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EMPLOYEE PROTECTION
(EMPLOYEE ENTITLEMENTS GUARANTEE) BILL 2002
First Reading
Bill presented by Mrs Crosio.

Mrs CROSIO (Prospect) (12.31 p.m.)—I present the Employee Protection (Employee Entitlements Guarantee) Bill 2002. The guarantee of 100 per cent of workers entitlements in the event of company insolvency is one of the most important reforms yet to be undertaken by an Australian government. Few things are more important to workers who have lost their employment than ensuring they receive the full amount of their pay and legally accrued entitlements when they lose their jobs through the insolvency of their employer. The bill I present to the House today will secure the full payment of employee entitlements, such as unpaid wages, annual leave, long service leave and redundancy pay in the case of corporate insolvency. The bill proposes that workers entitlements be secured through a 0.1 per cent levy on payroll.

This year I have marked 31 years in public office. I can safely say that, in all of those years, I have never seen a more disgraceful display of cowardice and ignorance than the refusal of the Howard government to legislate to protect 100 per cent of workers entitlements. It has had countless opportunities to fix the problem; this is the fifth time now I have introduced the bill. However, despite a string of widely publicised and high profile corporate insolvencies every year since I first introduced the bill, this government has still done nothing to legislate to fix the problem. Workers have been deprived of millions of dollars of unpaid entitlements while this government just sits on its hands. Reports into insolvency suggest that workers belonging to insolvent companies around Australia could be losing over $140 million annually.

The issue of employee entitlements stands as a monument to the Howard government’s complete failure on this issue. The government’s response has been a quick fix solution, which has proven to be hopeless, inadequate and unreasonable for taxpayers, employers and employees. The government’s Employee Entitlements Support Scheme is hopelessly inadequate, with payments for entitlements capped at a maximum of $20,000. Most employees have to fight tooth and nail to get even 50 per cent of this. However, if through years of loyal service to a company you are owed more than $20,000, you will still lose out. This is not good enough!

The message from the government is clear: unless you work for the Prime Minister’s brother, the Howard government does not care about your entitlements. Federal legislation that protects and secures 100 per cent of workers entitlements must be set in place and this bill provides the opportunity for the federal government to do this. I welcome all genuine efforts to secure workers entitlements. However, this should not be at the sole expense of the taxpayer.

Throughout the term of the Howard government they have treated workers entitlements as an unsecured interest-free loan which workers had handed over to their employer. It is not. It is a legally accrued and legitimate entitlement that many workers rely on to plan their retirement or their life after work. It is not right that workers, who in some cases have accrued tens of thousands of dollars in entitlements, can lose what they have worked for and what they are entitled to.

Every time I have introduced this bill I have said to the government that it is a piece of legislation that is flexible. If there is a problem with it, it can be amended, and this offer still stands. I have pursued this issue of entitlements because I strongly believe, as we on the Labor side of this parliament believe, that we must have 100 per cent of workers entitlements secured in Australia. We do not believe that this bill is the be-all and end-all of employment issues. However, we do believe that it is the best possible step we can take as a country towards securing what we feel is inevitable—that is, the 100
per cent guarantee of entitlements paid to all Australian employees.

In the *Australian Financial Review* on 31 January 2002, Michael Dwyer of the Insolvency Practitioners Association said:

A sound case can be made that employers need to make provision for entitlements in the same way as they do for workers compensation … ultimately what is required is an improved standard of corporate governance, a strong and well resourced regulatory arm ... I believe this bill does just that. This bill at the very least makes employers take responsibility for their workers’ totally reasonable demand that 100 per cent of employee entitlements be secured and paid in the case of insolvency. If this bill is legislated, smaller employers will have their entitlement costs covered directly by the government, so small business employers will not be affected by the 0.1 per cent levy. It will not at all be a burden on small businesses. The *Sydney Morning Herald* on Friday—as late as last week—said the problem with the government’s scheme is that the unpaid wages and accrued annual long service leave paid in lieu of notice and eight weeks redundancy offered by the scheme that the government has got in place are all made good but from the public purse. It noted:

The alternative to individual businesses setting aside employee entitlements is to have all businesses pay a modest levy into a common fund. It is surprising that for five years I have been harping again and again on this and we are finally seeing the electorate change. If the Howard government is going to be governed by the opinion polls written in the press, maybe now he and his government will get their act together and legislate to bring in workers entitlements so that we have a bill in this House that does secure the entitlements of all our workers throughout Australia. I commend the Labor Party for the succession of private members’ bills that are going to be introduced into this House following this bill because this is the right way to go. *(Time expired)*

Bill read a first time.

The SPEAKER—In accordance with standing order 104A, the second reading will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

**CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPLOYMENT SECURITY BILL 2002**

**First Reading**

Bill presented by Mr McClelland.

Mr McCLELLAND (Barton) (12.37 p.m.)—The Corporate Responsibility and Employment Security Bill 2002 follows on neatly from the bill presented by my colleague the member for Prospect in respect of an employee guarantee fund. It is the other part of an equation that would make a guarantee scheme far more viable than the government’s unfunded scheme—unfunded other than from taxpayers’ pockets.

As members of parliament we have access to an extremely generous severance package. Indeed, in many instances it is lifetime superannuation coverage that is considerably better than the community norm. It is the ultimate hypocrisy that we have not taken steps to ensure that if a worker loses his or her job they will be paid their full entitlements. In many instances workers have devoted the totality of their working lives, or a significant part of them, to corporations, only to lose their jobs and be left without the bulk of their entitlements because of corporate skulduggery and manoeuvring—or simply because of corporate incompetence. This was brought home to the Australian community last week with the collapse of Ansett Australia.

Speaking in the House on 18 September last year, the Prime Minister said that he had made it very clear to the New Zealand Prime Minister that ‘there was very deep anger in the Australian community, particularly among Ansett employees, regarding the behaviour of Air New Zealand’. He also told the New Zealand Prime Minister that the government would be standing in the shoes of the employees and becoming a creditor of Ansett Australia to institute legal proceedings against Air New Zealand to recover entitlements. Indeed, the Prime Minister said:

We will pursue, if we are legally able to do so, Air New Zealand to secure reimbursement.

Well, here is the opportunity for the government to put actions where their words are.
The Ansett collapse highlights the vulnerability of employees of Australian companies that are taken over by multinational companies. When mismanagement occurs, it cannot be assumed that global capital will have any loyalty to Australian workers and their families. If the government fails to support this bill it will be letting down Australian workers, Australian families and, ultimately, Australian taxpayers. The government has introduced a scheme that protects workers' basic entitlements up to a maximum of only eight weeks redundancy pay. That just is not good enough. Moreover, under the government’s scheme the Australian taxpayer foots the bill for corporate mismanagement. But the bill I have presented, the Corporate Responsibility and Employment Security Bill 2002, will enable workers or their nominee to pursue their entitlements directly from a related company if the company employing them goes bust.

In summary, it will enable Australian workers or their representatives to pull aside the corporate veil and get to the company that actually has the assets. For too long Australian workers have been vulnerable to fancy corporate manoeuvres and artificial structures. If a holding company has a direct role in the management of the employing company, under the provisions in this bill the onus will be on it to establish why it should not foot the bill for employee entitlements. This contrasts dramatically with the current legislation where it is necessary to establish a criminal onus of proof that there was a deliberate shifting of assets for the specific purpose of avoiding employee entitlements. That is clearly virtually impossible to establish.

This bill also recognises that it is not just employees who lose out through corporate insolvency; increasingly, subcontractors and employees of subcontractors will also lose out as a result of corporate insolvency. Accordingly, in those circumstances this bill will enable subcontractors and employees of subcontractors to recover their wages and fees from a contractor higher up the contracting chain.

The proposed legislation is based on a system that has been operating effectively in New South Wales, and there is no reason why it should not be applied on a national basis. Our scheme would enable workers to be paid out immediately and then for the guarantee fund to stand in their shoes to recover from those companies that have played a material role in the demise of the employer companies. Ansett Australia is a classic example. It would also enable workers to have their superannuation entitlements recovered—something not covered under the government’s current GEERS and SEESA schemes.

We are living in an unforgiving global environment. When workers lose their jobs it is devastating for their lives and for those of their families. Global capital is necessary to develop industries but, at the same time, global capital has no national loyalties. The government has a moral duty to support this bill. At the end of the day, it is going to be judged by its actions, not by its hollow words. (Time expired)

Bill read a first time.

The SPEAKER—In accordance with standing order 104A, the second reading will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

TAXATION LAWS AMENDMENT (A SIMPLER BUSINESS ACTIVITY STATEMENT) BILL 2002
First Reading

Bill presented by Mr McMullan.

Mr McMULLAN (Fraser) (12.42 p.m.)—I take great pleasure in introducing the Taxation Laws Amendment (A Simpler Business Activity Statement) Bill 2002. At the last election the Labor Party promised to introduce a simpler GST. This bill honours that commitment. The Australian Labor Party, under Simon Crean’s leadership, is committed to providing a better deal for small business. This bill will free small business from John Howard’s and Peter Costello’s red-tape nightmare by providing a simpler method of calculating goods and services tax.

At the moment Australian small business proprietors face greater accounting and record keeping costs, greater cash flow costs, a less competitive small business sector, less time to run their businesses and potential
The simpler BAS option will eliminate the need for quarterly and annual GST reconciliations. The new option will be completely voluntary. Small businesses can opt to remain in the current system without any change at all. The simpler BAS option will be individual or industry specific, based on reporting experience during the first two years of the GST, and it will employ a simplified ratio to turnover approach that allows for large or irregular business cost items. The simpler BAS option will allow small business to pay a simply calculated quarterly payment on their quarterly turnover. Each participating business will be given a GST ratio based on its own trading circumstances. A final GST liability is calculated by multiplying the business turnover by this ratio, eliminating the need for a full GST reconciliation. Small business will only need to complete one calculation and fill in two boxes on the BAS form.

The overwhelming majority of small business will be able to access the simpler BAS option. It will be available to those businesses with a turnover below $2 million. This threshold can be increased by regulation in the context of aligning the simpler BAS option with other small business compliance requirements in other areas. In calculating the ratio for each business, the ATO will net out transitional items in the first year of the GST, such as credits for wholesale sales tax paid. Taxpayers will be able to claim the credits on unusual purchases, such as new business premises, whilst still using the ratio method. New businesses can utilise the simpler BAS option immediately by using industry based ratios if they so choose. This will allow them to completely avoid the necessity for GST paperwork and the costs associated with this. This will be particularly welcomed by small sole traders without formal accounting experience. A small minority of businesses might substantially change their operations over time such that the original ratio issued by the ATO becomes unfavourable to them. In that circumstance a business has the right to refer to the general BAS process.

The simpler BAS option also provides a safe harbour from the potential costs arising from any tax audit. Currently, businesses being audited may have to justify every separate input tax credit claim and account for every separate taxable sale. Under the ratio method, all the small business has to do is show that all turnover has been disclosed. In other words, honest small businesses can eliminate their GST audit risk by adopting the simplified option. In addition, the onerous record keeping options under the GST will be reduced so that only records relevant for an audit, namely those concerning turnover, will be necessary, further simplifying the compliance burden facing small business.

The simpler BAS option therefore provides a double benefit to small business: less paperwork and hassle now and no uncertainty and future cost from a future GST audit, provided no fraud has occurred. Labor’s simpler BAS option will mean lower accounting and record keeping costs, less time spent on tax compliance, more time for small business proprietors to run their businesses and spend time with their families, and a more competitive small business sector relative to big business.

We are prepared to consult with small business, the tax profession and other stakeholders further on the details of the bill and we would welcome any further suggestions for improvement. I particularly want to thank the Clerk’s office for guidance in drafting of the bill. I urge all members to support this important reform and I commend the bill to the House.

Bill read a first time.

The SPEAKER—Order! In accordance with standing order 104A, the second reading will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.
SUPERANNUATION GUARANTEE (ADMINISTRATION) AMENDMENT BILL 2002

First Reading

Bill presented by Mr Latham.

Mr LATHAM (Werriwa) (12.48 p.m.)—
The Superannuation Guarantee (Administration) Amendment Bill 2002 has been introduced to amend the Superannuation Guarantee (Administration) Act 1992 to require employers to remit superannuation guarantee payments at least quarterly, rather than annually. Labor have taken the lead in addressing the urgent need for quarterly superannuation contributions. We introduced a bill on this matter in 2000 and again last year, but the government has allowed both of those bills to lapse in the parliament.

The Senate Select Committee on Superannuation and Financial Services found almost universal support for quarterly contributions from among employer and employee representatives and other relevant stakeholders. Support came from groups including the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Institute of Chartered Accountants, the Investment and Financial Services Association, CPA Australia and the government's own superannuation regulator, APRA. So, as can be seen, there was almost universal support across the industry. As a result, the committee, which included three Liberal senators, recommended in August 2001 that employers be required to make contributions for their employees on at least a quarterly basis.

On 5 November last year, the Prime Minister, Mr Howard, announced that the government would finally introduce legislation for quarterly contributions. But, as is often the case with his administration, there was a catch. Quarterly superannuation contributions will not be implemented until July 2003. Australians saving for their retirement and responsible Australian businesses deserve better than these arrangements.

Had the government supported Labor's first bill in October 2000, quarterly contributions would have begun in July 2001. Had they supported our second bill, quarterly contributions would have begun in July 2002. This bill is the last chance to get quarterly contributions started in this country by the end of this year. The longer the government waits to legislate, the greater the losses to the retirement savings of Australians and the disadvantage to responsible businesses. That is why I am introducing Labor's third private member's bill on this particular matter. It is our hope that the proposal will not go down for a third time by virtue of Liberal neglect but finally will be passed by the House and move into law.

Regular contributions by employers on behalf of their employees are central to the universal superannuation system that Labor established in 1992. When Labor introduced the superannuation guarantee, annual payments were agreed as a minimum, to give employers time to settle in to the new arrangements. Almost all employers now fulfil their superannuation obligations. In fact, around 86 per cent already pay quarterly or even more often than that. Requiring all employers to make contributions every quarter is in the interests of employers as well as employees.

As Mr Leo Bator, the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation, informed the Senate inquiry in October last year:
Smaller debts paid more frequently are probably going to be beneficial to both the employer and the employee.

The requirement for quarterly payments will remove the current competitive disadvantage for the 86 per cent of employers who diligently meet their superannuation obligations. A person whose employer pays his or her superannuation annually will benefit because their superannuation for an entire year—and we are talking about amounts up to $4,000 for the average full-time employee—will be earning interest in their superannuation fund. Quarterly payments will mean higher investment earnings on superannuation savings and will therefore lead to higher retirement incomes. Quarterly contributions will also reduce the likelihood of employers defaulting on their superannuation obligations when times are tough.

The ATO received 11,000 complaints about unpaid superannuation last year and estimates that outstanding superannuation
guarantee payments amount to around $104 million. Labor members of parliament have received numerous inquiries from individuals whose super has not been paid and who can get little or no action out of the tax office. Quarterly contributions are absolutely essential to protect superannuation entitlements. The government’s inadequate employee entitlements scheme does not cover lost super. This bill, Labor’s bill, would commence operation on 1 July this year—a year ahead of the government’s proposal. The first quarterly payment would not be due until 28 October. Any employers who fail to make this first contribution would need to lodge a superannuation guarantee statement before 14 November. Contributions would be due on the BAS reporting date for each quarter, consistent with Labor’s commitment to reducing red-tape and compliance costs for small business.

This is a long overdue proposal. This is legislation we have brought into the House for the third time. We are now hoping for its passage through the House and the other place. (Time expired)

Bill read a first time.

The SPEAKER—In accordance with standing order 104A, the second reading will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Water

Mr FORREST (Mallee) (12.54 p.m.)—I move:

That this House:

(1) acknowledges the seriously depleted nature of rainfall patterns across south east Australia in the last decade;

(2) recognises that adequate water availability is a limiting criterion for Australia’s economic and population growth; and

(3) encourages the implementation of water conservation projects, including capital upgrades for inefficient and wasteful water supply projects, increased public education on measures to conserve water and increased meteorological research into changing rainfall patterns and possible intervention measures.

Mr Speaker, the motion before us highlights a very serious issue for the nation as a whole: the savage depletion of water in our water storages across the continent. My view is that it has already reached a critical stage. The weather seems to be changing, particularly across the southern region of Australia. The CSIRO’s latest climate change estimates indicate that Australia will be hotter and drier in coming decades. Whilst there is still some active discussion amongst the scientists as to the real trend in declining rainfall, weather patterns are clearly changing, a situation which leads us to face problems with run-off and consequent water storage. For example, if you look at averages, it appears that rainfall may be increasing in aggregate. The trouble is that the rain is falling in the wrong places. There seems to be more thunderstorm activity, which might keep averages up, but there is clearly less rainfall run-off as a result. For example, there has been a reduction of natural inflow in the catchment of Perth by 50 per cent since 1970, and there has been a reduction of natural rainfall and snowfall in the Snowy Mountains by about 40 per cent in the last 40 years. This was demonstrated in May 1993 by the environmental impact statement report on the Snowy Precipitation Enhancement Project that was commissioned by the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority.

The southern parts of Australia have felt a substantial impact. I have already mentioned Perth, but the Grampians—which are in my electorate and the electorate of Wannon—the Victorian Alps and the Snowy Mountains have suffered declines in storage ability over the last 40 years. The parliament needs to recognise that adequate quantity and timing of natural rainfall and snowfall precipitation in the catchments and consequent storage reduction are limiting factors for Australia’s rural economy and environment.

By way of further example, the average inflow from 1911 to 1974 for Perth was 338 gigalitres, whilst the average for the past 2½ decades, 1975 to 2001, has been just 167 gigalitres. Last year saw a critically low inflow, the second lowest on record, with just 30 gigalitres. These are crucial figures. Similarly, the storage in the Menindee Lakes...
of the Murray-Darling Basin in New South Wales is currently 512 gigalitres, or 30 per cent of its nominal capacity. Under the operating agreement of this storage, the New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation control releases from the Menindee Lakes when the combined storage in the lakes falls below 480 gigalitres. This is currently expected to occur this month. The last time that storage fell below 480 gigalitres at the Menindee Lakes was for a brief four-month period of November 1994 to February 1995.

