as long as possible. Burrangiri is not an accredited aged-care facility. However, as an approved provider of aged-care services

across Australia, the delivery of services at Burrangiri has always been aligned with the Salvation Army's internal quality system, which ensures care is consistent with the Aged Care Quality Standards.

Feedback from ACT Health on Burrangiri's most recent performance report stated: "It was pleasing to read the comprehensive report that was submitted, highlighting the value and the extent of the services Burrangiri provides to clients. We are pleased to see your effort to maintain quality and care at Burrangiri reflected in the customer satisfaction results and compliments." That is from ACT Health.

I would like to read some talking notes from a constituent who uses the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre. It shows the passion that this issue invites in the community. The notes say: "Hi. I'm Tom Anderson, a carer. I care for my wife, Margaret, who has dementia. I have cared for her for more than 20 years. She is a user of Burrangiri. This facility is loved and cherished by carers and the person they care for. It is the only facility I know in Canberra dedicated to short-term respite. But the ACT health minister has decided it must close. She offered no consultation with those affected—no empathy, no sympathy—and no alternative location for the 5,000 days of care and overnight stays that happen each year. The minister claims Burrangiri needs to be refurbished, but where is the report? Where do carers and the person they care for go for day and overnight respite now? All we get as an answer are the vague responses: 'It's a Commonwealth responsibility' and 'ACT Health has a relationship with aged-care facilities for those leaving hospital.' These answers just don't cut it, and there is no response to carers as to where they can find short-term respite, either in the day or overnight in Canberra."

He has a solution for the minister: "Keep Burrangiri open and work with Carers ACT to build a facility, which the minister keeps talking about, and review Burrangiri when that facility is completed." He says, "Have a heart, Minister, and think of the hundreds of older people looking after those with dementia or disabilities and keep Burrangiri open to give them a break. The alternative is probably a line of older people at Canberra hospitals with their loved ones, to leave them there so they can have a break."

The closure of Burrangiri is a very emotional issue and it has a big impact on both carers and the people that need care. But why is it closing? The government claims that the building is closing because it does not meet the expected ACT government standard for this facility. The government claims that the current number of toilets and showers is insufficient for the number of residents and no rooms have an ensuite. However, the ACT government's hospital and Carers ACT facilities do not have an ensuite for each person either. We have not heard anyone complain about the building. In fact, it is bright, warm and clean. It has been repainted and recarpeted. It has a new kitchen and a new outdoor garden.

Another reason given for its closure is that it is a Commonwealth responsibility. I understand that the new Support at Home program is coming into effect on 1 July this year. However this program will not address the need for both day and short-term overnight respite care. Carers spend extremely long hours with the person they care for. One constituent who shared their experience with me spends around 150 hours out of the 168 hours in the week supporting her partner, who is at a stage where they are unable to be left alone. The support available from the Support at Home program through My

Aged Care provides around 15 hours of respite care each week, which is not adequate. This is why Burrangiri, with stays up to three weeks, is so important to carers. The Albanese government's aged-care reforms are designed to support the growing number of older Australians choosing to retain their independence and remain in their home as they age. If more people are ageing at home, there is a need for carers to have access to respite facilities, so the ACT government needs to take some responsibility to care for its carers and not simply say it is a Commonwealth responsibility, while carers become exhausted. I understand that the government is in discussions with Carers ACT about a new respite facility, but there is no confirmation of if or when this will be available.

I am sponsoring a petition which opposes the closure of the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre. It has received over 600 signatures in under three weeks, demonstrating the high level of concern in the community about the imminent loss of this critical facility. The petition requests the Assembly call on the ACT government to ensure that the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre remains open until a satisfactory alternative can be found.

We need to remember that respite care is about people. It is about looking after our ageing residents and looking after the people who care for them. It is about supporting ageing Canberrans to stay in their home for as long as possible. I believe that, while there is a critical shortage of short-term respite capacity and no arrangements are in place to address the shortfall, the contract for Burrangiri should be extended until alternative arrangements are in place.

With respect to Burrangiri, you do not know what you have until it is gone. We need to keep this facility and care for our carers. Cuts in expenditure should not be at the expense of vulnerable people in our community.

I would like to thank the people who have come along today to support the extension of the contract for the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (4.04): I want to start by thanking Ms Castley and Ms Carrick for bringing this motion to the Assembly. Also, I want to recognise the people who have joined us in the gallery today to listen to this debate. The first thing to say is that this decision is not a decision that was taken lightly and it is not a decision that was taken without consideration of the potential impact on people who would access this service. The ACT government recognises that accessing quality respite care is important for older Canberrans and their families, and it is why we are committed to improving health outcomes and community based services for older people, including through the Centre of Excellence for Care of Older Canberrans.

I also want to take the opportunity up-front to acknowledge and thank the Salvation Army and its hardworking staff at Burrangiri for their commitment to providing quality care for older Canberrans for more than three decades. Again, I can assure the Assembly that the decision to close Burrangiri from July 2025 was not made lightly. Unfortunately, it is part of the reality of being a minister that sometimes difficult decisions do need to be made. As I have made clear, the Burrangiri facility itself needs significant refurbishment which would require the respite service to close for a period of time in any case. I understand from ACT Health Directorate advice, as well as my

own conversations and meetings with the Salvation Army, that they understand and acknowledge this as well. Further significant upgrades would be needed to make the facility actually fit for purpose to continue delivering quality aged-care respite services according to modern standards in the medium to longer term.

I need to be crystal clear in saying that this is not a criticism of the Salvation Army and its staff or of the incredible care that they have provided; it is about the facility's capacity to support this work into the future. Hence, the consideration for me, in the short term, was not whether to keep the Burrangiri respite service going as it is but whether to fund a new or alternative service while the refurbishment was undertaken, also in the longer term. I and the ACT Health Directorate have spent some considerable time exploring alternatives to Burrangiri, including the potential for the ACT to fund community or residential aged-care services to provide respite accommodation through the Health Directorate. This included consideration of relocating the Burrangiri service to another suitable facility. However no suitable facility was identified by the ACT Health Directorate or, indeed, the Salvation Army in our conversations with them.