I might now refer to another example closer to my home and heart, which is the famous Wimmera Mallee Stock and Domestic Water Supply Scheme. Water is supplied to over 90 communities and over 7,000 stock and domestic water users over nearly 20 per cent of the geographic area of Victoria. It is the largest open channel system in the world. It is now 100 years old but wastes an enormous volume of water in seepage and evaporation. The system is supplied by a series of storages in the Grampians of the Mallee and Wannon electorates, and I am delighted that the member for Wannon is seconding the motion today.

Storage figures for the Wimmera Mallee show a steady decline in the amount of water received into the storages over the last 15 years. In the last year, storages were at a critically low 13 per cent—in fact, in some storages water had to be pumped from below water level—down from averages of over 80 per cent in the late 1980s. The situation for the Wimmera region is now critical, with wholesale water restrictions now in place. I will come back to the Wimmera Mallee system later, for it is just one example of the dire situation in which we find ourselves. The worry is that it is predicted to get worse.

The CSIRO’s latest climate change estimates are due to rising concentrations of greenhouse gases, according to Dr Peter Whetton from the CSIRO’s Atmospheric Research Unit. In 2001, the CSIRO released projections regarding the likely extent of climate change in Australia and the expected impact across the continent. In areas that experience little change or an increase in average rainfall, which tends to be to the north of Australia, more frequent or heavy downpours are likely. Conversely, there will be more dry spells in regions where average rainfall decreases. Mr Speaker, I can assure you that that is what is happening in my own constituency. We may also see more intense tropical cyclones, leading to an increase in the number of severe oceanic storms, occurring particularly in the north.

It is a complex picture, tangled as it is with greenhouse and other factors, but the links seem to indicate that the greenhouse effect is closer to home than we may have thought. The greenhouse effect is not going to go away. The motion asks for the attention of the parliament because it is already crunch time for our nation.

To return to the position my constituents find themselves in with regard to water restrictions across the Wimmera, these have already had an adverse impact on the economy and the environment. The resulting water and land salinity and the water flow of the Murray River, the Murrumbidgee River, the Goulburn River, the Wimmera River, the Glenelg River and the Snowy River are having an enormous impact on our economy. The southern parts of my electorate, as I have mentioned, particularly the rural city of Horsham, currently have the severest water shortage they have had in 50 years. This has been going on for the last four years, and the community of the Wimmera is now demanding some attention from governments.

Whilst education regarding water use is essential and important in such a dry continent, clearly it needs to be recognised, as a matter of urgency, that there are just too many water wasting schemes across Australia supplying water in vast open channels. Losses from evaporation and seepage are enormous. With predictions as they are, it is time for us to be more efficient with the use of water. Thankfully, this has been recognised in the Wimmera-Mallee stock and domestic system. Supplies in the northern Mallee, the top end, are already being transformed with the construction of a pipe to supply direct from the Murray River instead of from the long, wasteful channel system from the Grampian Mountains in the south. Construction of this project commenced in
1993, following many years of argument when the need was evident but funding was not forthcoming. Now funding provided by the Commonwealth, state governments and land-holders to the tune of more than $50 million will result in water savings of some 50,000 megalitres each year and will free up that water for environmental and other uses. In fact, over the seven years of the northern Mallee project, already the entire capacity of the Grampian storages has been saved. As grim as things are for the people of the Wimmera with water restrictions, it would have been a complete disaster if the top end had not already been piped, which proves my point.

I am proud of the role I have played in my time in this parliament in achieving those funding commitments, but there is much more to do. The Wimmera-Mallee scheme may have been innovative 100 years ago—and is a great tribute to our innovative engineering then—but the largest open channel system in the world cannot continue. The current critical situation of water storages drives the imperative that all of the channel system should be replaced with pipes. With the northern Mallee done, we need to continue the momentum and complete the remainder of the scheme. It is a nationally significant project, a project that I put up there with the capping of the artesian bores. Mr Deputy Speaker Causley, you will remember the parliament’s attention being drawn to that. The piping of the rest of the system will save an additional 100,000 megalitres of water each year. Added to what has already been done, that is 150,000 megalitres. Just to put that into some sort of word picture, if you can imagine Olympic swimming pools end to end from Melbourne to Darwin, that is how much water 150,000 megalitres is.

If we are faced with the concept of depleted rainfall in the southern parts of Australia, we must be more efficient with the use of water. I am asking for the parliament to give its attention to supporting the piping of the remainder of the Wimmera-Mallee stock and domestic system. It is being driven by a regional steering committee. The member for Wannon, Mr Hawker, and I will be hosting a delegation of members of that committee to lobby the parliament. Their request is for a small amount of $77.5 million, only one-third of the total cost. Another one-third is supplied by the state of Victoria. The balance of the project is $300 million, and the community will supply the balance. The example of the northern Mallee is just one of those tributes to partnership, which happens so much across Australia. The community are providing their own funding to the tune of one-third of the total cost of the project. The federal government is playing its part and the state is playing its part as well. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

Mr Hawker—I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (1.04 p.m.)—The essence of the motion moved by the member for Mallee is commendable and I certainly wish to register my support for the sentiments involved in it. The member for Mallee made some quite significant observations about the issue of rainfall reduction in this great continent of ours and its impact on places as diverse as Perth, the Grampians and the Snowy Mountains. He made some significant comments about climate change in this country and made the observation that the greenhouse effect is closer than we may have thought. Unfortunately, much of the significance of this motion appears to be lost on the member’s National Party and in particular on his leader.

Firstly, I will comment on the issue of the depleted nature of rainfall patterns across south-east Australia, which certainly calls up this issue of climate change. There is no doubt that Australia has very variable weather patterns, and it seems to me to be the case that climate change is leading to even more variable weather patterns than we have been used to in the past. Perhaps when people have talked about global warming some have had a mistaken impression about what is actually going to happen. Climate change is going to give us, according to bodies such as the CSIRO, more droughts and more floods—more severe weather of a variety of extremes.
Given the seriousness of climate change, it is regrettable, from my point of view, that the US administration has chosen not to support the Kyoto protocol but to go down its own path. It is even more regrettable that this government has also chosen not to support the Kyoto protocol. In fact, as I understand the Prime Minister’s position and the government’s position, it seems to me to be distinctly odd in that they are saying that Australia will do everything it can to meet its Kyoto protocol targets in terms of greenhouse gas emissions but is not going to ratify the protocol, which is of course the legal instrument by which it could require everyone else to do the right thing. It seems to me to be very strange to say that we want to do the right thing, but we do not seek to have other countries internationally do the right thing as well.

The second element in the member’s motion goes to the issue of water availability as a limiting criterion on Australia’s economic and population growth. He makes another accurate observation there. I know and respect Richard Pratt. I have heard his proposals for massive population growth fuelled by more dams in northern Australia. We have to be very careful that proposals for dams in northern Australia do not simply lead to our repeating the mistakes that have been made in southern Australia and lead to some of the problems with water availability and water quality with which we are only too familiar—particularly in the Murray-Darling Basin, with which the member would also be familiar.

The problems involving salinity and water quality have been spoken about in this House on many occasions. Recently there was a report in the *Australian* by Amanda Hodge following up that newspaper’s Save the Murray campaign. Some of the points she made have been made before, such as the point that Adelaide’s water could be undrinkable in 20 years time on two out of every five days. The Murray-Darling Basin Commission’s report of last October found that 95 per cent of the Murray suffered from environmental degradation and that water quality ranged from poor to very poor. Fish populations were in poor condition along the length of the Murray and down more than 80 per cent on original population numbers in 17 per cent of the river. The report recommended the return of two-thirds of the Murray’s natural annual flow to the river. That is a pretty big ask, given that less than 30 per cent of the river’s median annual flow gets there now.

The study also follows an August report from river scientist Peter Cullen which concluded that the Murray needed a massive 1,000 gigalitres in environmental flows. Given that sort of background, it is regrettable that the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, a $1.4 billion program which was to be the river’s white knight, has all but stalled. The chairman of the ministerial council’s community advisory council, Leith Boully, has been told by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Warren Truss, that she must reapply for her position. Her observation is, ‘I am not sure federally there’s the interest or skills to lead that debate.’

Given the severity of the issue, you would expect that the government would be dealing with this in a serious way rather than in a political way. But what did we get from the Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, last week in his address to the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics outlook conference? We got a political speech. He engaged in attacks on the state governments and made clear that his intention was to have the question of water management and access to water as a matter of partisan controversy between the Commonwealth and the states.

Prior to the 1996 election, the then opposition leader John Howard made great play and virtue of his intention to work cooperatively with the states, but now we get an intention on the part of the Deputy Prime Minister to fight the states. He attacked the New South Wales government’s Native Vegetation and Conservation Act—he derided it as ‘command and control legislation’—when it is a genuine attempt at environment protection dealing with land clearing, salinity and water quality protection issues. We have the former environment minister Senator Hill castigating the Queensland
government for not implementing land clearing but then we have Deputy Prime Minister Anderson castigating the New South Wales government for implementing land clearing controls. You have to ask yourself: how fair dinkum are the federal government? They are simply playing politics.

Further, the Deputy Prime Minister says that farmers have to be compensated for any reduction in water allocation or vegetation clearance controls but he goes on to say that the Commonwealth will pay no compensation whatsoever—that all compensation must be paid by the states. Then he has the nerve to claim that the federal government is taking a leadership role in sustainable water management policies. What a joke! As my colleague Senator O’Brien has pointed out, the federal government has a key role in this area but has failed to show any national leadership during the past six years.

The Deputy Prime Minister’s new found courage in state bashing owes everything to the fact that the conservatives no longer are in control of any of the states. His position is a recipe for inaction. He wants to make the states a scapegoat. He also wants to make the environment a scapegoat. When action is required, the clear consequence of his contribution will be to prevent any of the action which is needed to properly allocate water and protect our precious water resources.

He also had a lot to say about property rights. It is surprising to hear conservative MPs talking about property rights. We hear conservative MPs frequently lecturing us about responsibilities and obligations rather than rights. In my view there is not a right to ruin the environment. We are going to get more inaction rather than the collective approach, the cooperative federal-state approach, which is needed to deal with such serious issues.

In relation to the National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality, it is the Howard government which has been delaying implementation of these things. For example, it has refused to agree to the recommendations of the Victorian government for the spending of $20 million of its money, holding back on approving some $4.2 million for projects such as stream stabilisation works to enhance environmental flow management and stressed rivers in the Glenelg Hopkins—over half a million dollars which the Commonwealth refuses to sign off on—the Lower Goulburn Waterway and flood plain rehabilitation and the Lower Avoca Wetland Management Survey. These projects bowled up by the Victorian government back in September have still not been approved by the Commonwealth.

The member for Mallee has identified one of the most serious problems facing the nation in the 21st century. Solving these problems will require federal-state cooperation and collective efforts on the part of all stakeholders. Unfortunately, the leader of the member’s party has shown time and time again that he does not have what it takes to meet these challenges. (Time expired)

Mr HAWKER (Wannon) (1.14 p.m.)—I am delighted to be able to support my friend and colleague the member for Mallee on this motion, and I commend him for his enthusiasm and for his commitment to addressing water conservation right across Australia and particularly in the Wimmera-Mallee area. I also commend him for his commitment to the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline project. I think it is very timely that this motion has been brought forward. It does identify some very serious problems facing many parts of country Australia, particularly the south-east of Australia, with the series of dry years we have had. It also identifies the fact that water is becoming a limitation to economic development in many parts of the south-east, particularly in the Wimmera-Mallee region, and it highlights the importance of implementing water conservation projects, particularly capital upgrades where we have some very inefficient systems—in their day they were very innovative, but that was many decades ago. I commend the member for bringing this motion forward and I am certainly very keen to support it.

I was initially pleased to hear the comments from the member for Wills when he supported the motion, but I was then very disappointed when he—

Mrs Hull—He degenerated.
Mr HAWKER—That is right; he degenerated into trying to make this just a partisan political issue. It was very disappointing. In particular, he seemed to completely overlook the fact that the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality was an initiative of this coalition government and that it is the state governments that have been causing all the hold-ups in getting it under way. That really is an appalling indictment on the states. It is not good enough for him to come into this chamber just to be an apologist for the Victorian Labor government and others; he ought to be showing a bit of leadership and pointing out to the Victorian government that they have responsibilities to make sure that the national action plan gets under way—there is very important work that needs to be done in tackling some of the salinity problems.

I would also like to talk specifically about some of the benefits that we would see through undertaking some of these capital works—in particular, the piping of the remaining parts of the Wimmera-Mallee water system, which the member for Mallee has detailed very eloquently in his speech. I would like to talk about one aspect which shows, if we can get this under way, just how much spin-off there will be for regional Victoria, not only in terms of new development but, most importantly, in terms of new development for jobs. One case I am talking about is the Basin Minerals project, which has the potential to give a really huge economic boost to western Victoria. If this project goes ahead, it will have a significant impact on the communities in the Horsham region, where it is based, spreading through to those around Hamilton and the port of Portland, which is in my electorate. In fact, I think it could really change the face of the region in many ways.

The exploration work has been going on and the commercialisation work is being undertaken, but what we are talking about is a project that requires water. The piping of the Wimmera-Mallee system is an integral part of ensuring that this project can go ahead. Mr Deputy Speaker, given the short time I have available, I wonder if I could have incorporated in Hansard a table which outlines the water requirement and also the job creation aspects of the Basin Minerals development.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. I.R. Causley)—Because of the shortness of time, I will allow you to table that. I will leave it up to the Speaker to adjudicate about whether it should be incorporated in Hansard.

Mr HAWKER—If it gets under way, this project will require between 5,000 and 7,000 megalitres—or five and seven gigalitres—of water a year. It will mean the development of an additional 130 jobs, including exploration personnel. That will probably mean some 540 full-time positions, based on Western Australian experience, for a region that really is looking for new employment opportunities. The impact on the regional economy will be huge, and I think this is an example of the sorts of things that can be done if we can improve our water conservation and make better use of our existing facilities. In the very little time left to me, can I again say that I am delighted to support the member for Mallee and to be working with him tomorrow, when a delegation is coming to parliament to meet with senior ministers to discuss this further. I think the piping of the Wimmera-Mallee system offers tremendous benefits for our region. I seek leave to have the table incorporated in Hansard.

Leave granted.

The table read as follows—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Commencement</th>
<th>Water requirement</th>
<th>Employment numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction of mine and primary processing plant</td>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioning and ongoing operation of mine and primary treatment plant</td>
<td>2003–ongoing</td>
<td>5,000 to 7000 ML a year</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction and commissioning of secondary processing plant (location not determined)</td>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td></td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (1.19 p.m.)—It is with great pleasure that I rise to speak on this motion and I commend the member for Mallee for bringing it to the parliament. As we all know, water is a vital part of life. Research is essential to the understanding of weather patterns—looking at patterns such as El Nino that go around the world, seeing how those patterns are changing and how weather patterns are changing because of greenhouse gases et cetera. Water is very important in my electorate and drought has been very evident there in the last 10 years. Fortunately, this year the weather has improved and rain has fallen greatly. We have not overcome all our problems, but we have had a reasonable year. To extend that, we have had a good season in just about every product we produce. We need to make sure that we get on to drought proofing properties and using all the new ideas of farming that can assist us. The Tasmanian government, on my recommendations, has established the Meander Dam—Warners Creek—and this is going to assist in many enterprises. In cooperation with the federal government, I think that project will go ahead. It has been around a long time, but it is one of those areas that should go ahead. In 1983, a woman told me that when her brother left school aged nine he was going to start work on that dam; he was 75 when she told me this in 1983. I think we will get that dam up and running, but dams in Tasmania have been a bit hard in recent years.

The second point of the motion, I believe, recognises that adequate water availability is limiting Australia’s economic and population growth. If we use new technology, we can improve economic growth and also the number of people we have in the country. Water need not limit economic or population growth. We just have to do things much better. Australia has water all around it, under it and in the atmosphere. We have been wasteful in the past, and it is time for us to do a lot better. We can cope with many more people than we presently have in Australia.

In looking at new ways of doing things, I want to mention an inquiry of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services that was conducted in the last parliament. I remember going to the Riverland in South Australia—the electorate of Mr Speaker, the member for Wakefield—and looking at how they had changed to drip irrigation from channel irrigation. They were using only about a third of the water they had used before on the horticultural land. If you do things a lot smarter, you can increase production and use less water. That takes cooperation between the states and the federal government, and it takes driving. The federal government has a big role to play in that area.

Most municipalities in Tasmania now have water meters, and most consumers of water in Tasmania are charged for their water. Most users—and this has not come without controversial comments, as you would imagine—know what water costs them now. The change has thrown up some issues that need to be resolved, but it has been in the interests of the conservation of water and understanding how much water we have.

There is a need to continue to do that. The debate about Basslink, the link between Tasmania and Victoria, comes down to water—whether we use it for energy or whether we use it on farmland for farm production. And there is also the environmental flow in the rivers to keep them healthy. We have a lot of water in some parts of Tasmania, but we do not always have it in the right place.

The quality of water is very important, especially in food production. Tasmania produces much high-value food and value-added food products; we need to have high quality water to meet the standards that people require. (Time expired)
Mrs HULL (Riverina) (1.25 p.m.)—It gives me great pleasure to support the motion of the member for Mallee today and to have the opportunity to outline what is happening in the Riverina electorate and its progressive moves in respect of water. The Riverina electorate is widely acknowledged as one of the most productive food growing regions of the globe. In an otherwise dry inland environment, access to water is a key requirement of the many globally competitive Riverina rural enterprises that each year feed increasingly large numbers of people around the globe.

Few industries have been as closely reviewed, analysed, restructured and made more accountable, or been subjected to as many inquiries, as my irrigators have been. But they have kept on investing and developing their business operations to create facilities and operating mechanisms that now have few peers. However, over the past decade, many uncertainties have emerged about the future capacity of irrigation farmers to retain their long-held entitlements to water. Many rural businesses, particularly those in the Coleambally area, are concerned that their future livelihood is threatened—not from competition but from governments walking away from previously agreed joint industry and government development agreements.