The Salvation Army's current contract is ending on 30 June 2025 this year, following a 12-month extension while all of these options were considered. I also considered a further short-term contract extension for the existing service, which I discussed with the Salvation Army. However, any further contract extension beyond that would require consideration of government procurement rules and would not provide any long-term certainty for the community or the provider. In addition, the main driver of this decision, as I said, is the need for significant refurbishment of the facility to ensure the delivery of suitable services, which is understood by the current provider, as well as recognition of the changing landscape of aged care and respite services and the role of the Commonwealth.

In part, my decision was made because an alternative service model, in the absence of a dedicated facility which we could not identify, would likely replicate a program already provided by Canberra Health Services for hospital step-down for older patients, which I will talk about a bit more in a moment. Therefore, if funding were allocated to this space, it would make sense to expand the existing arrangement rather than establish a separate service through the ACT Health Directorate.

I know that there is considerable conversation about the facility and infrastructure, and I hear what people are saying about what is seen on the surface. Our concerns largely lie behind the walls and in the physical structure of the building. Of course, the ACT Health Directorate has continued to invest in its facility while it was providing services. Of course, they had to continue to refresh things like paint, carpet and kitchens because it is an ACT Health facility and it has been providing a service, but there are some substantial challenges. The 2022 asset management plan, which I have released in response to a question on notice, identified the need for several major structural and electrical upgrades. The Health Directorate's advice to me was that the program of work would come at an estimated cost of over \$900,000 and a necessary temporary closure of the facility itself. Extending the useful life of the building and increasing its amenity for aged-care respite to modern standards would require a further significant capital investment, estimated to be in the range of \$6½ million to \$12 million, and, of course, this activity would require an even longer closure.

I am happy to provide transparency around the reasons behind this decision. I have already released the 2022 asset management plan for Burrangiri, and the ACT Health Directorate is in the process of compiling relevant documents and briefings in response to a freedom of information request for all ministerial briefs and related correspondence related to this matter from 1 January 2023. That process is currently underway.

Respite services typically exist alongside or as part of other care initiatives funded through the National Disability Insurance Scheme and My Aged Care Commonwealth funding. The Commonwealth government funds aged-care respite services as part of the aged-care system, and the advice to me is that, of Burrangiri's clients, four out of five have an ACAT assessment and are eligible for My Aged Care. Burrangiri's target cohort is people aged 65 years and over who are part of the My Aged Care system. However, because it is not an approved aged-care service under this system, Burrangiri itself—not the Salvation Army but the specific service—does not attract Commonwealth aged-care funding, even though the vast majority of clients at Burrangiri would have access to aged-care funding.

Older people can access respite for a short period of time in a number of residential aged-care homes for either planned or unplanned respite care. I recognise that, after 10 years of neglect of the residential aged-care system by the former coalition government, there has been a lack of investment in residential aged care for some years and that finding respite is challenging. But I am pleased that, under the Albanese government's reforms, we have seen significant additional investment in aged-care facilities—indeed, facilities like LDK's—which are not part of a residential aged-care system but provide support for older people, including some respite care. There are 29 residential aged-care homes in the ACT that could provide residential respite care, but I recognise that there are some challenges associated with that, and that is an ongoing conversation with the Commonwealth as well.

The Commonwealth also funds community respite services through the Commonwealth Home Support Program. This includes Carers ACT, which is funded for cottage respite and centre based day care. BaptistCare and UnitingCare are funded for centre based day-care services, and there are a number of other providers funded for flexible respite which can be provided in a person's home.

The Commonwealth and ACT government jointly fund the Transitional Therapy and Care Program, a short-term rehabilitation program for up to 12 weeks to assist eligible people 65 years and over, or 50 years and over for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, after being in hospital. The ACT is currently funded for up to 78 transitional care places: 14 residential places and 64 community places. Patients can either receive supports directly in their homes or transition via the 14-bed residential rehabilitation facility. Depending on a patient's goals and care needs, services may include: help with personal care; cleaning; shopping; transport to medical appointments; nursing support; low intensive therapy, such as physiotherapy, speech pathology or occupational therapy; or help with their diet. The ACT government has funded CAPS to provide specific support to people who are transitioning out of hospital, with support in their home for similar things, like personal care, cleaning, shopping, transport to medical appointments et cetera.

The Commonwealth government has also announced the new \$4.3 billion Support at

Home program, which will come into effect from 1 July 2025. This will improve access to services, equipment and home modifications to help older people stay at home and in their communities longer. Residential aged-care homes are providers of day and overnight respite services, which can be accessed through the Carer Gateway service in the ACT, which is run by Carers ACT. Carers ACT also provides the Staying at Home program to support carers and people living with dementia. The feedback that I have had from Carers ACT is that many people prefer flexible forms of respite, like respite in their home or, indeed, time away with their family member.

I understand the depth of feeling about this issue. I understand that it is a challenging issue. As I have said, it is a difficult conversation for me as the minister, but it is the reality of being a minister that sometimes you just have to take decisions that some people are going to find difficult. Indeed, I find it difficult.

The amendment I will move is to omit the part which calls on the ACT government to extend the Burrangiri service for all the reasons that I have given. I just do not believe it is a realistic option at this point to extend the service. As I said during question time, this conversation is creating significant uncertainty. The reason that we provided advice to the Salvation Army in January about the closure of the service at the end of June was to provide sufficient notice and support for them to transition out and to work with their staff, who I am sure will be in high demand across the sector, which is an area of skill shortage. We wanted to provide this level of certainty. I recognise why this conversation is taking place, but I also do not want to prolong uncertainty around this matter. I want to provide certainty to the Salvation Army and the staff.

I move the amendment circulated in my name:

Omit paragraph (2)(c).

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (4.17): I wish to speak in support of the motion that has been moved by Ms Castley and Ms Carrick. The ACT Greens will be supporting the motion today. In particular, we wish to see the continued operation of the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre until alternative capacity for respite care can be clearly identified. In weighing up the limitations to the current infrastructure on the one hand and on the other hand the pressures currently seen in access to respite services, we have to prioritise being able to provide adequate healthcare services to Canberrans.