As acknowledged in the recent Australia-wide assessment of major natural resource management issues, rural businesses are well down the track in adopting and implementing land management practices to improve production and minimise off-farm impacts by combating salinity, acidity and soil erosion. There remains much to be done, since these three threats also affect off-farm assets such as roads, bridges and buildings. This assessment, produced by the National Land and Water Resources Audit, provides facts and figures that will help us make better decisions regarding agricultural productivity and the environment. This information will help land managers use our natural resource management dollars much more effectively than ever before. This will include better targeting of the $1.4 billion of the coalition’s National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

Large industry investments in water efficient technologies will be necessary to support this government’s salinity and water quality objectives. However, an ominous threat looms large for my rural businesses and those of the member for Mallee. All of the rigorous scientific review, negotiation, consultation and infrastructure development are on hold because industry is thwarted from further investment. The usual financiers understandably want underpinning security for their loan agreements to fund the sorely needed improvements to irrigation schemes. But rural businesses are being told by some state governments that access to water will be provided for only 10 years—and possibly less. Such a short-term view seriously prejudices the ability of rural enterprises to finance the acquisition of the required technological management systems that will lead to much more efficient water use.

An urgent need exists for Australia to implement a real property right in access to water, not a temporary allocation for 10 years as proposed by the New South Wales government. I support the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon. John Anderson, in his discussions and in the commitment he made last week at an ABARE conference. We need ongoing access to water sufficient to secure loan funds without unnecessarily high risk premiums—premiums that would otherwise need to be applied to compensate financiers for additional risks if regulators continue to change the rules of the irrigation business.

Communities throughout my electorate have been strongly participating in the development of successive land and water management plans. But they experience great frustration when dealing with a fundamental lack of understanding of the extent to which they have built enterprises within regulatory frameworks that continue to change markedly. And time away from their businesses to attend bureaucratic talkfests means lower income, through either lower production or increased costs.

State governments have not only diminished the capacity of irrigators to borrow to fund the adoption of new technology but also denied irrigators compensation for reductions in water allocations. Consequently, banks
have expressed a reluctance to lend when compensation is not guaranteed and when it is possible that the nature of an asset may be altered after funds are advanced.

The reality is that, under our Constitution, responsibility for land and water management and property rights issues clearly rests with the states. (Time expired)

Mr WILKIE (Swan) (1.30 p.m.)—I would like to place on record my support for the motion moved by the member for Mallee and, in doing so, hope that it may, at last, lead to some tangible actions by this government, in stark contrast to its poor record in this area since 1996. I congratulate the member for Mallee on bringing the motion forward. South-eastern Australia is not the only corner of this continent that faces challenges in managing its water resources. Like other parts of the country, Western Australia has only a finite water supply and rainfalls are concentrated largely in limited regions in the state. Water is a crucial resource and it must be effectively managed to ensure its ongoing availability. Changing rainfall patterns and greater demand on water supplies by domestic, industrial and agricultural users means that a cooperative approach to water resource management is crucial. Sadly, the coalition government has failed dismally in this regard. Any achievements that have been made in recent years have been made by state Labor governments. On that note, I congratulate the election of a Rann Labor government in South Australia. I am confident of the good government it will deliver for the people of that state.

In 1994 the Council of Australian Governments first addressed the issue of water reform. On this issue, the national government must provide leadership and bring state and territory governments with it. It was appropriate that water reform was addressed in this forum. However, any momentum generated by COAG in 1994 has long since run out. Instead, the government has again chosen to play the blame game. Rather than show leadership, it now blames the states. It is funny how water is often involved when the government is seeking to blame others. Following coalition logic, perhaps the states threw the water overboard. In reality, the coalition is suffering a policy drought.

Last week, the Deputy Prime Minister addressed the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics Outlook 2002 and sought to deal with this issue. The sum total of his grasp of water management was to announce that COAG would, again, consider the issue in April this year. So for the Deputy Prime Minister it is back to square one, despite the discussions held on this issue in 1994. He has no choice but to ignore them because this federal government has done nothing in response to them in the past. The Deputy Prime Minister did not miss an opportunity to criticise the New South Wales government for its environmental policies. He conveniently failed to mention that he had responsibility for water reform during the first disastrous term of the Howard government. Between March 1996 and October 1998, the sum total of his achievements in water reform amounted to nothing—not a drop.

The blame game is not a sign of leadership; it is a sign of government with no policies and no direction. While the federal government on one hand plays the blame game, the state governments are getting on with preserving this valuable resource. In my own state of Western Australia, the Gallop Labor government is getting on with the job. It continues to manage a regime of water restrictions that encourages the responsible use of water and educates the community about how this can be achieved. Similarly, the Gallop Labor government is tackling the major problem of salinity. Western Australia has the largest area of dryland salinity and faces the greatest prospect of salinity increasing unless this problem is addressed. Rather than passing the buck, the Gallop Labor government is doing something constructive about these challenging issues.

The private sector is playing its part. I recently had the pleasure of attending the opening of a waste water treatment facility in Fremantle that utilises technologies that were developed entirely by a local company, the Wormall Group, and I congratulate the company on its groundbreaking technological achievements. The private sector is using its
expertise and ingenuity—and putting its money where its mouth is—to develop innovative solutions to water conservation and treatment. This is not easy given the lack of incentives for companies to undertake research and development because of the policies of the federal government.

I thank the member for Mallee for bringing this important issue to the attention of the House. I hope that tangible achievements result from it so that the federal government can actually start doing something about water conservation and not simply blaming others for its own lack of achievement.

Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (1.34 p.m.)—I would like to lend my support for the motion moved by the member for Mallee today as a friend and someone who shares a passion for the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline. It seeks to save water for western Victoria, to deliver environmental flow benefits to other river systems in Victoria and to give the South Australians a break. South Australians, frankly, need a break. I was reading in today’s edition of the Australian the response of state governments to the recommendation for environmental flows through the Murray River system. The Australian Conservation Foundation land and water coordinator, Tim Fisher, who is not readily known for gratuitous pieces of kind words on behalf of the government, is appealing to all the states that adjoin the Murray River, or are a part of its system, to put aside their differences. He said:

This could be the last chance for the Murray River. We’re looking for leadership here, but we’re afraid Victoria and NSW may be planning to sabotage a healthy outcome.

That is an independent assessment of where the state of water policy is at. Doesn’t it contrast vividly with what the Labor members of parliament are trying to put to you in this House today? The article further stated:

A spokesman for Victorian Environment Minister Sheryl Garbutt said the state Government was ‘not prepared to make this kind of decision now’—

The government was not prepared to make a decision about environmental flows in the Murray system. I understand that people in South Australia are a little anxious about that inability to make a decision on what is a difficult issue. What illustrates the difficulty is that, when a number of Liberal and National Party members of parliament talk today about solutions and pathways to tackle this very difficult issue, all we get from the Labor Party is carping—‘We’ve got carp in our river systems; we’ve got carp’—which is the only policy we have from them on the environment. Mr Thomson, the shadow minister, is following on from Senator Bolkus, the former Labor environment spokesman: he does not offer any ideas; he just has a go at the margins of what is a very difficult issue facing this country.

We all know that healthy natural systems go to the heart of a healthy productive capacity in this country. That is what this debate is seeking to draw out. We know the anthropological influence that exists on our climate and the impact that is having on rainfall. That has a further impact on the river flows and what is available for environmental flows and agricultural production. We know that that is an issue and the government is tackling it. What also needs to be looked at is the regional impact of these changes. The climate is changing and variations in rainfall will affect different parts of our country quite differently. That is why, in this motion, we are looking for more research into these changes in rainfall patterns.

These regional microclimate assessments are required to understand and evaluate the impact climate change is having at a regional level and to understand the consequences of it. Some people might say, ‘Gee, this is difficult to handle,’ but the cost of not doing something to tackle some of these issues is just as great as the cost of turning our backs on some of these terrific ideas, such as the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr BILLSON—Those opposite heckle about the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline. It is clear that the Labor Party is not committed to it, otherwise the state government would have seen fit to get off its backside and back the project. Here is a constructive proposal which is trying to pipe one of the largest earthen distribution systems in the world. It is a simple idea. If more than 90 per cent of
the 1,000 megalitres of water being channelled is not reaching its destination and is therefore not productive, that is a grotesque waste of water. Through this project—through piping those earthen channels—we can not only ensure better water quality for productive uses but also guard against waste. The dividend for the Australian community and the environment is that water saved, which can then go into environmental flows. That is why this is another constructive and practical measure.

Those opposite also saw fit to criticise the Leader of the National Party. He is putting forward a new approach—one on information, property rights, incentives and partnerships. What is wrong with that? Why is the Labor Party criticising that? It simply has no grasp of the importance of this issue. Property rights are an important signal for investment. Over the years, successive state governments have overallocated water. Some people are given an expectation that they will be able to get certain volumes of water and, unless there is a torrential downpour in the season, they will never be able to get that amount of water. We need to work with the people who hold those water entitlements to make them real, fungible and bankable. Then if they are promised three gigs of water a season, they are guaranteed to get the three gigs. And if we have a better than average season of rainfall and have greater flows in our river systems, there is more there for the environment and there is more there that we can put into the market to draw from the market the price it is prepared to pay for that scarce resource. There is a pathway to be followed to secure this vision. I support this motion and commend the government for looking for ways forward. (Time expired)

Mr Ripoll (Oxley) (1.39 p.m.)—I am privileged to speak to the motion moved by the member for Mallee. Firstly, I acknowledge that this is an extremely serious issue in terms of what we do with our water. In the few minutes that I have, I want to lay a couple of ideas on the table. I also want to mention briefly that members of government take the opportunity to stand up in this place and pretend that they are in opposition and say, ‘We need to do something.’ I say to them: you can do something—you are in government. You can talk to your ministers. You are the ones in the engine room, in the policy room, so do not come back carping to us about too many carp in the river or too many carp in the policy room. At the end of the day, the buck stops with you. You are in government; you are the ones who need to do something about this.

On this side of the chamber, we have plenty of ideas on what we should do and what should happen. The member for Mallee has raised a number of very serious issues about rainfall. Firstly I want to set a couple of things straight. People might be confused about the amount of rainfall. Australia’s rainfall over the last 100 years has not decreased; it has actually increased. There are a number of research papers which show that quite categorically. In fact, south-east Australia has had one of the highest recorded averages of rainfall over the last 100 years, not only in numbers of days but also in intensity.

While I accept the fact that perhaps in the last decade we have seen a change in rainfall patterns—in terms of where that water might actually be falling and other issues such as run-off, land degradation, salination, and a range of issues in terms of where that water might end up—I do not think you can isolate it and say that the last 10 years is a more powerful indicator of rainfall than, say, the last 100 years. What we are actually discussing is how we use water—what we do with it, how we catch it, how we store it, how it runs off land, who has rights over water, who owns it, how much we can catch, and all those sorts of issues.

The member for Mallee raised in his motion a number of important questions about the amount of water, the availability of water, limiting Australia’s potential for economic growth and population growth. I fully support that. I support the idea that Australia can have a much higher sustained population that can grow economically. But under the current situation, without increased water usage, without a range of policies and leadership from the federal government, we are not going to get to the point where we can move on to have the debate about our population target or what an ideal population number
might be until we can resolve some complicated, but not impossible to resolve, issues about water usage—who owns it, who pays for it, the cost of it and so forth.

Having said that, I want to quickly move on to the idea of specific projects. A number of members have raised projects in their local area that they think are important, and I am sure there is a range of projects right across Australia. You might not think Oxley is an area that has water issues—and it probably does not in the scheme of things, in terms of some really large rural electorates. But right next door, in part of the Ipswich region—in the Lockyer Valley, the Warrill Valley, and in a range of other areas—there are grower groups who have come to see me to talk about issues in their electorate regarding water usage and recycling. I think one of the clever things that this country can do is look at better ways to use the water that is already being used. While this idea might frighten a few people, it is certainly not new, either in Australia or internationally—that is, the idea of treating waste water, sewage water, to a drinkable, safe level. It is already being done in a number of areas. I know that India has a program which works extremely well. India recycles its waste water to pure, clean drinking water.

The grower groups towards the Lockyer Valley and Warrill Valley in my region are quite keen to see some federal government leadership. They want to see some money—small money. I think the member for Mallee was talking about $70-odd million. Around my area they are asking for about $10 million. They would like to see treated sewage piped directly from Brisbane become clean water. Currently that water is going to places like rivers; it is being treated and it is ending up in Moreton Bay and in a whole range of areas. We could use that water and increase the production, the economy and the growth in those country areas. You would see those rural regions and towns boom. You would see boom times back if we could get that water piped there. It is a fantastic idea. It is an area that the government should look at and it is an area in respect of which the government could take a leadership role. When I see that little bit of money being put forward, I will know that the leadership is there.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 1.45 p.m., the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 106A. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

New South Wales Surf Lifesaving Titles 2002

Ms HALL (Shortland) (1.45 p.m.)—The 2002 New South Wales surf lifesaving titles were held and hosted by the Belmont Swansea Surf Life Saving Club at Blacksmiths Beach over the last two weekends. The event was an outstanding success, with the junior titles being held on the first weekend in March and the senior titles held last weekend. One hundred and twenty-nine clubs competed. There were 3,500 senior competitors and 1,800 masters competitors.

The event was organised by volunteers from all the surf lifesaving clubs in the area, and it had considerable support from the local community. There was no big event organiser and it did not cost big dollars to put on. There were no big sponsors. The carnival will bring $12 million into the local community. There were 400 volunteers from the local clubs, and the local communities of Blacksmiths, Swansea and Belmont pitched in.

Surf Lifesaving New South Wales announced yesterday that the 2003 state titles would again be held at Blacksmiths Beach and, in doing so, said that the 2002 titles had been one of the best ever. Congratulations to everyone associated with the titles, especially Belmont Swansea Surf Lifesaving Club. It was an outstanding success and it really shows the impact that the local community can have when they work together. (Time expired)

Broken Hill: St Patrick’s Day Race Club

Mr JOHN COBB (Parkes) (1.46 p.m.)—I have the honour of being a patron of the St Patrick’s Day Race Club at Broken Hill. On Saturday, 2 March they held their annual
meeting. This is a magnificent meeting and probably the largest western meeting held in Australia. It is held for a wonderful cause and it is the greatest community effort I have ever seen in the west. It is held on behalf of the Catholic schools of Broken Hill and it does a magnificent job. It brings the community together in a way I have not seen before, including people from all around western New South Wales and even from South Australia and Queensland. It is an absolute credit to Broken Hill. It raises a lot of money for the best ideal of them all, which is educating our children, at very limited cost in this case to the federal government. I must congratulate Broken Hill on its effort.

Macfarlane Burnet, Sir Frank

Mr ZAHRA (McMillan) (1.47 p.m.)—In response to some media coverage over the weekend about Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet, I want to set the record straight about this great Australian. Macfarlane Burnet was one of Australia’s foremost scientists and one of the greatest biomedical researchers of the 20th century. He was author or co-author of over 500 scientific papers. He wrote more than 30 books and received almost every honour and award available to a scientist, including the Nobel Prize.

Mac Burnet, as he was known to all of his mates, was born in the Latrobe Valley. In fact, he was born in my home town of Traralgon. He was the second of seven children and a son of the local bank manager. He was active in public life. From about the mid-1950s, Mac Burnet increasingly accepted memberships, often as chairman, of scientific or public policy committees, including the World Health Organisation’s Medical Research Advisory Committee, the Papua New Guinea Medical Research Advisory Committee and the Australian Academy of Science, of which he was president.

He was a man who spoke out against cigarette smoking and radiation, and he advocated the fluoridation of water. He strongly opposed the White Australia policy. Although he was internationally acclaimed, he turned down numerous overseas appointments throughout his career, preferring to work in our country—Australia—as a proud man of our country. Perhaps Mac Burnet’s finest act of genius was to appoint Gustav Nossal as his successor at the Hall Institute. Gus Nossal said this about Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet:

Burnet brought to his laboratory work and to his extensive writings the unique spectrum of his gifts: originality, imagination, honesty, breadth—

(Time expired)

Veterans: Gold Card

Mr CHARLES (La Trobe) (1.49 p.m.)—I wish to read to the House a letter that I received from a constituent:

Dear Mr Charles,

My husband Walter Cantwell and I would like to thank you for his Birthday Card which you sent on the occasion of his 92nd Birthday, and for the interesting thoughts.

Walter is, at the moment, recovering from a fall on 27/2 when he broke his hip and he has had a complete hip replacement. All through, he has had every care, the ambulance arrived quickly and was very caring, he was operated on at Knox Private the next day (Monday) then had time at Vic Rehab in Springvale Road, and all through, Vet Affairs have covered the cost and we are so thankful. He has a Gold Card being 27 years in the Navy.

We were wondering if you could be so kind as to let the relevant people in Vet Affairs know how much we appreciated the wonderful care in every way Walter Cantwell VX154321 has received.

Thank you too for all you do for La Trobe.

Walter and June Cantwell.

Too frequently we cast aspersions on our public servants and we find fault and complaint about them. I simply wanted to bring this to the House’s attention as an instance where a constituent of mine has congratulated a federal department. I would like to add my congratulations as well.

Media: Cross-media Ownership Rules

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (1.50 p.m.)—In last Friday’s News Limited newspaper, the Australian, the media editor Matthew Doman wrote a piece suggesting that politicians should change their thinking not to overhaul Australia’s media laws. On the same day, I replied with a letter to the letters editor of the Australian which was not published. For the benefit of the House, I wrote in part:

... the public, overwhelmingly, still gets its news and information from traditional media sources—
newspapers, radio stations and television stations—and it is these sources that influence the way the public thinks and votes.

*News Limited* has a stranglehold on the print media. In terms of its share of circulation within Australia, *News Limited* owns and controls some two thirds of the capital and national newspaper market, three quarters of the Sunday newspaper market and almost one quarter of the regional newspaper market. In addition, *News Limited* has a quarter stake in Foxtel’s pay television and News Interactive online as well as additional media interests in AAP Information Services.

I ask, how can it be in the public interest to change Australia’s cross-media ownership laws to allow *News Limited* to buy, in addition to its existing vast national and international media interests, a free-to-air television network, or radio network, or both, in Australia?

I am appalled that no one employed by *News Limited* is arguing about the grave dangers to our democracy of further concentrating media ownership in our country. To be fair to *News Limited*, neither is anyone in Publishing and Broadcasting Limited.

In terms of our democracy, this is an extremely serious issue for all Australians.

The Australian’s reporting of this issue gives truth to the saying that “he who pays the piper calls the tune”.

*(Time expired)*

**British Pensions**

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (1.52 p.m.)—Last week, I attended a rally at Customs House Square in Circular Quay, along with a number of expatriate Britons from my electorate. The rally was organised by the British Australian Pensioners Association to protest at the British government’s continuing refusal to index the pensions they pay to the increasing cost of living. The refusal is particularly confusing when one keeps in mind the close relationship that our two countries have traditionally enjoyed, as well as the fact that British expatriates living in the United States, EU countries and even Turkey are benefiting from fully indexed pensions.

The obvious side effect of this discrimination is that Australia as a nation misses out also. For example, in Australia, an expat pensioner who had retired 10 years ago would receive only £52 per week from their government when, if their pension was indexed at the same level as expats retiring this year, it would be £72.60 per week, a cumulative underpayment of $18,300 over the decade. When this figure is translated to the national level, it emerges that the Australian economy is missing out on an annual injection of $450 million through the refusal of the British government to index these pensions.

There are over 6,000 British-born people in my electorate and a large proportion of these are of pensionable age. The majority of them have spent all or nearly all of their working lives earning and paying tax in Britain for the benefit of that country. Now that they have left, they are being denied their rightful entitlements and are understandably aggrieved. I fully support their campaign.

*(Time expired)*

**Oxley Electorate: General Practitioners**

Mr RIPOLL (Oxley) (1.53 p.m.)—I rise today to raise the very important issue of the need for more general practitioners to be made available for my constituents in Ipswich and Brisbane and to make it known to the Howard government that the current health policies regarding general practitioners have created a disincentive for doctors to open their books to new patients in my area. The lack of available GPs and a decrease in the incentive for doctors to use bulk-billing are major issues that have been brewing in Ipswich for quite some time. Ipswich is a rapidly developing city, with new families moving into the area and taking advantage of the wonderful lifestyles we have there. However, families will be turned away if they are unable to access a local GP. It is of the utmost importance to create incentives for more GPs to move into the area and to make it easier for existing GPs—for now and for later population growth.

I believe that the Howard government’s systematic destruction of the Australian health care system is now hitting ordinary people in the hip pocket and will be hitting new residents as they are forced now to pay up-front for GP services and to travel outside the area to get those services. All residents deserve to have a GP available in a suburb
close by. Those who do not, have to take either public or private transport and go outside their area at a cost to themselves.

The combination of the 80 patients maximum per day regulation, stricter doctor provider number issuing and a lack of government incentives for doctors to move out into the outer metropolitan and regional areas has seen new patients being turned away from outer suburban medical centres. The Australian Medical Association has found opinion to contradict the Australian Medical Work Force Advisory Committee’s recent findings of a surplus of GPs in rural areas and has produced a GP work force survey that indicates doctors are worried about the serious risk of shortage of doctors. (Time expired)

Petition: Closure of Kin Kora ANZ Bank Branch

Mr NEVILLE (Hinkler) (1.55 p.m.)—I would like to draw the House’s attention to the matter of a petition, recently compiled, regarding the closure of a branch of the ANZ Bank in Gladstone. The petition is supported by 597 signatories and its main clauses request you, Mr Speaker, and the assembled members of the House to consider the closure of the Kin Kora branch, located in one of the leading commercial areas of Gladstone. The branch has been open for 20 years and has literally grown up with the area. It has ample parking and customer access. Its closure would unquestionably inconvenience a large number of loyal customers, including the principal petitioner, Mr Frederick Blair Charles of 7 Roe Street, Gladstone.

It staggers me that the ANZ Bank would contemplate closing a branch within Gladstone, considering the recently commenced construction of Comalco’s massive new plant and planning by a further four international companies. This is a city which will need more infrastructure, whether it be roads, housing, civic facilities or financial services—and I stress financial services. Leaving such a dynamic part of Gladstone at this time shows a lack of understanding as to where the city and the region is heading, to say nothing of the inconvenience to business and customers in the Kin Kora area and the south-western suburbs of Gladstone.

I join my state parliamentary colleague Liz Cunningham in protesting this action. The closure of the Commonwealth Bank branch at Boyne Island was a mistake and I think the ANZ Bank would do well to reconsider its position before it goes down a similar path. Mr Speaker, this petition has been certified by the Clerk and I table it herewith.

The petition read as follows—

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:

The petition of certain residents of the State of Queensland draws the attention of the House—

That the ANZ Bank reconsider the closure of The Kin Kora Branch as it will disadvantage the residents of this area, many of whom will be forced to change banks.

The branch has been opened for 20 years and serves the local business’s and many consumer customers. The Kin Kora branch has ample parking facilities and easy access. This closure will cause much inconvenience to myself and many other customers.

The Gladstone region is presently undergoing a boom in local industry and ANZ appears not to have considered this.

Your petitioners therefore request the house to review this closure and that the branch remain open.

from 597 citizens. (Time expired)

Education: Fruit Breaks in Schools

Ms HOARE (Charlton) (1.57 p.m.)—A good friend of mine is a primary school teacher, and each morning, pupils are asked to bring their piece of fruit into the classroom. At 10.30 a.m., in most circumstances, the kids have their fruit break while going on with their work. His kids have named this time as ‘fruit attack’. They do not make a big deal of it; things go on as usual while the kids munch on an apple or banana or whatever. The teacher, of course, joins in.

When this idea was first presented to his class, they had a simple chat and an explanation of how food is turned into sugar and how sugar is energy for your body and brain. The teacher explained that some food, like chocolate, is turned into fast sugar and, while fast sugar works quickly, it runs out sooner. Slow sugar is better sugar because it lasts longer and is better for you. Slow sugar
comes from different types of food, including fruit. Slow sugar from fruit gives us energy for our brain so that we can think, learn and feel better.

So at 10.30 a.m. each day in class they have their fruit break, while just going on with their work. The kids in his class are really keen for 10.30 to arrive and let him know when it does. By joining in with the kids at this time, the teacher assures me that the fruit break at 10.30 each morning gives an undoubted lift. This activity is obviously good for the children in an immediate sense, as well as by helping raise their awareness of good health and dietary habits at a young age in a very practical way.

Robertson Electorate: Riding for the Disabled Association

Mr LLOYD (Robertson) (1.58 p.m.)—On Monday, 4 March I had the privilege of attending the official opening of the indoor arena for the Central Coast branch of the Riding for the Disabled Association. It was opened by Her Excellency the Governor of New South Wales. This important facility was the result of a combination of a number of grants, and I am very pleased that one of the first contributions that was made was $28,000 out of the Federation Fund for each electorate. I was very pleased to be involved in that.

The riding for the disabled facility—the indoor arena—is such an important facility because it means that the young people who use this service are no longer at the mercy of the weather. It is amazing to see the look on the faces—the way they light up—of these severely disabled young people who use this facility. The facility gives them a mobility and freedom that many of them are never able to experience in any other way. Also, when they are on the back of a horse it gives them height. Many of these young people are restricted to wheelchairs and they do not often get that height and the sense of movement. If it was not for the work of the volunteers of the Central Coast branch of the Riding for the Disabled Association, this important facility would not be a reality. I pay tribute to their chairman, Vicki McGuinness, who put a great deal of work into this over many years to make sure that this very important indoor arena became a reality on 4 March.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 2.00 p.m., in accordance with standing order 106A, the time for members’ statements has concluded.

CONDOLENCES

Cutler, Sir Roden, VC, AK, KCMG, KCVO, CBE

Mr HOWARD (Bennelong—Prime Minister) (2.00 p.m.)—I move:

That the House records its deep regret at the death on 21 February 2002 of an outstanding Australian, Sir Roden Cutler, VC, AK, KCMG, KCVO, CBE, who died in hospital after a long illness. The House extends its profound sympathy to his family in their bereavement.

By any measure, the late Sir Roden Cutler was a gallant and fine Australian who won the respect and affection particularly but not only of the people of New South Wales in the time that he served as Governor of that state, from 1966 for a period of 12 years. He was born in Manly, New South Wales, in 1916, the son of Arthur and Ruby Cutler. He was educated at Sydney Boys High School and the University of Sydney, graduating in economics in 1934. He represented Australian universities as a swimmer and the state of New South Wales in rifle shooting.

His life was one committed to the service of his country and his fellow Australians. His service, both in war and in peace, was courageous, distinguished and dedicated. After joining the Second AIF in 1940, Sir Roden was awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous and consistent gallantry against the enemy during the capture of the Syrian town of Merdjayoun in June 1941. A few weeks later, while moving forward against machine-gun fire at Damour, he suffered severe wounds in a leg that was subsequently amputated. With Sir Roden’s passing, there are now only two living Australian holders of the Victoria Cross and a total of 17 throughout the world.

After his discharge from the Army in 1941, he became the State Secretary of the RSL and Assistant Commissioner at the former Department of Repatriation. In 1946, Sir Roden entered the diplomatic service. He
had a successful career in the diplomatic service, serving as Ambassador to the Netherlands, delegate to the United Nations General Assembly, Consul General in New York and High Commissioner in Pakistan, the then Ceylon and New Zealand, as well as in other posts. From 1966 to 1981, Sir Roden served as Governor of New South Wales and was the longest serving appointee to that office, eclipsing the previous record of 12 years by Governor Lachlan Macquarie. He and his wife were widely respected and admired for the great service they gave to the state of New South Wales. As governor, he was advised by four premiers of New South Wales of varying political persuasions.

He also served as President of the Scouts Association of New South Wales and gave much of his time to numerous other charities in a voluntary capacity, including the Red Cross, Legacy and the Bradman Museum. In recent years, he also helped to raise necessary funds for the Australian Service Nurses Memorial on Anzac Parade. In addition, Sir Roden was prominent in business life after he left the office of Governor of New South Wales.

I am pleased that I had the opportunity shortly before Christmas to visit Sir Roden in the hospital in which he was staying in Rose Bay, Sydney. I well remember a marvellous conversation with him, his wife and some of his friends, and the wonderful spirit and the sense of hope and optimism that he displayed about Australia and about the life that he had lived, despite his very considerable illness.

In every way, Sir Roden was an exceptional Australian and it is right that this House properly honours and mourns his passing. A state funeral for Sir Roden was held at Sydney’s St Andrew’s Cathedral on 28 February, and many citizens of Sydney and Australia, including many World War II veterans, gathered outside to listen to the broadcast of the service in the overflowing cathedral. The Most Reverend Sir Marcus Loane, the former Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, told the congregation that Sir Roden was more than six feet tall, with presence and prestige to match. Sir Roden’s first wife died in 1990. He is survived by his second wife, Joan, and his four sons from his first marriage, David, Anthony, Richard and Mark.

Sir Roden left an indelible impression on the life of Australia, particularly Sydney and New South Wales. He was a great servant of the state as Governor, he was a gallant soldier for Australia and he won the greatest military award that any person can win in battle through showing conspicuous bravery in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. He was a great lover of sport, and I and many other members of this House had the opportunity on numerous occasions of enjoying Sir Roden’s company, either at the Sydney Cricket Ground trust box or the box of the New South Wales Cricket Association. I well remember speaking to Alan Davidson, President of the New South Wales Cricket Association, at the Sydney test at the beginning of the year and reflecting upon the many times which Sir Roden had been to watch test matches as Alan’s guest, and we lamented the fact that it had not been possible for Sir Roden to come on that occasion. He was to die only a few weeks later.

He is, in the proper sense of the word, a great Australian; somebody who displays such extraordinary bravery, pays very dearly through the loss of a limb and then pours the rest of his life back into the service of his country as a contribution to his fellow Australians. He is somebody who is very properly honoured. He belongs very much to a generation of very brave, virtuous and gallant Australians, and as an outstanding representative of that generation—as Sir Roden was—it is right and proper that we honour his memory and carry this motion. On behalf of the government and the people of Australia, I extend to his widow, his four sons, their wives and their children the deepest sympathy, but also, may I say, the great thanksgiving of the Australian nation for a life lived to the full and a life that gave so much to the service of his fellow Australians.

Mr CREAN (Hotham—Leader of the Opposition) (2.08 p.m.)—I second the condolence motion and support the comments of the Prime Minister. Sir Roden Cutler lived a wonderfully full and generous life. It was a life also of great sacrifice and service. His Victoria Cross was gained after repeated and
high-level acts of bravery in one of Australia’s hardest fought campaigns of World War II against the pro-Nazi Vichy French forces in Syria. For more than two weeks in June 1941 he put his life on the line, helping drive back tank attacks and taking three machine-gun positions single-handedly. He eventually sustained a serious leg wound that led to the loss of his leg. While Sir Roden lost a leg in the service of his nation, he never lost his readiness to serve the nation. By honouring his service, we honour that of all those who have fought in our wars and are currently still fighting in Afghanistan.

Prior to his distinguished and record-breaking 16-year tenure as Governor of New South Wales, Sir Roden held numerous positions in which he served the Australian public, including as the New South Wales Secretary of the RSL and as Assistant Commissioner at the repatriation department. In 1946, he entered the diplomatic service and was appointed High Commissioner to New Zealand. He later served as High Commissioner to Ceylon, Australian Minister to Egypt, High Commissioner to Pakistan, Consul General in New York, Australia’s delegate to the UN General Assembly and as Ambassador to the Netherlands.

His vice-regal tenure in New South Wales was characterised by dignity and public popularity. He was a man whose bearing always drew respect. His comments as governor were often thought of as controversial but, looked at today, many of his comments seem like commonsense. Sir Roden, for example, recognised the drawbacks of conscription during the Vietnam War. He questioned whether Australia’s foreign policy was sufficiently independent, he voiced concern about high levels of unemployment, he criticised Sir John Kerr’s dismissal of the Whitlam government, and he even recognised the inevitability of Australia becoming a republic. In many ways, he could be seen as setting the precedent for the modern role of governors today: above daily politics but willing to identify important moral issues about which we should be concerned.

After his governorship, Sir Roden remained active, serving on a number of company boards and foundations and as chairman of the State Bank of New South Wales. Sir Roden is survived by his second wife, Lady Cutler, four sons and nine grandchildren. Our appreciation of his life is expressed to them and all those who knew him.

Honourable members—hear, hear!

Question agreed to, honourable members standing in their places.

MINISTERIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Mr HOWARD (Bennelong—Prime Minister) (2.11 p.m.)—I inform the House of a minor change in relation to ministerial representation in the Senate. From today the Minister for Small Business and Tourism will be represented in the Senate by the Special Minister of State, Senator the Hon. Eric Abetz. For the information of honourable members, I present a list of the full ministry, indicating the new representational arrangements. In all other respects the list is the same as that presented to the parliament on 12 February 2002. I understand the document will be included in the Votes and Proceedings and Hansard.

The document read as follows—
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Minister</th>
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<td>The Hon Jackie Kelly, MP</td>
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<td>Senator the Hon Helen Coonan</td>
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<td>The Hon Mark Vaile, MP</td>
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<td>The Hon Alexander Downer, MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Veterans' Affairs</td>
<td>The Hon Danna Vale, MP</td>
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<td>Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence</td>
<td>The Hon Danna Vale, MP</td>
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<td>Parliamentary Secretary</td>
<td>The Hon Fran Bailey, MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate)</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Richard Alston</td>
<td>The Hon Peter McGauran, MP</td>
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<td>Minister for the Arts and Sport</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Rod Kemp</td>
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<td>The Hon Tony Abbott, MP</td>
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<td>The Hon Mal Brough, MP</td>
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<td>The Hon Daryl Williams, AM QC MP</td>
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<td>Senator the Hon Eric Abetz</td>
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<td>Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry</td>
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<td>Senator the Hon Judith Troeth</td>
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<td>Senator the Hon Amanda Vanstone</td>
<td>The Hon Larry Anthony, MP</td>
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<td>Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women</td>
<td>The Hon Larry Anthony, MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Amanda Vanstone</td>
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<td>The Hon Ross Cameron, MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Education, Science and Training</td>
<td>The Hon Dr Brendan Nelson, MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Science (Deputy Leader of the House)</td>
<td>The Hon Peter McGauran, MP</td>
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<td>Senator the Hon Kay Patterson</td>
<td>The Hon Kevin Andrews, MP</td>
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QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Health: Program Funding

Mr CREAN (2.11 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Does the Prime Minister recall that on 20 February I released a policy to improve ministerial standards by excluding former ministers from taking up employment or consultancies for a period of 12 months in a business with which they had had ministerial dealings? Does the Prime Minister then recall rejecting that proposal at the time? In light of the latest scandal involving former minister Wooldridge and the Reith-Tenix affair, will you now adopt Labor’s policy to improve ministerial standards, and if not, why not?

Mr HOWARD—Mr Speaker, the answer to the first part of the question is vaguely yes. I do remember some reference to it. I must say that I did not read the document in full. But in relation to Dr Wooldridge, can I say that I have asked for a full report on this matter from relevant departments. I want to give an assurance to the House, and most particularly to people who may be interested in, and assisted by, these programs that no less money—not one dollar nor one cent less—will be allocated to the relevant asthma and medical specialist programs as a result of the contract offered to the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. The government intends to support these programs in full. Also, I should inform the House that I do not rule out withdrawing the Commonwealth’s offer to the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. I do not intend to say anything further about this matter until I have had the benefit of getting a full report from all relevant departments.

Trade: Steel Industry

Mrs GASH (2.15 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. Would the Prime Minister inform the House about the action the government has taken in response to decisions announced last week by the United States President affecting Australian exports of steel to the United States?

Mr HOWARD—I thank the honourable member for Gilmore for her question. I hope that what I am about to say will be of interest to her constituents in particular, to the constituents of the member for Cunningham and the member for Throsby and to the constituents of other honourable members in this parliament who are interested in the Australian steel industry.

Let me say to the honourable member that the decision announced by the President last week was a bad decision. It was a decision that was wholly against the interests of freer and more open trade. It was a decision that drew an immediate critical response from all of the people charged with responsibility in the government. As a result of that a number of representations were made by the government and by relevant ministers, both here and in Washington. I am very pleased to say that, as a result of those representations, important understandings have now been reached with the United States administration over the weekend.

I would have thought honourable members opposite would be interested to hear this because it goes to the security of the jobs of the people they represent—not only those who they represent, but those who we represent. As a result of those representations, understandings have been reached with the United States administration over the weekend which will allow Australian exports of hot rolled steel products to the United States west coast to proceed.