Over the past few weeks, we have spoken extensively about the current pressures on the ACT health system in terms of wait times for patients to access care and the availability of various services, as well as the financial pressure caused by increasing demands on our healthcare system, particularly in the emergency area but also across a range of service demands. The ACT Greens policy response to that pressure is to want to focus more heavily on primary and preventative care—to seek to, where possible, avoid people having to attend the acute end of our healthcare system and try to get them supports closer to home, in the community, and at a lower level of care. These are things that are less costly and generally people prefer them than ending up in an acute environment.

In looking at this issue and in preparing for today's discussion, we spoke to the Salvation Army and they shared that Burrangiri has consistently delivered in excess of

4½ thousand overnight respite days per annum and around 140 day-centre attendances per month, so we can see that it is a significant provision of services. Most significantly, of their overnight admissions, 40 per cent have resulted in either reduced length of hospital stay or hospital avoidance. This presents significant benefits to those accessing aged-care services, in terms of preventing unnecessary hospitalisations and indicating better preventative health outcomes. In addition, it poses a significant benefit in alleviating pressure on the health system, which I have just spoken about.

In the most recent annual reports hearings, we heard that there is a significant number of aged-care patients who are waiting in hospital for significant periods of time to access appropriate facilities for their care requirements. Surely, given that we know we have this backlog, whilst Burrangiri may not be suitable for all patients, it will clearly continue to assist some. In the context of the sorts of pressures we are describing, we need to look for a range of potential solutions, because clearly there is no easy fix to this. If there were an easy fix, one might assume it would have been dealt with by now. So it is about taking the bits of positive contribution and making the most of them. We have seen publicly that Carers ACT have expressed that there is a lack of respite services in Canberra, with many struggling to access these services. Due to these pressures, it is difficult to understand the full rationale for the decision. The minister has talked through the considerations that she has taken into account.

We are grateful to have been able to see the asset management plan, which has been released through the question on notice, for the facility. There are a couple of really interesting features to that asset management plan. It identified that Burrangiri is compliant with all statutory obligations and there are zero assets that do not meet the Building Code. That is an important consideration. If there were findings of things that were not compliant, that is an important discussion to have. Obviously, safety and amenity are important. That is the first point. The second thing that we particularly picked out of the asset management plan is that there are no assets that are characterised as very poor, potential structural operational problems or not operational. At worst, assets have “30 to 20 per cent of asset useful life remaining”. As previously mentioned, we acknowledge that the facility has maintenance upgrade needs that are required. However, given the lack of alternatives currently being offered, we believe the facility, in that context, does remain safe for use.

The report also outlines issues of operational criticality. This is in a section called “Critical Systems”. It says:

Asset criticality forms part of the Health Directorate’s risk management methodology. It recognises that some assets or asset groups have differing importance or value or represent different vulnerabilities to the business. Criticality considers the risks of asset failure or non-performance.

That is just to give some context. When you go to the actual table, Burrangiri has been rated as “highly important” and given a rating of 4 by the ACT Health Directorate. Again, to give this some context, there is a series of scores from 5 through to 1. Five is “critical” and 4 is “highly important”. There are only two in the “critical” category: Howard Florey Centenary House and Clare Holland House. There is a whole bunch in the “highly important” category: QEII, Watson Hostel, the Karralika facilities, and Burrangiri as well. That gives an indication of where this facility sits.

In trying to sum up all of this, and in the way we have reflected on this issue, it is clearly an older facility, but I saw a quote in the *Canberra Times* from Peter Lyons, the convenor of the Save Burrangiri Action Group, which I thought summed it up pretty well. He said, “The place is safe but just dated.” In the context where the choice is a dated facility that you can actually access or no facility, the decision that members of the community who rely on this facility would rather see is evident. That was expressed in the public comments that I just touched on.

Those are the reasons we are supporting the motion today. We will not be supporting the minister’s amendment. It is important that the government reflects on the feedback from the community and the feedback from the Assembly today. In my experience in this place and from listening to the minister, it is clear the minister has carefully considered this—she has outlined the points that she is taking into account—but, in my experience, members of the Labor party are significant fans of the expression: “Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good.” It is a phrase I have heard them use on many more than one occasion. This particular issue may be one of the cases where they would wish to take their own advice.

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (4.24): I, too, stand to speak in support of this motion. I thank my colleagues Ms Castley and Ms Carrick for bringing this motion forward. I also thank the various speakers that came before me. This debate is about emerging symptoms in our society. It is the beginning of symptoms that leave our most vulnerable behind. I have seen the symptoms before, having grown up in a less developed country. In the 80s, my country of birth was the best place to live. When you fast forward to today, though, the treatment of citizens and very vulnerable people has declined. The symptoms which I have witnessed in the past, if left unchecked, start small. They start with the closing of centres and the cutting of services and finding excuses to justify those decisions. We heard from Mr Rattenbury that the asset management plan does not indicate any significant issues with the building. So the question is: why has the minister decided to move forward with this decision?

This symptom is also an indication of the lack of future planning and leaving issues until the very last minute, with no communication whatsoever with the people who would be most affected: the users of the service and the carers. The consequences of this emerging epidemic strikes at the very heart of our community. The impending closure of this centre is not just a policy decision; it is a human tragedy and will have a far-reaching consequence for the most vulnerable in our community.

As we have heard so many speakers indicate, respite care is the unsung hero of our care system. It is a safety net to allow our seniors, who have contributed meaningfully to this society, to have care. It is also a support system that gives carers a much-needed break. If you have been a carer, as I have been, you would understand the importance of carers having a break, because, when carers do not have a break, you then have the flow-on consequences that carers break down and then you have more people who need care. Respite is also a system that helps those who are exiting hospitals to be ready to return home. The respite system does very significant work. But here is the harsh reality: we are facing a critical shortage of respite capacity in Canberra. The amount needed is increasing and the supply is dwindling.

The Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre has been a beacon of hope for many. It is one of the few facilities that provide extra flexibility by accepting people with dementia without requiring an ACAT assessment. This centre is more than just a facility; it is a community and it is a place where our seniors can find companionship, support and care. It is a place where carers can find respite, reassurance and hope. And it is a place where family can find peace of mind, knowing that their loved ones are being taken care of with dignity and compassion.

So I echo the calls of this motion and call for transparency; alternative facilities that could be accessed by people who would utilise this service; an extension to the contract for the Salvation Army; and delayed closure until an equivalent alternative facility is available. Let's be clear: the closure of the Burrangiri respite centre is not just a local issue; it is a symptom of a broader systemic failure. It is the failure to prioritise the needs of our most vulnerable and it is the failure to invest in care and support at the onset, before it becomes an issue. I urge the minister to reconsider her decision and stop this symptom before it becomes an epidemic.

I again thank Ms Castley and Ms Carrick for the motion. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (4.29): Like so many others in this place and in our community, I was taken by surprise when I first heard about the impending closure of the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre. I have stood in the car park outside Burrangiri to meet local community members and have heard stories of how valuable the centre is. It is integral. I take the point that it is not just a local issue, but it is genuinely a local issue. This is really important to the people in our community. As our community gets older, it is only going to become more important that we have facilities like this in place.

I have to apologise to my team from the outset, because they drafted a wonderful speech and almost every point has been hit by other speakers in this place. Ms Castley, Ms Carrick and Ms Barry all touched on, amazingly, the values that this centre provides to people and the importance of making sure we have services like this in our community. I do not think anyone could fail to be moved by the words of Tom Anderson and his long-term engagement with this service, to simply be able to continue caring for his wife. This is genuinely a compassionate resource in our community. It helps people just get through.

The minister addressed some of her thinking around exactly what is going on. Staff from Mr Rattenbury's office were testing wireless microphones in our hallway today. I am wondering whether he heard some of the rehearsal of my speech, because he has touched on a whole lot of things that I picked up on as well. There are still questions, in spite of the minister's comments. There are still questions about exactly why Burrangiri has suddenly been deemed as not fit for purpose. It is just not clear to anyone, I think, why on earth we are shutting down a facility when it is so important and so valuable to the community.

I have my worries and I have my fears. I am worried whether it is at all possible that the government is looking at selling off this property for profit. It is in a good location. I would hate to see the loss of critical community infrastructure simply to be able to sell off the land in a very highly desirable location. I am worried that it looks like this could

be linked to an extreme and ideological interpretation of the government's insourcing agenda. I was concerned about this when we saw the takeover of Calvary hospital. I raised my concerns about the potential for valuable community services to start being insourced by this government. We are seeing an increasing move to take things out of the hands of the people who are experts in providing it—those who do so without a massive cost, leveraging volunteers who deliver more value than we provide back to them. I am worried about that. And I am worried about the potential for this to be an indicator of an underlying problem with the government's budget.

Since the election, we have seen a dramatic turnaround in the government's financial position, and it is impossible to look at that and not wonder whether the government is now just looking at cutting everything it possibly can to scrape through this. That is my fear, and it is a fear that is shared by a lot of people in our community. People are looking at this decision and it does not stack up without something else to be considered. I really hope those things are not the case. To me, if the position of the minister is that somehow Burrangiri is not fit for purpose, it is very clear that it is a whole lot more fit for purpose than not having anything at all.

MS CASTLEY (Yerrabi—Leader of the Opposition) (4.34): In closing, I thank everybody for their contributions. It has been a really great discussion this afternoon. There was something raised during the annual reports hearings, when we discussed Burrangiri, that has stuck with me. We asked how many people coming out of the public health system go to Burrangiri. I believe the statistic was something like five per cent—only five per cent. We then talked about, as the minister outlined, the building being old and needing refurbishing, and that bariatric patients could not go to this facility.

Having spoken to the Salvation Army, they say that that is not a reason. I cannot help wondering whether the government are trying to find reasons, excuses, to close the facility. I believe that is a real shame on this government. It is not just public patients coming out of the hospital that need it; so many private Canberra patients need it, as we have already discussed at length.

The minister said that this was not an easy decision, "But we're closing it, anyway." By the sound of things this afternoon, Minister, the doors will need to remain open until, as the motion calls for, "equivalent alternative respite care capacity is available". I think that is a real win, and I would like to thank all members for their engagement this afternoon. I thank Ms Carrick and her office for pulling this together and working on it. It is such an important thing for our community.

The idea of refurbishment is just nonsense. As Mr Rattenbury pointed out, the building does not need refurbishing. It is fit for purpose. It is serving a great purpose, and it is serving our Canberra community well.

I will pose the question for Canberrans: what is going on here? We really do not know. As I say, I thank everyone for their contributions today. We will not be supporting the amendment that the minister has put forward. I look forward to hearing great stories of Canberrans who can still access great respite care in Canberra.

MS CARRICK(Murrumbidgee) (4.36): I would like to thank everybody for participating today. I think we have uncovered some truths about what is going on.

I, too, worry about why facilities close. From my perspective, it is about more than Burrangiri; there are other ones in our area. Thank you, everybody; let us have the verdict.

Amendment negatived.

Original question resolved in the affirmative.

Statements by members

Sport and recreation—ACT Brumbies

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (4.38): I want to speak about the advent of the new ACT Brumbies season. On the night of Saturday, 22 February, the ACT Brumbies kicked off their 2025 Super Rugby Pacific campaign against the Western Force. It is always a pleasure and privilege to be able to attend these games in my electorate of Ginninderra at GIO Stadium in Bruce.

There was a healthy crowd in attendance at the game who cheered on the Brumbies. Unfortunately, they went down 45-42 to the Western Force. It was the Force's first win in Canberra, remarkably, in nearly 14 years. I wish all the best to Stephen Larkham and his team for the 2025 season. I was very pleased to be joined by Liberal Senate candidates Jacob Vadakkedathu and Hayune Lee before the game, and have an opportunity to chat to constituents and fans as they entered the stadium.

Mr Vadakkedathu and Ms Lee are sensational candidates for us, and it was great to watch them in action, talking with and caring for Canberrans, before we enjoyed the rugby together, along with my good friend Harry. I look forward to attending many more Brumbies games this season—and, of course, those of our wonderful Canberra Raiders—and I hope that Mr Vadakkedathu and Ms Lee can join me again in Ginninderra. Go the Brumbies!

Environment—global warming

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (4.39): I rise today to share a statement sent to me by Olivia from Gordon, to be brought to the attention of the Assembly. With her permission, I share the following:

Dear Taimus, my name is Olivia. I am 9 years old. I am worried about global warming and the effect this will have on mine and others' futures. I think there is a lot that can be done in Canberra to help with this problem. Some of my ideas to fix Canberra include a recycling system, to make it easier to recycle more materials like foam and clothing, as I know that lots of clothes that get donated end up in the dump.

Another way to help is to make it easier to buy solar panels and insulate houses so people stop wasting energy when heating and cooling their houses. If people stopped needing as much electricity as they do now, this could go a long way to reducing greenhouse gases.

To conclude, I think that people need help to protect the environment. There is no planet B. Thank you, Olivia.

Australian National University

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (4.40): Mr Deputy Speaker, today I would like to speak briefly about the hard work being done by the student group No Cuts at ANU, who, as you can probably gather, are not particularly fond of the staff and course cuts currently being undertaken at the ANU.

To start with, they are absolutely correct; the ANU will not be able to improve the quality of student education by cutting courses. As was discussed in the forum held two weeks ago, overworked educators with no sense of job security are in no position to provide the best guidance, education or support to the students they are being tasked with teaching. That is not even mentioning the fact that so many of the staff facing job cuts at the ANU are, in turn, students, and their inability to rely on their jobs existing will, of course, impact their ability to study.

More than fighting for a good cause, No Cuts at ANU is doing a great job of keeping the tradition of student activism alive. As universities try to turn themselves more and more into assembly lines designed to make students work-ready and little else, there is a spark of protest that could be lost. Groups like No Cuts at ANU are showing that universities remain, and will always be, places where young people can gather to push for the state of the world to be better than it currently is.

The forum two weeks ago was wonderful to see, with representatives of staff, the Greens, No Cuts at ANU and the NTEU talking together about what needs to be done to improve life for staff and students on campus. The ACT Greens fully support the upcoming rallies and walk-outs that No Cuts has planned, and, as a young person, a proud ANU alumni and the Greens spokesperson for education, I intend to provide support however I can. Best of luck, No Cuts at ANU; hopefully, between us, we ensure that the ANU remains an institution focused on education.

Faith—Ramadan and Lent

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (4.42): I rise today to acknowledge two significant religious observances—Ramadan, which began on 2 March, and Lent, which commences today.

For our Muslim community, Ramadan is a sacred month of fasting, prayer and self-reflection. It is a time to strengthen faith, practise gratitude and engage in acts of kindness and charity. Last weekend, in my electorate of Ginninderra, a beautiful iftar dinner was hosted by Ginninderry, in collaboration with HelpingACT and UnitingCare Kippax, bringing together 250 guests from diverse backgrounds.

For our Christian community, Lent is a time of reflection, sacrifice and preparation leading up to Easter. Through fasting, prayer and acts of service, it encourages believers to work with humility and compassion. Just like Ramadan, Lent reminds us of the importance of self-discipline, generosity and caring for those in need.

Both Ramadan and Lent highlight the values that unite us—faith, sacrifice and community. As these observances continue, I send my best wishes to all who are observing, and I encourage our broader community to reflect on the blessings of peace,

understanding and unity that bind us together. Ramadan Mubarak, and a blessed Lent to you all.

Active travel—west Belco bike bus

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (4.43): This week I was pleased to join the west Belco bike bus. They run this bike bus on the first Monday of every month, so anyone can show up. Come along if you are interested. We rode from Kippax. We went on all the off-road paths. I discovered a lot of paths that were new to me, and it was a lot of fun. We ended up in Civic. Sometimes they go right through to Barton.

Cycling is a great way to take climate action. It is also a really good way to save money. If you are not sure of the route, or if you are not sure about whether you want to ride near cars or traffic, joining a bike bus is a really good way to do it. If you want to find out more about the bike bus, Google “SEE-Change west Belco bike bus”, and you will get all the details, and we hope to see you there.

For Olivia, who has just left, we would also like to see our government making environmental action easier for everyday Canberrans, like recycling and cycling, and all sorts of other things like that. We think that would be a great thing for this government to do. The Greens think that, too.

Discussion concluded.

Adjournment

Motion (by **Ms Cheyne**) proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

International Family Drug Support Day

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (4.44): Last week I had the privilege of speaking at an event here at the Assembly to highlight the work and importance of International Family Drug Support Day, and I would like to highlight it again now. Many of those gathered last week were united by the challenge of having, and in some cases losing, a family member with a problem addiction. Jen Ross-King spoke movingly about losing her 19-year-old daughter to an MDMA overdose at a music festival six years ago and about the importance of educating young people on how to keep themselves safe. Jen’s daughter was not a common drug user, as is the label that is often used; she was just a teenager who made one unlucky mistake that a pill-testing program could have avoided. Nearly 30 years ago, the founder of family drug support, Tony Trimmingham, lost his son Damian to a heroin overdose, and came to realise how little support there is for the families of people with drug and alcohol addictions.

I want to talk a bit about families, actually. The closest and tightest bonds we have in our lives are so often with the people we call family. They are the people we miss the most when we go away. They are the people we have the most history with, the funniest shared jokes, the weirdest shared habits, the strongest memories. That, of course, is why a family member’s drug use and addiction hits so hard. You cannot back away and you

do not want to. But the closeness you feel to them can really hurt when their lives spin out of control. Life cannot be turned off just because it is painful. You do everything you can but, just because you love someone, just because you would go to the ends of the earth for them, it does not mean that you cannot burn out or dry up or just end up feeling completely empty and alone and out of ideas.