This decision, combined with the tariff rate quota on Australian slab steel exports, should preserve about 85 per cent of Australia’s steel exports to the United States. This is the result of a very strong, effective and coordinated lobbying effort—in the right manner, in the right places and with the right tone—carried on by members of my government. I might say that I cannot recall an example in the last 20 years where a US trade decision of this type has been subject to this kind of positive response. I do particularly want to thank the Minister for Trade, whose representations—particularly to the United States Commerce Secretary, Mr Don Evans—have been so effective. There remain aspects of this that are not positive. We keep all options, including World Trade Organisation options, open. We will continue to work with the United States and other steel producing nations to resolve this issue.
Although the original decision was a very unsatisfactory one, I am particularly pleased with the way in which the administration has responded to the very legitimate complaints that we had to make as a result of this decision. Compared with the inability of earlier governments to roll back United States decisions, I regard this as a particularly satisfactory outcome if it comes to full fruition. I want to thank the trade minister, and I also want to thank and compliment the Australian Ambassador to the United States, Mr Michael Thorley, for the work that he has done. I would also like to record my appreciation for the constructive approach adopted by the United States Ambassador in Canberra, Mr Tom Schieffer.

Health: Program Funding

Mr STEPHEN SMITH (2.20 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister, and it relates to the answer he gave to the earlier question from the Leader of the Opposition. Prime Minister, when were you or your office first told, either orally or in writing, about Dr Wooldridge’s GP House funding proposal?

Mr HOWARD—I have no recollection of having been informed of this at the time the original decision was taken. A quick check, done this morning—and I say that it was a quick check, in the time available—would suggest that this recollection is correct. But part of getting a full report from departments is establishing who knew what, and when. When I have the result of that I will be very happy to take further questions, and the member for Perth will not be held in terrorem.

Middle East: Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Mr SOMLYAY (2.21 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Would the minister update the House on the current situation in the Middle East? What is the minister’s response to comments that we are fast approaching an all-out war between the Palestinians and the Israelis?

Mr DOWNER—I thank the honourable member for Fairfax for his question. I recognise the interest that he shows in this issue. I think that all Australians will have been struck this week by the appalling scenes of violence that we have seen on our television screens from the Middle East. In that period of a week, over 110 people have perished. There is no justification at all for these acts of terror, and the perpetrators of these acts of terror must be brought to justice. The level of violence that is taking place now is threatening to take the Middle East situation over the precipice into something at least akin to war.

The Australian government urges the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to reassess their present course and bring to an end the killing. There is no military solution to the problems of the Middle East. The Mitchell recommendations and the Tenet security work plan are widely accepted as providing a path back to negotiation and the two parties—the Israeli and the Palestinian leaders—should move to try to implement the recommendations of the Tenet plan and the Mitchell report.

I am pleased that the United States administration now has decided that the time is right to increase its engagement. Visits by President Bush’s envoy, General Zinny, and Vice-President Cheney as well, indicate the American determination to do what they can—limited as their capacity might be in certain ways—to reign in the violence. At the end of last week I went out of my way to encourage the Americans to become more involved in trying to achieve at least a return to some stability in the Middle East. Next week I will meet with the Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council who will be visiting and it will be an opportunity for me and others in the House to discuss the issue directly with the Palestinian leadership.

Australia has consistently expressed support for efforts to build peace in the region. Let me remind the House that we remain strongly committed to the territorial integrity of Israel and the right of the people of Israel to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries. We also recognise the proper right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. We expect a comprehensive, just and durable resolution of the region’s conflict and that it will necessarily meet the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians for
a homeland of their own in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 242.

**Health: Program Funding**

**Mr STEPHEN SMITH** (2.24 p.m.)—My question is again to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, is it not the case that the former health minister, only one week before the last election was called, agreed to give the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners $5 million for a new Canberra building? Is it also the case that the $5 million is money originally allocated for asthma management and rural and regional health? Prime Minister, if your government believed that a building in Canberra represented a correct priority for health expenditure, why did your government keep this whole deal secret and make no public announcement before or during the election campaign?

**Mr HOWARD**—In answer to that question, I make two points: I refer the honourable member for Perth to my previous answer and I repeat what I said in my first answer to the Leader of the Opposition that not one cent was taken from the asthma or rural health programs.

**Goods and Services Tax: Education Funding**

**Mr CAMERON THOMPSON** (2.25 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Has the Prime Minister’s attention been drawn to comments about GST revenue and improvements to school funding? What is the government’s response to these comments?

**Mr HOWARD**—As it happens, my attention has been drawn to some comments and those comments have been made by a successful Labor leader, the Premier of Queensland. He had some very interesting things to say last week about the link between education funding and the goods and services tax. And may I say that it will not be the last that the other Labor premiers of Australia have heard about that linkage. They will hear a lot more about that linkage from me and from other members of the federal government over the course of the next 12 months.

What the Premier of Queensland did last week when he announced a massive increase in education spending in the state of Queensland was finally admit that the Labor Party has been running a great lie about the goods and services tax ever since it was introduced. That is what the Premier of Queensland did. When I heard the Premier of Queensland, I was put in mind of some Labor Party advertisements in the last election campaign and they belonged to the ‘very smart’ category of Labor Party advertisements—they quoted my words. It was one of those advertisements that took a comment I made in the great debate. The member for Brand will remember—

**Mr Beazley interjecting**—

**Mr HOWARD**—He remembers it very well and I am glad that he does. The worm on Channel 9 remembers it very well, too. I said that the best thing that we have done for education and health in recent times was to introduce a GST. The Labor Party said, ‘You beaut! Howard’s blown it again.’ And they grabbed hold of it and they ran an advertisement and they said, ‘This is ridiculous. This is not a plan. This is a new tax. This is outrageous. This will cost him the election.’ And they went out there and they said, ‘The GST is bad for your health. The GST is bad for education.’

Now the election is over and Labor premiers around the country are facing the reality of their responsibilities. What are they doing? They are owning up and they are starting with the Premier of Queensland. The Premier of Queensland knows that from 1 July next year his will be the first state in Australia that is better off as a result of the introduction of the GST. He knows that those rivers of GST gold will flow from the Commonwealth in ever greater quantities from 1 July next year. The difference between the Premier of Queensland and all of the others is that he has been the first to own up. When the next Premiers Conference gathers together, I am going to apply the Beattie truth test to all of the other premiers of the Australian states. I am going to remind the Premier of New South Wales—who likes to talk about education and who likes to demonstrate his knowledge of American, Australian and all forms of other history—of what the Premier of Queensland had to say. And every time he complains to me about funding of
education, I am going to say to the Premier of New South Wales, ‘You just listen to what the Premier of Queensland said.’ The Premier of Queensland said:

Today the government’s commitment to invest the lion’s share of GST growth funds—
‘growth funds’, he said—
in education was a clear statement of its determination to make Queensland the ‘smart state’.

Listen to this:
The growth funding returning to the state—
this could have been my friend the Treasurer. When I read those words I thought,
‘Good on you, Peter, you are really selling the benefits of the GST.’
Then I realised it was not Peter Costello; it was our friend Peter Beattie, who stated:
The growth funding returning to the state government as a result of the GST will be largely invested in the education of our children and young people. Now we are planning to invest our growth funding in education.

In other words, what Peter Beattie was saying is what has always been the case: that the great long-term beneficiaries of tax reform in this country are the people who receive the services provided by the Australian states. If you want to improve government schools, police services, roads and hospitals, what you need is tax reform. What you needed was a courageous federal government that had the courage to introduce tax reform, and what you did not need was a negative, dishonest, carping opposition that tried to feed back electorally on what it thought was the short-term disadvantage of the introduction of tax reform. Peter Beattie has blown the whistle on that deception. Peter Beattie has been honest enough to recognise what we all know to be the case: that the GST is good for state education funding; that the GST will guarantee in the years ahead rising revenues for state government services; and that it therefore represents one of the great historic revenue sharing reforms in the 100 years of the Australian Federation.

Health: Program Funding

Mr STEPHEN SMITH (2.32 p.m.)—My question is again to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, is it not the case that in exchange for the $5 million given to the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners one of the few things the Commonwealth receives is naming rights for the building? Prime Minister, will you rule out naming the building ‘Michael Wooldridge House’?

Mr HOWARD—I can certainly rule out naming it Centenary House. That name has already been taken, and we wonder under what circumstances that was taken. Would you like to hand back the 20 million bucks you grabbed for the Australian Labor Party from Centenary House?

Mr Melham—It’s a free market.

Mr HOWARD—I cannot hear a thing! ‘It’s a free market,’ he says—not when you control both sides of the contract. Do you call that a free market? Adam Smith would roll in his grave at that.

The SPEAKER—The Prime Minister will not encourage the member for Banks.

Mr HOWARD—Let me say that apart from that exchange I just refer the honourable member to my previous answer.

Economy: Performance

Mr GEORGIOU (2.33 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer advise the House of the results of the December quarter 2001 national accounts released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics? What do the national accounts indicate about the underlying strength of the Australian economy?

Mr COSTELLO—I thank the honourable member for Kooyong for his question. I can inform him that during the December quarter of 2001 the Australian economy grew by 1.3 per cent to record 4.1 per cent growth through the year in 2001. I am sure that all Australians and both sides of this House will welcome the fact that the Australian economy proved to be the strongest growing economy in the industrialised world in the course of 2001. In fact, the figures show that it was broadly based in the economy with household consumption increasing 1.3 per cent in the December quarter, with the first home owners grant and lower mortgage interest rates leading a very solid 4.1 per cent increase in dwelling investment. Business investment increased by 2.9 per cent for the
second quarter in a row. The profit margins of companies also increased by 5.8 per cent.

A 4.1 per cent growth rate would be remarkable at any time, but this was a 4.1 per cent growth rate in the year in which the US economy was in recession, Japan was in recession, Germany was in recession, Singapore was in recession and Taiwan was in recession. There was a synchronised global downturn in the three major centres of world activity: in Europe, in Japan and in the United States. Yet Australia continued to grow. The growth rate of 4.1 per cent in the Australian economy in the calendar year 2001 was 10 times the OECD average. I am sure both sides of the House will welcome those very strong national accounts—10 times the OECD average and 10 times the average of the industrialised nations. It was not everybody in Australia who had confidence in the Australian economy in 2001. Members of this House will remember that Her Majesty's loyal opposition took great delight through the course of 2001 in making their economic prognostications. For example, on 4 April 2001 Simon Crean stated:

... the GST has king hit the ... economy.

This is a year in which the economy grew at 4.1 per cent. The amazing thing about the Australian GST is that it managed to put Japan into recession, the US into recession, Germany into recession and Australia into booming economic times. He said on 8 March:

... we know the GST has already king hit investment—

which was up in the December quarter—

It's king hit consumer demand—

which was up in the December quarter—

and we've still got to await the impact of the international economy ...

We remember the current member for Brand going down to the Aston by-election a hopin' and a wishin' and a thinkin' and a prayin' that there would be a negative quarter and he could proclaim a recession. That was when he went down in July to Aston and said that Europe was fine, America was fine and the only country which could be facing recession would be Australia. And to his great regret Australia continued to grow, and grow at 4.1 per cent. I think that, as the Prime Minister said, not only has tax reform delivered to the states increasing revenues—and we will be having a meeting with all of the state treasurers on Friday week, I think, where they will all come to Canberra to demand their share of GST—

Mr Schultz—What are you going to tell them?

Mr COSTELLO—I am going to ask if any of them are still interested in roll-back! Any Treasurer that is interested in roll-back will be delivered a roll-back policy on Friday week, especially if it is the treasurer of Tasmania—a good man who really loves his GST!

Not only that: we came through a year when Australia turned stronger whilst the world turned down. For the tens and hundreds of thousands of Australians whose jobs were saved as a result of the Australian economy continuing to be strong in 2001, this was good news—welcomed, I believe, by all Australians. I pay tribute to the businesses of Australia, to the optimism of the Australian consumer, and I hope that the continued economic growth of Australia for the benefit of all Australians will continue through this current year.
the shadow Treasurer keeps on asking the same question. I have gone through it in great detail.

The policy of foreign currency swaps, which was started by the Labor Party in 1989 and practised under all treasurers and treasury secretaries until then, had a benchmark, which was under Treasury Secretary Evans. In October, Treasury Secretary Evans gave authorisation for the breaching of that benchmark. On 9 November the matter was drawn to my attention. I discussed it with the Governor of the Reserve Bank and the Secretary of the Treasury, and I believe it was on 6 December that the benchmark was suspended.

After that, at my instigation, a report was commissioned on whether or not the policy should be continued at all. My view was that it was something that should be reviewed in its entirety. That report came out in June 2001, recommending that the policy not be continued. That was accepted by me in September 2001 and the policy was ended accordingly. As I have said in my press releases and I have said on a number of occasions, this matter was first brought to my attention on 9 November. As I have said on numerous occasions—in press conferences, in statements—on 9 November this matter—

Ms Macklin interjecting—

Mr COSTELLO—No, it was on 9 November. I will say it, I think for the sixth or seventh time.

An opposition member—You know nothing.

Mr COSTELLO—No, on 9 November I was alerted. I was alerted on 9 November. I think I have now said it eight or nine times. It was after that that I discussed it with both the Secretary of the Treasury and the Governor of the Reserve Bank, and on 6 December at a meeting between the three of us, the decision was made, at the request of the governor of the bank, to suspend the benchmark.

Agriculture: Economic Outlook

Mrs DE-ANNE KELLY (2.43 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Would the minister update the House on forecasts for Australian agricultural commodities issued by ABARE at the Outlook Conference recently? How has sound economic management contributed to a better economic outlook for the majority of Australian farmers?

Mr TRUSS—I thank the honourable member for Dawson, who represents the biggest part of one of Australia’s most important industries—the sugar industry—and a whole range of other agricultural producers. Just a few moments ago the Treasurer spoke about Australia’s remarkable economic performance over recent times. Against a background of recession around the world, Australia has continued to make economic advances, and in the rural sector there has been a magnificent contribution towards our nation’s economic growth. At the Outlook Conference last week, ABARE was able to report that there have been 10 per cent increases in farm output for the last two successive years, and it is estimated that in 2001-02 there will be a 10 per cent overall increase on top of the 10 per cent the previous year which has boosted the livelihoods of so many rural and regional communities around Australia.

We have also, from the farm sector, significantly underpinned our nation’s improved trade performance. Our rural exports have made a real difference to Australia. Whilst this government is very encouraged by the farm sector’s recent performance, we certainly cannot be complacent. There are elements of the forecasts for the year ahead which demonstrate some degree of softness in commodity prices, including, unfortunately, in the sugar industry, where massive production in some other parts of the world and a corrupt world market are leading to concerns about potential prices in that commodity.

But Australian farmers know that their position is substantially improved as a result of the low inflation, low interest and low tax policy of this government. That is something they did not experience under the previous 13 years of Labor. It is bad enough if your commodity prices are low but if you are experiencing high taxes, high inflation and high interest rates—as Labor delivered for 13 years—then your economic situation is indeed in a great deal of trouble. While this
government is in office, I believe we can guarantee that there will be a continuation of policies of low interest rates and low inflation and that there will be a continuation of support for rural industries that face difficulties.

However, it is important that farmers also take advantage of the better times to put aside for those inevitable commodity cycles when prices deteriorate. Farm management deposits, which had been destroyed by Labor in their term in office and have now been restored, are an excellent vehicle for farmers to put aside in their good times so that they can be self-reliant in more difficult times. I am pleased to report to the House that farmers have responded wholeheartedly to the new farm management deposit arrangements. There is now more than $1 billion deposited by farmers in the Farm Management Deposit Scheme. That is something they have been able to do because of the good economic management of this government and because there is a useful scheme that has been able to give them an opportunity to put aside in these times. It will help them through the more difficult times and help them through softer commodity prices, but through all this what they need most of all is a government that cares about their economic circumstances and that will provide the kind of economic environment to make farming prosperous in Australia.

Economy: Debt Management

Mr McMullan (2.46 p.m.)—My question is to the Treasurer. Given that the Treasurer has failed to say when he first heard of the risk of substantial losses—

Government members interjecting—

Mr McMullan—Thank you for that assistance; it helps a lot. Can the Treasurer confirm that he received reports on foreign currency exposure within the government’s debt portfolio from Treasury or from independent consultants in 1996, 1997 and 1998, and from the Auditor-General in 1999? Treasurer, didn’t any of those reports refer to the risk of substantial losses?

Mr Costello—The report of 1996 actually recommended the entering into of the currency swaps.
But the amendments, as he said in paragraph (7), will bring the Commonwealth’s ability to issue short-term debt overseas in line with the issue of Treasury notes in Australia. I will table that document in its entirety, Mr Speaker.

The power to enter into swaps was sought by Paul Keating as Treasurer, and that was passed by this parliament. The policy of entering into swaps continued under five treasurers, four Treasury secretaries and three Reserve Bank governors. It was recommended by JP Morgan in 1989, it was recommended by BT, Carmichael Consulting and Coopers and Lybrand, and it was recommended by UBS Warburg. That was all set out in my press release—

Ms Macklin interjecting—

Mr COSTELLO—You want the dates? I can give you the dates—it is all in the press release: JP Morgan in 1989; Union Bank of Switzerland in 1996; BT, Carmichael Consulting and Coopers and Lybrand in 1997; and UBS Warburg and Dillon Read in 1998.

I should also point out that various people appeared before the Senate to justify this policy. I have never actually appeared before the Senate to justify this policy but someone in this House has—someone in this House actually went into Senate estimates to justify the policy. It was in April 1992. Who should appear but the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer! He appeared before Senate estimates to justify the policy of entering into currency swaps—a fact which he has hitherto failed to disclose to the press. I should in fairness read out his justification. Senator Watson asked:

Could the Parliamentary Secretary comment on the monitoring process in relation to the swap interest regime conducted by Treasury?

Senator McMullan responded:

I hope somebody else can.

And he sat there while the Treasury officials justified the policy. So here we have a policy which was entered into by the Labor Party and which has been conducted under five treasurers, four Treasury secretaries and three Reserve Bank governors. The benchmark was a 15 per cent portfolio currency swap. The reason why large sums became involved was not just that the Labor Party initiated the policy but that the Labor Party ran up the debt portfolio to which it applied. As I have said previously, if there had been no Commonwealth government securities on issue, 15 per cent being held in foreign currency would have amounted to nothing. But when the Commonwealth government securities on issue were run up to $96 billion, a policy of 15 per cent of $96 billion amounted to a very large sum.

I noticed that Senator Conroy, one of the Labor Party people who pretends to be an expert on this, was asked, ‘Wasn’t this Labor Party debt that was held in swaps?’ He said, ‘Well, no. It was the debt which has been run up by the Commonwealth since Federation.’ And he was right, except that the debt which was run up by the Commonwealth since Federation stood at $16 billion in 1990 and five years later stood at $96 billion. So for 90 years worth, we got to $16 billion and in another five we got another $80 billion. As I said, the policy was set up by the Labor Party, the debt was run up by the Labor Party and the policy was justified by Mr McMullan. Another point that he has failed to disclose to the press is that, whilst he was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer, he himself presided over the issue of $2.2 billion in currency swaps, some of which we are still managing.

As I said earlier, the policy was recommended by JP Morgan, reviewed and re-endorsed by the Union Bank of Switzerland; reviewed and re-endorsed by BT, Carmichael Consulting, and Coopers and Lybrand; and reviewed again and re-endorsed by UBS Warburg and Dillon Read. The only Treasurer to my knowledge who has wound down the swaps program was me. I am afraid to say that it was started by PJ Keating, it was run by Ralph Willis, John Kerin, John Dawkins, Ralph Willis again and continued by me until it was wound down as the result of a decision I took on 6 December 2000, suspending the benchmark, ordering a review and closing the program. I was asked about those reviews. Those reviews all recommended the continuation of the program. If I say so, your complaint ought to be that we followed them, not that we ignored them.
Workplace Relations: Trade Unions

Mr SCHULTZ (2.55 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. Is the minister aware of any divergence of opinion between workers and officials who are members of registered organisations under the Workplace Relations Act, particularly trade unions? What does this indicate about the attitude of Australian workers and unions? What is the government’s response to this situation?

Mr ABBOTT—I thank the member for Hume for his question. This government has great faith in the commonsense and decency of the Australian worker, which is so often at odds with the attitudes of union officials and the leaders of the Australian Labor Party. The House might recall a recent survey of Australian workers that showed that no fewer than 83 per cent supported the government’s policy on border protection. The same survey showed that fewer than 50 per cent of Australian workers thought that their union was doing a good or a very good job. This is little wonder, because far too many union officials are more interested in union power than they are in the real rights of Australian workers.

The unions’ latest campaign is to make it federal and state Labor policy to force workers to pay compulsory levies to unions if they are not members of those unions. In the last fortnight, the Queensland Secretary of the Australian Services Union described workers who were not union members as freeloaders. He said, ‘They are freeloaders who should not be tolerated by Labor governments.’ This gentleman may well be, to the general public, just another one of the faceless men who control the Labor Party—

Ms Livermore—He’s a woman!

Mr ABBOTT—He is obviously very well known to members opposite, because 16 members opposite are affiliated with the Australian Services Union. In the last fortnight, the Queensland Secretary of the Australian Services Union described workers who were not union members as freeloaders. He said, ‘They are freeloaders who should not be tolerated by Labor governments.’ This gentleman may well be, to the general public, just another one of the faceless men who control the Labor Party—

Dr Martin interjecting—

Mr ABBOTT—Well, you have misled the register of members’ interests.

Dr Martin—No, I have not!
Mr COSTELLO—Can I come to the ANAO, because, again, the member for Fraser has been wilfully misleading the public on the issue.

The SPEAKER—The Treasurer is aware that an accusation of deliberately misleading the House requires a different form of the House.

Mr COSTELLO—No; he has been wilfully misleading the public, Mr Speaker, in his press comment. The Australian National Audit Office report of October 1999 did not recommend abandoning the benchmark. It is all there on the public record, and what it said was that, when the next review was done, for the first time they should refer to the Treasurer the benchmark—the implication being that it had never been referred to the Treasurer. It is all there on the public record. In fact, it was referred to the Treasurer before they finished their next review; it was referred to the Treasurer at the instigation of the Reserve Bank Governor. It was the Reserve Bank Governor who raised this with the Treasury secretary, who waived the benchmark in October, who notified the Treasurer on 9 November, who discussed it in a preliminary way thereafter with the governor of the bank and who had another meeting with the governor of the bank on 6 December and suspended it. It was able to be suspended at that point because there were no or very few new swaps being entered into. I believe that swaps actually ceased being entered into for any substantive reason back in February 1999.

Mr Latham interjecting—

The SPEAKER—I have warned the member for Werriwa!

Mr COSTELLO—and conducted under five treasurers—four Labor and one coalition—four Treasury secretaries and three Reserve Bank governors, two of whom were appointed, I believe, by the Labor Party. It was ended by this government, first with the suspension on 6 December 2000 and, after a review, formally ended in September 2001. However, at the end of all that, what are the facts? The facts are these: Commonwealth government debt stood at $96 billion when the Labor Party left office, and we have repaid $57 billion worth of Labor Party debt. In all of the figures that I hear about, I never hear any reference to the $57 billion worth of Labor Party debt that has now been repaid; nor does the member for Fraser ever concede that the debt that we are managing is Labor Party debt.

This government have not issued any new debt since they were elected. The whole argument is: how do we manage Labor’s debt and how do we repay it? We have managed $96 billion down to $39 billion, which only puts us $57 billion in front of the Australian Labor Party. We believe there is more work to be done. We would like to get it back to where it was before the Labor Party began the damage to Australia in 1990. If we continue our good economic management, I hope we will be able to do that.

Education: Government Policy

Mr McARTHUR (3.04 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Education, Science and Training. Would the minister outline the measures this government is taking to support the rights of parents to choose the school which best suits their circumstances? Is the minister aware of other policies in this area?

Dr NELSON—I thank the member for Corangamite for his question and, indeed, for his strong advocacy not only on behalf of Corangamite but also on behalf of the Christian College Institute of Senior Education in his electorate. The Howard government believes very strongly in a quality education for all Australian students and also in the right of parents to choose the kind of school that is
best to meet the aspirational and educational needs of their own children. In fact, since coming to office in 1996, the Howard government has increased funding to government schools by 46 per cent in a period when enrolments in government schools increased by 1.4 per cent. The interesting thing here is that state governments, which are responsible primarily for state government schools, increased their funding to their schools last year by 2.7 per cent, on average; whereas, the Commonwealth increased its funding by 5.6 per cent. One of the important measures introduced by this government to assist parents to make choices is to base the funding of non-government schools on the educational, occupational and income status of families, and also to provide establishment grants or start-up assistance for small non-government schools that are trying to get going.

I was asked about other policies. The Labor Party still has a policy of denying these schools their funding. In fact, some of the poorest schools in this country are awaiting those grants, because the Australian Labor Party has twice refused to pass the bill and only two weeks ago foreshadowed poten-tially obstructive amendments in this House. This is causing significant hardship and grief in these school communities, and many members in this place know this to be true. There are 58 schools awaiting these critically important funds.

Ms Macklin interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Jagajaga!

Dr NELSON—Those 58 schools are represented by 46 honourable members in this place.

Ms Macklin interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Jagajaga is defying the chair.

Dr NELSON—In fact, I know my office has had considerable representations from a number of members’ offices—for example, the member for Kalgoorlie has phoned me directly three times on behalf of the Nyikina Mangala Aboriginal Community School in Derby.

I have also had the member for Barker contact me on behalf of three schools in his electorate: the Glendale College, the Murray Bridge Christian College and the Encounter Lutheran Primary School. You will be surprised to hear this, Prime Minister, but the new member for Dickson is now a strong advocate of the Living Faith Primary School, which is waiting for $24,000 in establishment grants. It would be wrong to let honourable members feel that the only members in this place advocating on behalf of these struggling new schools are confined to this side of the House. Two weeks ago I had representations on behalf of the Chabad Jewish Day School and very strong and very effective representations from the local member’s office. In fact Ben, from Bentleigh, rang twice. He was quite diligent to make sure that we understood the needs of the 34 students and the families of the Bentleigh Chabad Jewish Day School. So concerned was he to see that we got the facts, he actually sent me the details of the establishment grants that have been paid to the school, and it correctly points out that the school, whilst having been paid $6,000 in establishment grants, is still waiting for another $6,000.

The reason why the Chabad Jewish Day School needs its federal member’s office to phone me to get the school the money is that the federal member concerned is a member of the Australian Labor Party which is opposed to these schools getting their start-up grants. It is rather interesting that the foreshadowed amendments by the Australian Labor Party will actually reduce the amount of money that will go to this particular school. Who would be a member who would represent a school such as this that is struggling and have a member of his staff contact me directly to get the funding? Who could that be? It is the member for Hotham. I ask the member for Hotham, if he has any influence in the Australian Labor Party and consistent with the excellent representation by Ben from Bentleigh in his office, to get this legislation passed in the Senate—and I hope it does not take 1,000 days.

It is hypocrisy, on the one hand, to go out to local communities and tell 58 struggling new non-government schools that you are going to come here and argue for their funds and then, on the other hand, to come to the
federal parliament and not support this legislation. There are 4,900 families involved here and some of them come from the most educationally impoverished communities in the country. I say to the member for Hotham: do not pass this legislation for the government’s sake, do not pass it for my sake or even for the member for Hotham’s sake; pass it for the sake of 4,900 kids and their families, who are some of the poorest in the country, and pass it immediately.

Immigration: ‘Children Overboard’ Affair

Mr CREAN (3.11 p.m.)—We may not ask Ben; we should ask Barrie—Admiral Barrie.

The SPEAKER—The Leader of the Opposition will come to his question.

Mr CREAN—My question is to the Prime Minister and it concerns the two photographs of the alleged ‘children overboard’ incident. Prime Minister, so that there is no misunderstanding, this question is only about the photographs. What precisely did Mr Reith tell you about those photographs when you discussed them with him on the evening of 7 November last year?

Mr HOWARD—I wonder if this was written by Ben from Bentleigh or Chris from Waramanga! I have already dealt with this in my news conference but let me repeat: as I indicated, the substance of what he informed me was there was debate and doubt about which depicted events on which day, which was of course the subject of a lot of media comment at that time and it was because of that that we moved very quickly on to the issue of the video.

United States of America: Terrorist Attacks

Mr PYNE (3.12 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Attorney-General. Would the Attorney inform the House what measures the government has taken in the six months since the September 11 terrorist attack on New York to sharpen the government’s strategy to eliminate potential terrorist activities and groups in Australia?

Mr WILLIAMS—I thank the member for Sturt for the question. Since the horrific events of September 11, the Howard government has moved swiftly to strengthen Australia’s counter-terrorism capabilities. There was a high level review of Australia’s security and counter-terrorism arrangements instigated after the terrorist attacks in the United States. The government announced in October last year it would introduce a series of measures designed to strengthen the counter-terrorism legislative framework.

A general offence of terrorism will be created, along with an offence relating to preparation for or planning terrorist attacks. The funding of terrorist activities will also be explicitly criminalised and existing treason offences will be modernised to reflect the realities of the modern conflict. The government will also act to implement the International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings and we will increase our national security by introducing further measures to protect our borders.

In October last year the Prime Minister announced our intention to introduce new antihoax laws. The antihoax laws were introduced during the first sitting week of the year and have already passed this House. These laws are designed to ensure that those who seek to create public fear and alarm by sending hoax material or dangerous substances are properly penalised. The government are also considering a range of options to enhance our counter-terrorism arrangements under our national antiterrorism plan.

We have made an election commitment to develop a new national framework to fight transnational crime and terrorism.

The Prime Minister has invited state and territory leaders to a summit to discuss the twin problems of transnational crime and terrorism, and Australia’s ability to respond at a national level to these issues. It is vital that Australia’s criminal justice and law enforcement agencies are able to deal effectively with contemporary threats of serious and organised crime. As part of the process of ensuring that we have the best systems in place to combat transnational crime and terrorism, we are reviewing the operation of the National Crime Authority. On this point, I should note that, contrary to reports in the media, the government does not plan to merge the Australian Federal Police and the NCA. No country has ever been immune to the threat of terrorism. While there is no spe-
specific threat of terrorism in Australia at present, we must ensure that we are as well prepared as possible to deal with the new international security environment. I believe that the government has taken very positive steps to ensure that we are.

While I am on my feet, I take the opportunity to commend the Commonwealth agencies involved in the national security arrangements for CHOGM. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Australian Defence Force, my own department—particularly through the PSCC—ASIO, the AFP and a number of other departments and agencies cooperated extremely well. I would also like to commend in particular the Queensland Police Service for the work done by them.

Immigration: ‘Children Overboard’ Affair

Ms GEORGE (3.16 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Does the Prime Minister recall questions from this side of the House during the last sitting week regarding the additional photos of the SIEV4 incident sent to ministers’ offices from the Department of Defence? Is the Prime Minister aware that six questions without notice have now been asked on this issue, including two to the Speaker, and that the first of these was asked three weeks ago today? When will the Prime Minister release the names of all ministers and their staff who received the photos? Prime Minister, do you have an answer for the House yet?

Mr HOWARD—I have been provided with some advice by the office of the Minister for Defence. I am advised that 13 photographs were received by the former defence minister’s office. The two photographs which were released by Mr Reith’s office were dealt with in detail in the report by Major General Powell and in the PM&C report by Jenny Bryant. Of the 11 other photographs, I am informed that Mr Reith’s advisers have confirmed that they did not pass any such photographs to Mr Reith. I am advised that the 11 additional photographs were posted on the web site of the Department of Defence on Monday, 18 February 2002. That is the extent of the advice that I have thus far received.

Mr Swan—Mr Speaker, can the Prime Minister table the document he is quoting from?

Mr HOWARD—What I read out had the addition of the words ‘confidential’ and ‘photographs’, so I will not table it.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Members are aware that under the standing orders there is no obligation to table documents marked ‘confidential’.

Trade: Steel Industry

Mr HUNT (3.18 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Trade. Would the minister inform the House what actions the government is taking, beyond the measures already announced by the Prime Minister, to assist the Australian steel industry to maintain its world competitiveness, particularly the 1,400 members of BHP’s Western Port steel plant in Hastings? Is the minister aware of any domestic or international problems or obstacles to implementing the government’s actions?

Mr VAILE—I thank the member for Flinders for his question and obvious interest in his constituents in his electorate who are engaged in the steel industry. Our government have been actively engaged—as was outlined by the Prime Minister in his earlier response—with the Bush administration, pursuing an outcome that will secure the future of the Australian steel industry and exports to the United States. That in large part has been achieved. For the member’s constituents, whom he is concerned about, it ensures their jobs for the future. I understand that particular plant produces a significant amount of the hot rolled product for which we have been lobbying on behalf of the Australian industry.

Well may the member ask: what is happening in the future? We will be engaging with the steel industry over the next week to look at the remaining elements of this decision, in terms of the cold rolled product and other products in that small 15 per cent area of our exports that are still going to be subject to some impediments in getting into the US marketplace. We will continue to work with the industry, as we have over the last six
months. It has been interesting to note the absence until last week of any advocacy by the union movement involved in purportedly representing the steelworkers of Australia. Last week, we saw a media release put out by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr VAILE—Yes, Dougie Cameron. Dougie Cameron said:

We are very concerned about the impact of this move for our members in Port Kembla and the Australian steel industry. Generally we call on the government to act on their behalf immediately. We have, but we know the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the ACTU have not. They were absent from the field for the last six months while our government—and the industry—has been advocating the case with the US administration on behalf of Australian steelworkers.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr VAILE—They have been absent from the field. In fact, in 1999, at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle, where was Doug Cameron? Doug Cameron was on the streets of Seattle, marching with the AFL-CIO and the steelworkers. He has been in bed with the steelworkers in America, who have forced this decision. The steelworkers in America—the ACTU colleagues in America—have forced this decision in America. Far from acting on behalf of the steelworkers of Australia, he has been in bed with the steelworkers in America, who have been trying to cost Australian steelworkers their jobs. When Doug Cameron suggests that the government should act on behalf of the steelworkers immediately, we have. We have achieved an outcome and we know that for the last six months he has been absent from the field.

Trade: Steel Industry

Dr MARTIN (3.22 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, I refer to your earlier answer regarding the United States’ decision to apply punitive tariffs on Australian steel. Is it not a fact that, even by your own reckoning and your response today, 15 per cent—or $77 million of Australia’s $450 million annual steel exports to the United States—will be stopped by the US administration’s import restrictions? Isn’t this almost three times the size of the quota restrictions on lamb imports into the United States, about which your government protested long and loud? How can you claim a $77 million cut to Australian steel exports as a victory?

Mr HOWARD—I thank the member for Cunningham for his question. It gives me an opportunity, in the calmness of the remaining minutes of question time, to further expand. I know that there are many men and women in the Australian steel industry, in and around Port Kembla and in other parts of Australia, who will be very interested in the answer and who will be interested to know what their government and their representatives have been trying to do in good faith since this issue was raised.

I point out to the honourable member for Cunningham that the originally announced decision by the United States President did exclude slab steel, which represents close to 50 per cent of BHP exports to the United States. It is my understanding that the original decision was not as draconian as the recommendation made by the Federal Trade Commission. That was in part—not entirely, but in part—due to representations we had already made. The representations that have been made on this issue are not representations that have been made simply as a result of the announcement made by the President. There were many representations made by me, by the Minister for Trade and by the Minister for Foreign Affairs long before the decision was announced by the President. It is true that 85 per cent is not 100 per cent, but 85 per cent is 35 per cent better than 50 per cent, and 85 per cent is an infinitely better outcome than—

Mr Crean interjecting—

Mr HOWARD—If you go back over all the difficult trade decisions that have been taken, adverse to the interests of this country, by the United States over the last 15 or 20 years, I cannot offhand recall one where, as a result of representations made by the government in power, the roll-back by the United States has been as great as it has been on this occasion. The measure of the success
that we have had in relation to this is a compar-
ison with what has happened on earlier
casions. The decision taken by the United
States administration was a bad decision. It
was a domestically based political decision.
It was designed to suit the interests of the
steelworkers of the United States, and that is
why I went into bat for the steelworkers of
Australia. As a result of what we have
done—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr HOWARD—It might grieve the
member for Cunningham that we have had a
bit of success, but he ought to recognise that
we have had success and he ought to recog-
nise that this government, as a result of the
combined efforts of our ambassador in the
United States and my ministerial colleagues,
has been able to win a very significant addi-
tional concession from the United States ad-
ministration. The member for Cunningham
shakes his head. I will be very happy to go
and talk to the steelworkers of his elector-
ate—

Dr Martin interjecting—

Mr HOWARD—I will talk to the steel-
workers of Australia. I know he may not
want me to speak to them because it may not
suit the interests of the member for Cunning-
ham to acknowledge that a coalition gov-
ernment has been more successful in rolling
back an adverse American trade decision
than were the Hawke or Keating govern-
ments—

Dr Martin interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for
Cunningham is defying the chair.