This is where an event like International Family Drug Support Day is so important, as is the work of Family Drug Support year-round. It helps. It gives people ideas and strategies; it directs them to resources; it makes them feel less alone; and it gives them the support of knowing that there are people out there lobbying for a better, wiser, less punitive approach.

Family Drug Support launched in 2016, and its model has now been taken up all across Australia, as well as in New Zealand, the UK and elsewhere. Tony Trimmingham is stepping back from his role as CEO, and I want to acknowledge the huge amount of work he has done over the years to lobby for compassionate, evidence-based and sensible policies on reducing drug use harm. Key objectives for Family Drug Support are to reduce shame, stigma and discrimination; to promote support services for families affected by drug use; and to promote harm reduction strategies. The Greens, too, have been pushing for and helping to implement these same strategies for a long time, and we endorse the efforts of Family Drug Support.

International Family Drug Support Day was a great event, with insightful input from volunteer coordinator James Lomas; CEO of the Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT, Anita Mills; the CEO of the Alcohol and Drug Foundation, Dr Erin Lalor; and others. I hope to see this organisation continue to build on its success, because every life saved or turned around means a whole family spared from years of anguish. I thank them for their work supporting the community and wish them all the success in the future.

Clean Up Australia Day

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (4.48): Mr Assistant Speaker Braddock, because you and two other of my Greens colleagues rose yesterday to talk about the success of Clean Up Australia Day, I shrank a bit like a violet and decided to keep my powder dry until today, when I am rising to discuss the success of Clean Up Australia Day, which was held on 2 March. The 2025 event marked 35 years of cleaning up Australia. As I understand it, over 800,000 passionate volunteer Australians from all walks of life pulled on their gloves, picked up a trowel or a garbage bin and did their bit to make our environment a cleaner and better place.

I remember quite clearly Ian Kiernan and his advocacy for Clean Up Australia Day and it had been a really huge event, certainly in the 1990s. For me, it faded a little bit in its significance—but that was also because I was 20 and perhaps had my mind on other things. However, now, with almost four-fifths of a million people involved—of which some of my group, friends and team were a part of—it is a very, very special and important community event.

In the ACT, there were 45 events attended by hundreds of Canberrans. There were some organised by the ACT government in the Lanyon Valley in the south and also Harrison

in the north. As my colleague Laura Nuttall pointed out yesterday, a special chapeau should go to the Tuggeranong Community Council, which organises an extraordinarily large clean-up of Lake Tuggeranong twice a year, but their banner moment is on Clean Up Australia Day. In fact, Glenys and Didi are constantly cleaning up Lake Tuggeranong. Didi came immediately from Lake Tuggeranong to Fadden Ponds to help our team do some work around a much smaller body of water.

Fadden Ponds has been cleaned up for quite some years now on Clean Up Australia Day and organised by a predecessor of mine, Nicole Lawder. She handed me her big box of Clean Up Australia Day materials and her pond skimmer, and I was happy, with my team, to organise Fadden Pond Clean Up Australia Day in 2025. We had quite a number of people—at one point, 15—although it got quite hot so some people had to leave. The pond, the playground, the footpaths and the nearby drains are much cleaner as a result. From a not very big body of water, we collected eight large bags of rubbish and filled three green wheelie bins. I would like to note that one of those wheelie bins was filled with four extraordinarily big scotch thistles, which I spent 10 to 15 minutes hacking and digging out, and dodging brown snakes—which, in my opinion, was worthy of re-election alone but, apparently, there is more than one opinion.

I would like to thank Sam, Katrina, Henrik and Will who came independently—they had no connection; they just read a letter and came along to clean it up—and also my son Henson and daughter Octavia, who, for some reason, thought it would be a great idea to clean up the pond from within the pond. People giving up their Sunday to spend two hours to clean up a small body of water is really, really important and special, and helps to make Tuggeranong and the ACT even more stunning. The final group I would like to thank is the ACT government, who through ACT NOWaste, provided vouchers to those organising clean-up events for free waste drop-off at the two resource management centres. Therefore, the eight large bags of rubbish are gone.

Waste—FOGO

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (4.52): A lot of people are worried about recycling. They worry about the items they see every day in their homes, like food waste, containers, plastic wrap, plastic bags, lids and bread bag ties. It is not the largest component of our waste, but it is highly visible and people want easy recycling options. Amazing community schemes like Curby, Lids4Kids and Lions Club blister packs are doing their part.

So what about our government? Our FOGO food waste recycling service keeps getting delayed. The previous commitment was that Canberra households would have food and organic recycling by 2023. We do not yet have it. The latest government commitment is that it will be available once it has been built. Why the delay? The Labor government say they cannot work on two projects at once and first they have to build the new recycling facility.

The old recycling facility burned down in 2022 in a battery fire. In 2023, Labor Minister Steel said our new recycling facility would be operating by 2025 and we had business continuity insurance for shipping our recycling interstate in the meantime. Labor Minister Cheyne now tells us the new recycling facility will not be operating until 2028. It is costing us an extra \$10 million each year to send our recycling interstate than it

would to recycle it here. By the time that facility opens in 2028, we will have spent over \$60 million more than we would have if we had done it here. The minister cannot say if we will get insurance back. The minister cannot provide any reason for the delay except the need to run a thorough procurement, which I hope is and always was the original intention.

What kind of recycling results are we getting from our temporary arrangement? We are recycling paper larger than a credit card; aluminium cans; liquid paperboard, like soy milk cartons; and plastic takeaway food containers. We are not recycling soft plastics, plastic bags, disposable coffee cups, bamboo plates and cutlery, bioplastic plates and cutlery, medicine blister packs or wax-lined or plastic-lined paper containers. In terms of hard plastics, we are only recycling hard plastics that are bigger than a credit card and that are numbered, 1, 2, 3 or 5. This is very limited. Critically, it is a step backwards from our old facility, which used to recycle some of these items, like disposable coffee cups.

What about the new recycling facility we are designing that will open in 2028? Will that recycle all of our standard packaging? Will Canberrans seeing a recycling sign on packaging finally be able to confidently put it in their yellow bin? No, I do not think so. The new recycling facility will not recover soft plastics or many of our standard items of packaging, and I am still trying to find out exactly what it will recycle. But the minister has said the public-private partnership will be designed to maximise value rather than recycling outcomes.