Mr HOWARD—The Hawke and Keating
governments constantly engaged in rhetoric
on these matters but their success rate was
infinitely less than—

Dr Martin interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for
Cunningham is warned!

Mr HOWARD—the success rate of this
government. Can I just say again to the hon-
ourable member for Cunningham, who, inci-
dentally, mentioned the lamb decision—and
remind him—that we took that to the World
Trade Organisation and we won. As a result
of the success that we had in that, I think that
to have been able to achieve the additional
success in the few days that have gone by
since this announcement is a great tribute to
the negotiating skills of this government and
its representative. Instead of the member for
Cunningham and the Leader of the Opposi-
tion engaging in petty bipartisan opposition
on this issue, they ought—

Mr Crean—Bipartisan?

Mr HOWARD—Partisan opposition.
They ought to be joining the government in
welcoming the fact that the American ad-
ministration has responded to the representa-
tions of a close friend and a close ally and
see this as a decision that has been taken in
the interests of the Australian people.

Environment Protection and Biodiversity
Conservation Act

Mr LINDSAY (3.28 p.m.)—My question
is addressed to the Minister for the Environ-
ment and Heritage. Minister, are you aware
of proposals that seek for you to act illegally
in relation to your powers under the Envi-
ronment Protection and Biodiversity Conserv-
ation Act? Minister, what is your response?

Dr KEMP—Upon the member for Herbert for
his question. I know how dedicated he is to the
protection of the wonderful natural heritage on
the Great Barrier Reef and how proud he is of the
very powerful legislation that this government has
put in place, that the Labor Party opposed,
which gives the reef much greater protection
than it has ever had before. Mr Speaker, I am
aware of—

Mr Albanese—I rise on a point of order,
Mr Speaker. The question required the min-
ister to give a judgment as to the legality of a
situation; therefore, it should be ruled out of
order.

The SPEAKER—Had I believed that a
legal opinion was sought, the question would
have already been ruled out of order.

Dr KEMP—I am aware of suggestions
that I should act illegally by setting aside the
provisions of the Environment Protection
and Biodiversity Conservation Act. The per-
son who is making that request for illegal
action is none other than the member for
Wills, the shadow minister for the environ-
ment. Senator Nick Bolkus, the previous shadow minister for the environment, knew nothing about it, but at least he had the commonsense to say nothing about it. The new shadow minister knows nothing about it but constantly puts on the public record foolish, inaccurate and in this case quite unjustified statements.

On the weekend we heard an amazing recommendation from the member for Wills that I should arbitrarily ignore the EPBC Act in relation to an application to explore an area of the seabed off Townsville because it is too close to the reef. I quote the member for Wills’s press release, which says:

I have no doubt at all that all it would take is one public statement from the Howard Government that oil drilling will not be allowed in the Townsville Trough and the company would go away.

Far from making the company go away, such a statement from me would give the company grounds for legal appeal against any ruling that I might make on their application because, as the member for Wills ought to know, process has to be followed. The act lays down a very clear and specific process, which is being followed by this government, and I am not going to put the government in a position where it cannot adequately protect the World Heritage values of the reef. The shadow minister goes even further and on the ABC on Saturday, in relation to mining on the reef, he said:

If the government is serious about protecting the reef it will commit to banning that kind of exploration and that kind of seismic activity.

Kelvin, that is very kind of you, but mining on the reef has been banned for almost the last 30 years.

The SPEAKER—The minister will address members by their electoral titles.

Dr KEMP—Let us go through the situation so that those opposite can understand. There will be no drilling for oil and gas on the reef; there will be no drilling in the World Heritage area; and there will be no exploration allowed outside the reef if it damages the World Heritage area and its endangered or its migratory species. Now that they have heard this, I hope the members opposite, including the member for Wills, can comprehend it.

Mr Howard—Mr Speaker, I ask that further questions be placed on the Notice Paper.

Mr Costello—I seek leave to table the explanatory memorandum to the Loans Securities Amendment Bill 1988.

The SPEAKER—I thought the Treasurer had tabled it during question time but I accept the tabling now.

Leave granted.

PERSONAL EXPLANATIONS

Mr CREAN (Hotham—Leader of the Opposition) (3.33 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

Mr CREAN—Yes, I do by the Minister for Education, Science and Training.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mr CREAN—The minister for education claimed in question time that I opposed the passage of the bill and was delaying passage of the bill in the Senate. The bill was not opposed by Labor, nor are we delaying its passage in the Senate. Labor have proposed amendments to the bill but the minister has said that he is prepared to consider them. Labor’s amendments would see additional funding going to needy non-government schools—a priority even the minister agrees with.

The SPEAKER—The Leader of the Opposition is now advancing an argument. The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat.

BILLS REFERRED TO MAIN COMMITTEE

Mr LLOYD (Robertson) (3.36 p.m.)—by leave—I move:

That the following Bills be referred to the Main Committee for further consideration:

Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002
Student Assistance Amendment Bill 2002
Protection of the Sea (Prevention of Pollution from Ships) Amendment Bill 2002
Transport and Regional Services Legislation Amendment (Application of Criminal Code) Bill 2002

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

The Clerk—Petitions have been lodged for presentation as follows and copies will be referred to the appropriate ministers:

Immigration: Asylum Seekers

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives in Parliament assembled:

Whereas the 1998 Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne carried without dissent the following Motion:

That this Synod regrets the Government’s adoption of procedures for certain people seeking political asylum in Australia which exclude them from all public income support while withholding permission to work, thereby creating a group of beggars dependent on the Churches and charities for food and the necessities of life;

and calls upon the Federal government to review such procedures immediately and remove all practices which are manifestly inhumane and in some cases in contravention of our national obligations as a signatory of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We, therefore, the individual, undersigned Attendees and Members of the Uniting Church, Ivanhoe, Victoria 3079, petition the House of Representatives in support of the abovementioned Motion.

And we, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

by Ms Macklin (from 24 citizens).

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and calls upon the Federal government to review such procedures immediately and remove all practices which are manifestly inhumane and in some cases in contravention of our national obligations as a signatory of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We, therefore, the individual, undersigned Members of St Luke’s Anglican Church, Vermont, Victoria 3133, petition the House of Representatives in support of the abovementioned Motion.

And we, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

by Mr Pearce (from eight citizens).

Goods and Services Tax: Books

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:

We the residents of Australia would like to draw the attention of the House to the severely detrimental effects a GST on books is having on literacy, education and culture in Australia. As secondhand/antiquarian booksellers, readers, writers, students and/ or parents, we believe a tax on books to be a backward and inequitable step and ask you to reconsider this decision.

Your petitioners therefore ask the House to remove a GST on used books, where books are defined as anything on paper bearing the written or printed word.

by Mr Costello (from 703 citizens).
Immigration: Asylum Seekers and Refugees

The petition of certain parishioners of churches affiliated with the East Stonnington Ministers’ Association, * in the Electorate of Higgins, Victoria, draws to the attention of the House the following:

(1) We recognise the responsibility of the Australian government over matters of population and immigration and the means of entry to this country.

(2) However we acknowledge that we are largely a country of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, many of whom fled oppression and poverty overseas.

(3) We value the ethnic diversity and many cultures brought by new settlers to our community.

(4) We affirm the Biblical injunctions to care for strangers and sojourners in the land and to show compassion toward those in desperate need.

(5) We deplore the current harsh treatment of illegal arrivals, through the policy of mandatory detention, especially the imprisonment of children, young people and families in detention centres in remote locations in Australia and at immense cost on Pacific Islands.

Your petitioners therefore pray that the House take immediate, bold and creative measures to:

(a) re-accommodate asylum seekers more humanly,

(b) speed the process of refugee applications, especially in relation to conditions in countries of origin,

(c) increase the annual intake of refugees.

Your petitioners believe that by closing bank branches and continuing to increase bank fees, banks are not meeting their social obligations to the community.

We therefore pray that the House will immediately implement a ‘social charter’ to ensure that banks properly recognise the needs of the community.

by Mr Costello (from 52 citizens).

Banking: Closures

To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled:

We, the undersigned citizens of Australia ask that the House of Representatives consider the health and welfare of the present and future residents of this country and the environmental impacts of possible negative impacts relating to the visits of nuclear powered and armed vessels into Australian ports.

Nuclear navies are not welcome here whatever the colour of their flags.

The recent spate of accidents involving nuclear-powered submarines should be enough to convince all governments that the risk to the environment of these floating Chernobyls is a risk we don’t have to take.

Accordingly, we respectfully request that the parliament legislate to prevent all visits of nuclear armed/powered vessels to Australian ports and waters.

And your petitioners as in duty bound, will ever humbly pray.

by Ms Jann McFarlane (from 728 citizens).

Research: Stem Cell

To the Honourable the Speaker and members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:

The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House that we are concerned at the destruction of human embryos by scientists extracting embryonic stem cells and concerned at proposals by scientists to clone human embryos for the purpose of extracting embryonic stem cells.

Your petitioners therefore pray that the House will:

(1) Oppose the creation of embryos for the purpose of extracting stem cells and any other scientific purpose (therapeutic cloning);
(2) Oppose the use of already existing embryos for the purpose of extracting stem cells and any other scientific purpose;

(3) Support, encourage and fund scientific research using adult stem cells from all sources including umbilical cord blood.

by Mr Murphy (from 203 citizens).

Immigration: Asylum Seekers

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The petition of certain electors of the Division of Aston draws to the attention of the House the unnecessary and unconscionable social and personal disadvantage currently suffered by the men, women, and children seeking asylum in Australia caused by the forty-three year old Migration Act 1958.

Your petitioners therefore request the House establish as a matter of priority a full and independent review of the Migration Act with specific reference to the terminology used to define Asylum Seekers; education of the community about Asylum Seekers, their needs and their issues; equity before the Law for Asylum Seekers; approval processes for assessment of applications for asylum; attention to the needs of Asylum Seekers; and the facilitation of Asylum Seekers into the community.

by Mr Pearce (from four citizens).

Environment: Urban Wildlife

To the Honourable the Speaker and the members of the House of Representatives from concerned citizens. On behalf of future generations we wish to draw to the attention of the House, developments proposed for the Scottish hospital at 2 Cooper Street, Paddington in Sydney. We the undersigned strongly oppose these developments where they include the destruction of existing trees. We urgently petition the parliament of Australia to legislate to preserve this green space with 80 (approx) trees remaining from the original 19th century garden. We support an upgrade of the hospital’s facilities which does not diminish the heritage value of the site nor degrade this unique and vital habitat. We pray that the House of Representatives do its utmost to safeguard this urban wildlife sanctuary now under threat.

by Ms Plibersek (from 101 citizens).

Roads: Western Sydney Orbital

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in the Parliament:
The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House:

. The Western Sydney Orbital (WSO) will provide an essential link road for many Western Sydney motorists.

. The WSO is part of the National Highway route. It is the only part of the National Highway route that is proposed to be a toll road.

. Western Sydney motorists already pay tolls on the M2, M4 and M5. Further tolls in Western Sydney impose an unacceptable burden on motorists.

. The rest of the National Highway route has been constructed without any toll imposition. It is not equitable for the residents of Western Sydney to pay a toll for use of the WSO.

Your petitioners believe that by imposing a toll on the Western Sydney Orbital, the government is not meeting its obligations and commitments to the residents of Western Sydney or to the wider community.

We therefore pray that the House will immediately implement a ‘toll free’ Western Sydney Orbital in recognition of the needs of the community.

by Mr Price (from 659 citizens).

Family Law Act

To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives in Parliament assembled:
The petition of the undersigned calls for the following:
That section 121 of the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) be amended so as to allow the Family Law Court of Australia to be open to scrutiny, in line with other courts constituted at both a State and Federal level.

The petitioners request that it be left open to the discretion of presiding Judges whether publication of details pertaining to a matter before the Family Law Court of Australia should be open to scrutiny, in line with other courts constituted at both a State and Federal level.

As petitioners we request that the Parliament takes action to address this important issue immediately in order to ensure that parties before the Family Law Court of Australia, particularly children, are able to secure justice.

by Mr Price (from 85 citizens).

Telstra: Privatisation

To the Honourable the Speaker and the Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws the attention of the House to our concern that:

(1) the Howard-Anderson Government plans to fully privatise the Australian people’s 50.1 per cent share of Telstra as stated in the Government’s own 2001 Budget papers;

(2) a fully privatised Telstra will focus on profits not people; and

(3) services will suffer under a fully privatised Telstra, particularly in outer metropolitan, rural and regional Australia.

Your petitioners therefore ask the House to oppose the Howard-Anderson Government’s plans to fully privatise Telstra.

by Mr Sciaccia (from 78 citizens).

Table Cape Lighthouse: Access

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:

The petition of certain residents of the State of Tasmania draws to the attention of the House that the Table Cape Lighthouse at Wynyard in North West Tasmania is presently closed for public access.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to take whatever action is necessary to ensure that the Table Cape Lighthouse is opened for public access and thus realise its tourism potential to the State of Tasmania.

by Mr Sidebottom (from 1,029 citizens).

Nursing Homes: Funding

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament.

The following citizens of Australia draw the attention of the House to the lack of funding to provide urgently needed nursing home places with special high care units in the Maryborough-Hervey Bay area.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to provide adequate funding to allow the erection of additional nursing home places in this area.

by Mr Truss (from 1,813 citizens).

Mobile Phone Service: Fraser Coast

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:

The Petition of electors of the Division of Wide Bay draws to the attention of the House the growing and urgent need for Mobile Telephone coverage to the townships of Tinnanbar, Poona, Boonooroo and Maroom on the Fraser Coast.

Tourists visiting the area are unable to keep in touch with their families and trades people are obliged to leave their work site seeking a signal. We further feel this is a safety issue due to a lack of coverage to the land delineated and on The Great Sandy Straits waters in times of emergency.

Your petitioners therefore pray that the House initiates implementation of Mobile Telephone service coverage to this area.

by Mr Truss (from 602 citizens).

Health: Denmark, Western Australia

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:

The petition of certain residents of the Denmark district, Western Australia, draws to the attention of the House, the Denmark Multi Purpose Health Service urgent requirement for a new hospital, including a 25-30 bed residential aged care facility.

Your petitioners now request the House to support the Denmark Community in its endeavour to achieve an appropriate and safe health care facility for the residents of the Denmark district to be completed by the year 2003.

by Mr Tuckey (from 1,121 citizens).

Petitions received.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Alzheimer’s Disease

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (3.38 p.m.)—I move:

That this House calls on the Government to support improved quality of life for people with Alzheimer’s disease and their carers by:

(1) amending the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee’s eligibility requirements and conditions to include greater recognition of qualitative measures rather than quantitative measures; and

(2) allowing greater consideration of the advice of medical practitioners and carers involved in the daily management of patients to determine the continued eligibility for the use of the drug Aricept on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme list.

The motion before the House seeks to gain support for the change to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee’s requirements and conditions for the ongoing prescription of the drug Aricept under the prescribed benefits scheme. Aricept, also known as donepezil, is an antidementia drug used in
the treatment of patients with Alzheimer’s disease.

To gain continued access to the drug under the PBS, patients are required to demonstrate improvement on test instruments that rely solely on cognitive function. The motion recommends that the tests used to measure improvement include qualitative measures. These qualitative measures should consider global improvement, recognising patient function in activities of daily living and behavioural management factors affecting their receptivity to care.

The drug Aricept has been marketed in Australia since 1998. In February 2001, it was recommended for inclusion in the prescribed benefits scheme under specific conditions. It is those conditions that need reviewing.

In the original drug trials for Aricept, the research findings showed that the majority of patients did not demonstrate greater than four-point improvement on the cognitive assessments administered after a controlled period of drug use. However, the conditions introduced to determine continued access to the drug under the PBS require a greater than four-point improvement. The original drug trials showed that the significant success area was in the slowing down of cognitive decline and the slowing down of deterioration in everyday functionality. Improved behaviour management and receptivity to care were also noted in trial subjects. However, the tests introduced to determine continued access to the drug have no scale to measure functional or behavioural improvement. The drug trials also evidenced success in maintaining functionality at premedication levels. This was an important factor in recommending that the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee include Aricept in the national prescribed benefits scheme.

It is therefore inconsistent that the continued prescription of Aricept under the PBS relies on greater than four-point cognitive improvement, an outcome that was not obtained by the majority of subjects in the drug trials. It is also inconsistent that continued prescription does not take into account maintenance of function or any factors demonstrating improved daily function and receptivity to care.

Currently, diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease is confirmed using two instruments: the mini mental-state examination and the more complex test, the Alzheimer’s disease assessment scale-cognitive scale. As well as confirming diagnosis, the results of these tests are used as a baseline for further testing and provide a stage or level of the progress of Alzheimer’s disease. In the case of moderate to mild diagnosis where no contraindications exist, the antidementia drug Aricept can be prescribed. After six months, the tests are readministered and, if improvement is evident on the test score, continued access under the PBS is allowed.

Although the MMSE test can be administered by a GP, the more complex ADAS-Cog test requires specialist skills and is usually administered by a psychiatrist or a psychologist. The ADAS-Cog test is particularly favoured in the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease and for administering to patients who were placed in the higher intelligence scales before the onset of their disease. The ADAS-Cog test is quite a lengthy test, taking approximately 40 minutes to administer. Because it determines treatment options, referral to a psychologist or a psychiatrist for administering to patients is the usual practice. If a patient with Alzheimer’s disease is recommended for the drug Aricept, they must resubmit for the test within six months. In many cases, the carer and patient return to their medical practitioner close to the expiry of the six months but, because the test has to be administered by a psychologist or a psychiatrist, a referral process is begun and a further waiting period can occur. This frequently means that patients are presenting for the second test having ceased the medication for periods of up to three weeks. This makes it difficult for improvement to be established and calls the validity of the results into question.

The nature of the ADAS-Cog test relies largely on questions to do with general knowledge and memory. It does not attempt to measure functional or global improvement, nor does it recognise any arresting of patient decline. Stabilising cognitive decline
is a desired treatment outcome, so any failure to deteriorate should be seen as a favourable outcome of the drug use, and that should recommend continuing treatment with the drug and continued access to the PBS. The insistence on a four-point improvement on a cognitive scale should be removed and recognition should be given to scores that demonstrate that the patient condition has not deteriorated. Most importantly, the test requirements must be changed to include qualitative measures. These must be based to some degree on carer and consulting medical practitioners’ observations and assessments. It is essential that a scale measuring functional improvement in everyday activities and in behavioural and emotional areas be introduced at diagnosis. The initial performance on this scale should then be used as a base level for assessing further decline or improvement.