Every time I ask about local recycling options, I am told I am asking the wrong question because national product stewardship will save us all. National product stewardship is a great idea. If it is done well, it means industry pays the recycling costs from the packaging it produces and sells. It also means industry designs more recyclable packaging in the first place, more packaging that is made from recycled materials and less unnecessary packaging. How has this national scheme going? The federal government started design for this regulated scheme before 2018. The scheme had an original 2025 deadline for the targets, but the national scheme has admitted it will not deliver on that. The latest commitment on the website is this: "Work is continuing to accelerate progress." The latest update I got from the ACT government is this: "These conversations are ongoing."

The scheme is not and will not be mandatory. I do not understand voluntary regulation. We have a mandatory regulation for container deposit schemes, and that is because we thought brands like the Coca-Cola might not pay if they were not required to. But, apparently, we are not making this one mandatory because we trust Coles and Woolies to participate, even if they do not need to.

We are in a climate crisis. The embedded emissions in our waste is enormous. The government keep delaying our recycling services but they are not modelling the climate emissions impact of these delays. Our temporary arrangements do not recycle a lot of our standard packaging and they are expensive. Our new recycling facility is three years delayed and it will not recycle a lot of our standard packaging. The national scheme is also delayed. It will not be mandatory, and I am not sure exactly what it will be recycling or what it will be avoiding.

The ACT government target is that we recover 88 per cent of our waste. We have stagnated at around 75 per cent for two decades now. We have actually just shifted in the wrong direction. We are now only recovering 67 per cent of our waste. If you look at household waste only, it is worse again. We recover less than half of it; the rest goes to landfill.

The answers I heard today in question time were quite worrying. It sounds like the government might not provide recycling services if they cost money. The whole point of kerbside recycling in the 80s was that it is a public service because it costs money. We understand we need to provide health services, education services and public transport—recycling is the same.

Community organisations—funding

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (4.57): I rise to speak on an issue of deep concern to many Canberrans, and that is the budget process and funding uncertainty for our vital community organisations. Community organisations play a very critical role in supporting individuals and families, fostering a strong and inclusive community and improving the overall quality of life for all Canberrans.

Over the last couple of weeks, I have met and spoken to several community organisations who provide essential services to many Canberrans who rely on them. Whether it be supporting women facing domestic and family violence, mentoring young men through difficult times, providing transport solutions that promote a sustainable and active lifestyle, or offering crisis support for our most vulnerable, these organisations are at the heart of our city's social fabric.

However, these groups have raised significant concerns about funding uncertainty that threatens their ability to continue their essential work. The impact of this funding uncertainty is felt not just by the organisations themselves but also by thousands of individuals who turn to them for help. When community groups are forced to cut back services, it is everyday Canberrans who suffer—people experiencing hardship, those seeking a sense of belonging and those striving to contribute meaningfully to our community.

We must recognise that investment in community organisations is an investment in the wellbeing and resilience of our society. It is, thus, banking some credit in our social contracts with our citizens. Providing direct support to those in need also contributes to a more vibrant and connected Canberra. The work of these community organisations alleviates the pressure on government services and ensures that no-one in our community is left behind. In the budget considerations that are underway, I urge the government to listen to the concerns of these organisations and to prioritise sustainable funding that would allow them to continue the invaluable work that they do.

A strong community sector is essential for a thriving Canberra, and we must do everything we can to ensure its sustainability. I call on my colleagues in this chamber to work collaboratively in addressing these issues and to champion these organisations and make Canberra a better place, a progressive city and not just a federal subsidiary.

Early childhood education—Genius Childcare Centres

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (5.00): I rise today to speak about Genius Childcare again. Genius Childcare continues to avoid its obligations to pay wages and superannuation and continues to neglect to pay rent to landlords. This is unacceptable. In the month since I last spoke about it in the chamber, Genius Gungahlin has been temporarily closed for two weeks after safety concerns were raised, and Genius Symonston has announced it will close permanently from this Friday, 7 March. We have seen numerous centres around the country close permanently or temporarily over the past couple of weeks, across South Australia, Queensland, Victoria, here in the ACT, and New South Wales.

Let's take the example of Genius Symonston. They have repeatedly avoided paying rent, they repeatedly avoided paying staff, and now they have attempted to charge parents fees for next week, after they cease operations. Even though they are actually permanently closing and there will be no service to provide, they had the audacity to contact parents yesterday and try to charge them. This is unacceptable and completely ridiculous. But I am optimistic there will be a new provider in Symonston. One of the parents has reached out to say that she has heard that there is a new provider, but they are just waiting on the information. I am optimistic that this will happen and the families, and hopefully the staff, will have minimal disruption to their lives.

Just this morning, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* reported that, Darren Misquitta, the owner of Genius, and many other companies related to Genius, is being investigated for trading in some of his companies while insolvent. We in this chamber all know that you cannot trade while insolvent, so I am really happy to see that ASIC and other regulators are looking into Darren Misquitta's behaviour to see what is going on and whether he really is trading while insolvent. How is this person a fit and proper person to own early childhood education and care centres? He is running a business that is providing an essential service that is shaping the future of our children and runs businesses while insolvent. He is not paying his staff and he is not paying the rent; he is just letting people basically starve. It is unacceptable. He is doing this while staff cannot afford basics like food, groceries, rent or a mortgage.

Employees and their families have reached out to me with details of a GoFundMe page, because they cannot afford groceries. It has been reported in the *Age* this morning that staff are turning to food banks to get by. This is ridiculous. Centres have closed because staff have just stopped turning up as they are not being paid. Why would they continue to turn up to a workplace that is not providing the basic entitlement to their wage? How is it that we have workers in this country who do the incredibly important job of educating and caring for our children, but they cannot even afford to buy food? It is unacceptable.

As a mother, what these kids are going through with centres closing and the disruption of routine breaks my heart. I know my own son would struggle if we were going to one centre and that centre closed, and then we had to go to another centre. Some of the staff might be there, but other staff would not be there. There is the constant disruption of not knowing whether care is available and not being able to go the next day because staff are not there, as they were not being paid. As a human, it makes me angry that a company continues to avoid paying its workers to the point where they resort to food banks and GoFundMe pages. It is beyond belief that that is what staff have had to resort

to, just to get by and buy groceries.

For as long as Genius workers continue to be unpaid, I will continue to speak out and advocate for them. I will continue to push for the need for stronger oversight in the early childhood education and care sector; stronger powers for state and territory regulators to intervene; and stronger communication across all jurisdictions so we do not see a situation where what is happening in one state or territory is not being reported in another state or territory where the same operator is operating. And I will continue to call out wage theft and fight for workers. What is going on in Genius is unacceptable.

Children and young people—Drawing for Your Rights exhibition

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (5.05): A couple of weeks ago, I had the immense privilege of attending the exhibition *Drawing for Your Rights*, drawn together and executed brilliantly by Educacion Diversa. For members who have not heard of them, Educacion Diversa are the absolute epitome of think global, act local. Founded by the wonderful Lauren Cannell here in Canberra, they are dedicated to a world where everyone can reach their full potential. They do this through art-based education for young people. They focus on human rights, sexual and reproductive health and the elimination of violence. They operate across the world with over 100 volunteers from at least 34 countries, which is pretty incredible.

The event itself was an exhibition that pulled together the work of young artists from across the world and had art that expressed young people's human rights. What I really loved about this exhibition was that it really was for young people by young people. One of the big challenges that government face is the fact that, on the most part, they are not young. This comes up a lot when I chat to young people. It means a whole lot more when people meet young people where they are at. In fact, one of your most powerful communicators as a young person and one of your most powerful collaborators is one of your peers. It is the same reason I harp on about co-design so much: there is no bigger relief than having someone get it and not feeling like you will have to explain your lived experience every single time. Educacion Diversa understand this well.

What I loved about the *Drawing for Your Rights* exhibition was how clear it was that this was young people's expression of their rights, designed and pitched towards their peers. The young artists put their heart and soul into the exhibition and it showed. I was going through my camera roll—I had taken a couple of photos—as I was prepping for this speech, and I want to share a couple of highlights. For me, as a young queer woman, what struck me from the ACT contributors in particular was the prevalence of pride flags. It means a lot to me that young people can be so comfortable with and proud of their expression and their identity. We have fought really hard for that right, that freedom and that acceptance here in the ACT, and we really need to keep it up. An artwork that really stuck with me was an artwork about ARTICLE 19 by a four-year-old. It featured a young person locked in a cage and saying, "Love me." For this four-year-old, the significance of their artwork was that their parents take care of them and protect them from any kind of mistreatment and abuse. It is so important that young people are aware of their rights and understand that they should not and must not be mistreated or abused.

I think back to another excellent artwork by, in fact, an ACT student, which shows a young person facing away from the audience—with excellent space buns, I might add. Quietly written around the outside were a couple of this young person's thoughts: "Do adults listen to me? Can I ask uncomfortable questions? Are my rights valid to adults?" I would sure hope that the answer to all of these questions is yes, but the fact that these questions are being asked by young people highlight why it is so important that we have these conversations about human rights through a medium that is genuinely fun and accessible to young people.

I have a couple of photos of articles about children and young people's human rights still saved in my camera roll. The ones I saved tend to talk about the government's role in promoting, protecting and defending young people's human rights. As a member here, I intend to carry those photos with me as a reminder of my responsibility to my youngest constituents.

The opening of the event itself featured a fantastic panel discussion that was led and headlined by folks doing brilliant work to support young people, human rights education and wellbeing. Lauren spoke so compellingly about her work and why it matters. I really encourage members to reach out to her and ask her a bit more about what she is doing. I thank Lauren and the team for having us, and thank the young artists for making us listen. Sorry it is a harder task than it should be.

Waste—recycling

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (5.09): In the time available, I want to correct the record a little in response to Ms Clay's comments this evening. I feel that we have covered this ad nauseam, but I am happy to expand if it assists, and hopefully this does. The issue with recycling soft plastics really is about the end market. The end market effectively does not exist. The fact that REDcycle ran into so much trouble demonstrates how little demand there was for the company's end products. "Plastic waste in Australia—and the recycling greenwash" is a discussion paper by the Australia Institute from January last year. It notes that demand for the kinds of products that can be made from downcycled soft plastics—such as shopping trolleys, street furniture and asphalt road builder—was much lower than the supply that they were receiving. That led to the company stockpiling plastic. There is still a major environment fallout from that scheme. The discussion paper also notes that REDcycle, at its height, collected less than five per cent of soft plastics. This is a difficult issue. It is difficult because soft plastics are inherently difficult to recover and recycle due to the breadth of the materials used. They have an inherently low financial value and high contamination, but it is the lack of demand that really makes it unviable.

Effectively, I feel that the point Ms Clay has been making is that the government should lose money in recycling plastics that have low value. I do not think that is a reasonable question to lay bare to government, especially when recoverable plastic volumes in the ACT are already considerably smaller than in other jurisdictions. It is why, at the most recent Environment Ministers Meeting, we agreed that we would work on a national scheme, national collection, and trying to harmonise the approach. Going alone on something that has significant risks, including volatile commodity value, those few end

markets, buyer risks at the facility, and the significant potential for contamination of other higher value recyclable product, does not make it viable at the moment. Perhaps one day it will be, and that would be terrific and we would welcome doing the cost-benefit analysis then, but at this stage it does not make sense.

It is true that, for a time, the previous recycling facility did recycle coffee cups, but that changed due to China's National Sword policy, which limited the type of recycling that could go through. We used to say, "Don't worry about the plastic that might be in your coffee cup or the food that might remain in your pizza box," but now we take a different position because we need there to be a much greater recoverable rate in our recycling that does not have the contamination that it used to. In fact, coffee cups stopped being recycled well before the facility burnt down. I hope that corrects the record and that we can work together on something more productive.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 5.13 pm.