The need for these changes to the prescribing conditions for Aricept is clearly and very humanly demonstrated by a case in my electorate concerning two of my constituents, Mr John and Mrs Mary Bradley, who came to me seeking my assistance. Their story was poignantly presented on the A Current Affair program on Friday, 1 March and in articles published last month in both the Sydney Morning Herald and the Newcastle Herald.

Mr Bradley, who is 79, has cared for his wife, Mary, who is 80 and who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, for several years. At times this has been a very difficult task. Mary, his wife of 60 years, would frequently resist care from someone she considered a stranger in a place that she could not recognise, even though it was her home. After Mrs Bradley commenced taking Aricept, her improvement was remarkable. She now recognises her husband and responds lovingly and appreciatively to his efforts to care for her. Her improved receptivity to care means that her husband, John, can continue to take care of her in their home. This has the fortunate outcome of further delaying the time when they may need to seek nursing home care for Mary.

In this case, both the primary caregiver and the consulting physician have noted the clear and unequivocal improvement in Mary Bradley’s quality of life and emotional state. Yet their evidence has no bearing on the continued access to Aricept under the PBS. As Mary failed to demonstrate the necessary cognitive improvement after six months use of this drug, she can access it only at the full cost of $170 per month. Naturally, this option is not one that these pensioners can afford.

In reviewing the requirements for the ongoing prescription of Aricept under the PBS this year, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee considered the inclusion of a ‘clinician’s interview based impression of change’ scale and rejected such a measure because of its supposed subjectivity and resultant openness to bias. This decision needs to be reviewed. A behavioural observation scale used at initial diagnosis and then reassessed at review periods is possible and necessary. In fact, these types of behavioural scales are used widely in other fields and relied on quite significantly. Validation by the consulting physician against a baseline assessment would provide a degree of objectivity to satisfy concerns of bias. The alternative to introducing such scales is that the government will have to refuse Alzheimer’s sufferers access to drugs that arrest their decline, significantly improve their quality of life and allow them to be cared for in their homes by family members. This in turn would result in them having to be cared for in nursing homes at significant government cost.

Currently there are 150,000 Australians over 65 who suffer from moderate to severe Alzheimer’s disease. However, 94 per cent of these people are cared for in their own homes. To maintain this situation and to avoid any further drain on an aged care system already in crisis, the House should support strategies that assist Alzheimer’s disease patients to maintain function at a level conducive to continuing home care. The cost of $170 per month for the supply of Aricept is particularly low compared with the cost to government of $120 per day for nursing home care.

Because of the competing needs of different medical conditions and the high cost to the public of extending the PBS, it is under-
standable that the guidelines for the inclusion of drugs under the PBS are necessarily rigorous. However, it is quite inconsistent when failure to show improvement under the guidelines denies patients access to Aricept but still allows them to have other antide-mentia drugs prescribed to them under the PBS. A cost is incurred then for a drug that in particular cases has a lesser benefit. This is wasteful of public moneys.

Both the United Kingdom and Ireland allow for the ongoing prescription under their national benefit schemes of antidementia drugs, and we should do the same. We need to review the requirements for prescribing Aricept under the PBS, so that Alzheimer’s sufferers who show clear benefit on human scales of daily activity, functionality and emotional wellbeing are able to maintain as high a quality of life as possible. I commend this motion to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jen-kins)—Is the motion seconded?

Mr Griffin—I second the motion and re-serve my right to speak.

Dr WASHER (Moore) (3.48 p.m.)—I thank the member for Newcastle for bringing to the attention of the parliament the very important and debilitating disease of Alzheimer’s—its management and the federal government’s role in this, and in particular the use on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme of the drugs Aricept, which is donepezil, and Exelon, which is rivastigmine. Both of these drugs are anticholinesterases, which are suited to the treatment of mild to moderate Alzheimer’s disease. These drugs on the PBS reduce from a private cost in excess of $200 for a month’s supply to about $22.40 for general users and $3.60 for con-cession card holders.

So what exactly is Alzheimer’s disease and how do we diagnose it? Alzheimer’s is the commonest form of dementia in people over 55 years of age. It is a degenerative disease that slowly destroys brain cells, causing confusion, memory loss and disorientation—in other words, impaired cognitive function in language, perception and motor skills. It is illustrated graphically in the Oscar nomi-nated film Iris, which is playing in cinemas at the moment. The film portrays the final years of the British writer, academic and philosopher Dame Iris Murdoch, who died in 1999 after a long and debilitating struggle with Alzheimer’s disease. For her friends and the literary world, it was tragic to see such a brilliant mind disintegrating. In the early stages of the disease, Iris Murdoch described the condition as ‘a very, very bad, quiet place’.

In more technical terms, Alzheimer’s is a genetic disease usually diagnosed retrospectively, with at least four known chromosomal defects all leading to amyloid angiopathy in which beta amyloid deposits on neurons result in neuritic plaques and ultimately neuro-fi brillary tangles. Amyloid beta is aggregated in plaques around low density lipoprotein receptors. Neurofibrillary tangles are caused by changed tau protein. So we know that drugs that are anticholinesterases, like Ari- cept and Exelon, help improve cognitive function in Alzheimer’s. How then does a patient suffering from Alzheimer’s disease get Aricept and Exelon through the PBS system? When the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee, PBAC, was framing the terms and restrictions that apply to the availability of Aricept and Exelon, it had to ensure that the drugs were directed towards those patients for whom the medicines would be most effective. These patients were identi-fied as those with mild to moderately severe Alzheimer’s disease.

For this reason, and following consulta-tion with a range of specialists working in the field, the PBAC concluded that testing to determine the mental state of a patient was the best and fairest way for doctors to decide whether a patient was likely to benefit from receiving initial and continuing treatment with these drugs. To have PBS approval for the initial treatment of mild to moderately severe Alzheimer’s disease, confirmation of the diagnosis must be made by a specialist in the field. This is essential, because in older people Alzheimer’s can be difficult to differenti ate from things like depression, which would be treated quite differently, with medications such as serotonin re-uptake in-hibitors like Prozac. It could also be con-fused with vitamin B12 deficiency states,
thyroid disease, emboli, central nervous system infections and drug and chemical toxicity. These would all be treated in a different manner from Alzheimer’s. Pick’s disease is also different from Alzheimer’s, in that it affects a person’s response to stimuli, which causes them to experience apathy and disinhibition in much the same way as autistic children.

The testing requirements to establish the degree of cognitive impairment in Alzheimer’s patients are based on a series of questions to the patient. The availability of the drugs we are talking about is limited to patients who achieve a test score that would indicate that their Alzheimer’s disease is within the mild to moderate range. This is because the PBAC was satisfied that a reasonable ratio of benefit to cost had been demonstrated in these patients. The authority application must be in writing and include the result of the baseline mini mental-state examination. If this result is at least 25 points, the result of the baseline Alzheimer’s disease assessment scale, cognitive subscale, must also be specified. Up to a maximum of one month’s therapy plus five repeats will be issued. For continuing treatment, improvement by two points on the baseline of the mini mental-state examination or a decrease of at least four points from baseline on the Alzheimer’s disease assessment scale, cognitive subscale, must be achieved. Both Aricept and Exelon improve the levels of cholinesterase in the cholinergic synapses of the brain—not curing or reversing the disease, but improving cognitive function in a significant number of people. However, these drugs are not without significant side effects sometimes and can interact dangerously with other medications.

Some patients are unable to access continuing supplies of either Aricept or Exelon because their test scores indicate that they have progressed to a stage of Alzheimer’s disease where treatment with either medicine is no longer useful. It was recognised, however, that certain patients, such as those with intellectual disabilities, were unable to perform the test due to reasons other than their Alzheimer’s disease. After extensive additional consultation with specialists working in the field, Aricept and Exelon have been made available to these patients on the PBS.

It is also worth knowing that protective effects may be gained from such things as the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs we use for arthritis, oestrogen replacement therapy, free radical scavengers such as vitamin E, Ginkgo biloba, and, most importantly, resveratol, the last of which is found in grapevines and can be pleasantly consumed by drinking a glass of wine a day.

Carers and relatives of Alzheimer’s sufferers should find out more about support associations like the Alzheimer’s associations, which help with legal, medical, social and other potential problems.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the important—and this is important—possible curative role that pluripotent stem cells may play in the management of Alzheimer’s disease. Pluripotent stem cells, stimulated to develop into specialised cells, offer the possibility of a renewable source of replacement cells and tissues to treat a myriad of diseases and conditions, including Parkinson’s, diabetes, spinal cord injury and, particularly, Alzheimer’s. There is almost no realm of medicine that might not be touched by this innovation, which has the potential to revolutionise the practice of medicine and improve the quality and length of life. It is essential, for experimental and therapeutic reasons, that these stem cell lines are collected in Australia from discarded embryos from the IVF program.

Mr Griffin (Bruce) (3.57 p.m.)—The motion moved by the member for Newcastle touches upon a particular family that she mentioned but it is symptomatic of the circumstances of many people in our community who are faced with the horror of Alzheimer’s disease—either themselves or as carers, who are often the unsung heroes in dealing with this most depressing and debilitating illness. The motion calls for action to amend the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee’s eligibility requirements and conditions, in particular to include greater recognition of qualitative measures rather than quantitative measures.
The issue of the provision of pharmaceuticals in this country has seen quite a deal of debate in recent times and will be the subject of considerable debate into the future. In the past, for many illnesses, and this is an example of one, people had to learn to live with the illness—or, rather, in this case, learn to die with it. As medical science advances, we are starting to develop treatments that will deal with such illnesses to some degree. Aricept is one medication that has shown extraordinary results for some people but not for others.

This is an example of the problems facing the health system as a whole with respect to the provision of medicines. New medicines that are incredibly expensive to develop come onto the market and the government budget has to take care of the cost. In some cases, the private budget of those who can afford it takes care of the cost, but individual pensioners are in a situation where medicines with this sort of cost are far beyond their capability to afford.

This highlights, I believe, the fact that there needs to be a significant review of the PBAC. Although I support the PBAC in many respects and I believe it has done a difficult job in circumstances that have caused a good deal of public furore, in a situation where the overall requirements of the job that it does are essential to maintain a public health system, I do believe—and I have said this on the record before in this place—that there is a need for greater transparency as to what occurs on it. If we are to have a situation where the public is confident that decisions that are being made are correct, we need to make sure that the information is made public. That will require the companies being more open with their own data and the government and the PBAC being more open about the processes. Hopefully, that will lead to better decision making.

With an issue such as this there seems to me to be—and this has seemed to be so for some time—a need for some changes to take into account the sorts of conditions that the member for Newcastle in particular was talking about before. The fact is that the current system’s particular means of review of a patient’s condition does not take into account the variations that can occur on a daily basis and also the fact that certain aspects of the cognitive situation will not be made clear through the testing mechanism that is involved. That has certainly been clearly put on the record by experts and by many members of this House in respect of their constituents.

I agree with much of what was said by the previous speaker, the member for Moore. He said that this is an area where significant work has been done but that when we look to the future there is significant work still to be done. That raises this wider question about the future. We in this place have to ensure—and this is the message we have to send today—that through the proper processes another look is taken at this decision so that families like the Bradleys are able to get a fairer go from this system. We have to make sure that the government addresses the issue of funding in this area in a way that is fair and just to the poorer members of our society and ensures that we get access to medicines on a timely basis so that those who are dealing with these sorts of conditions are confident that the health system we provide is in their interests. (Time expired)

Ms GAMBARO (Petrie) (4.02 p.m.)—I rise today to also speak to the motion put forward by the member for Newcastle regarding changes to the availability of treatment for Alzheimer’s disease. This motion asks the House to consider the eligibility criteria of the drug Aricept for the treatment of Alzheimer’s disease. In effect, it asks us to consider if the benefit in broadening the supply of this drug to Alzheimer’s sufferers outweighs the costs involved in doing so. It is important to remember that the costs involved are not simply limited to financial costs. We must also consider the possible side effects that may result from broadening the range of patient eligibility for this drug.

Overall, this motion has merit but there are aspects that do need consideration. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common cause of dementia. Although the cause of Alzheimer’s disease is unknown, there are three confirmed risk factors that contribute to the disease. They include old age, a family history of Alzheimer’s disease and Down syn-
drome. In Australia nervous system disorders account for about nine per cent of the total disease burden. Several of these diseases, such as dementia, which also includes Alzheimer’s, are highly age associated and are important causes of death and disability among older Australians. Around 50 to 60 per cent of all dementia cases occur in persons aged over 50. In Australia death rates from dementia rose steadily up to 1995 because, it is believed, of an increased awareness of this disease. This trend is largely influenced by increases in death rates associated with Alzheimer’s.

For a drug to be subsidised under the PBS, it must have been demonstrated to be medically effective, safe and cost effective compared to alternative therapies. On 1 February 2002, the drug Aricept was made readily available on the PBS following the recommendation from the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee. When framing the terms and restrictions that apply to the availability of Aricept, the PBAC had to consider—and to ensure—that the drug was directed towards patients who would benefit the most from treatment with this drug. It was determined that patients with mild to moderately severe Alzheimer’s disease would be that group.

There are a number of requirements that need to be met to start therapy on the drug. These include a specialist recommendation; a mini mental-state examination test, which is used to determine the mental state of a person; and a cognitive test. Once a patient has undertaken these tests and is determined to be within the mild to moderate range, they are permitted a six-month supply of the drug and will be reassessed at the end of the six-month period. The listing of Aricept on the PBS is based on the modest benefit compared to cost. It is the view of the PBAC that continuing therapy was not only cost-effective but also demonstrated an improvement in mental state over the baseline level.

Each year the PBS costs the Australian taxpayer over $4 billion. Therefore, if we are to extend the eligibility of access to this drug, we need to consider the effectiveness of progressing this drug for patients who exceed the mild to moderate rating. We also need to consider any side effects associated with this drug and possible implications of these side effects adversely affecting patients with Alzheimer’s beyond the mild to moderate level. The increase in the incidence of Alzheimer’s disease in the last 10 years is reason enough to reconsider progressing studies into other areas that hope to find a solution for this disease. As science advances so too does our longevity as a race. With longevity comes a whole range of diseases that were unprecedented in other times and societies, and Alzheimer’s is one of those diseases.

Science provides many answers and many solutions, and it also provides many possibilities. I support the member for Moore’s endorsement of embryonic cell research. A large number of Australia’s leading scientists, including many who come from the University of Western Australia, the Pivot Medical Research Centre and the Murdoch Institute, have supported the need for this embryonic cell research. It will help in the treatment of diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. It is important that we do look at this area of research very strongly and that we consider the overall effect and benefit that it will provide in understanding diseases like Alzheimer’s. I support the motion. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hawker)—Order! The time allotted for this debate has expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

Taxation: Concessions

Mr KERR (Denison) (4.08 p.m.)—I move:

That this House expresses its concern at the growth of untargeted financial subsidies paid to the well off in the community and calls on the Treasurer to provide transparent information regarding the cost of tax concessions and direct payments to those who have high incomes in multiples of average weekly earnings. I want to raise an aspect of the growing rift between the rich and poor in Australia. My colleague and sparring partner Mark Latham has lampooned some of his Labor branch members who have raised the issue of redistribution of wealth with him, suggesting that
they are much like those Japanese soldiers who hid out in caves after the emperor’s surrender, fighting on not knowing that the war was over. But if the war to impose social control of capital is over, social democrats, even of Mark Latham’s ilk, should not kid themselves that they have won. I for one am in the trenches still fighting.

If Marx had been writing at the time of the defeat of the Keating government, he would have predicted: ‘The class struggle is about to intensify. Under the Howard terror, labour will lose ground to capital. Under Howard, the poor will be taxed to transfer wealth to the rich.’ My apologies to George Will, from whom I have drawn that analogy in his analysis of what occurred under the Reagan administration. As extreme as that language sounds, that is precisely what has been occurring. The overt shift has been from progressive to regressive taxation. Elections have been fought over shifting the burden of tax collection from progressive income tax to consumption. Other changes have been less public. The patchwork growth of untargeted and non-means-tested subsidies paid to the well off in the community largely remains hidden.

The most egregious manifestation of hidden regressive social expenditure is the $2.5 billion rebate for private health insurance. Julie Smith’s paper, ‘How fair is health spending? The distribution of tax subsidies for health in Australia’, Australia Institute Discussion Paper No. 43, October 2001, analyses the distribution of this rebate. She found that in the 1998-99 income year only four per cent of the 30 per cent rebate went to the poorest 20 per cent of taxpayers while half of the revenue forgone by the concession went to those in the top quintile—or top 20 per cent—of taxpayers. This is hardly surprising. Far more high-income earners than the less well off hold private health insurance and high-income earners take out more expensive policies.

But it is telling that Smith reports that the highest income taxpayer group—those earning over $500,000—received a per capita benefit of around $730 compared to the $390 paid on average to all taxpayers. Of course, those on lowest incomes received substantially less. We know that much of the benefit going to those at the highest levels subsidises their expensive extras, like gymnasium fees, while the public hospital system, which is in danger of becoming a residual service to the poor, remains in crisis.

A shift away from targeting scarce social expenditure is also evident in the way in which the first child tax refund, the family tax benefit part A, the first home owners grant and the child-care benefit minimum rate were designed. None were effectively means tested. Individually each may have had some merit, but collectively their design reinforces the transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top. As Brian Toohey wrote in an article, ‘The new welfare state’, in the Australian Financial Review Weekend of 16-17 February:

... in the lead up to the 2001 election, the Coalition produced a new round of benefits without the political encumbrance of a means test. The $14,000 first home owners grant was one of the more obvious. The grant has since been cut to $10,000 and in July will fall to $7,000. Although one aim was to provide a temporary boost to the building industry, the impact will be to deliver a straight gift of $7,000 to people who could easily afford to buy real estate without a government handout.

The Howard government has also magnified the benefits of tax concessions that go to high wealth individuals. The result is becoming scandalous. Yesterday’s Sunday’s Age, ‘Future Lifestyles’ section, page 9, carried an advertisement headed, ‘Are you about to retire with $400,000; $500,000; $600,000; $4M or more?’ It said:

Learn how investing your money through private superannuation gives you choice, flexibility, control and $20,000 p.a. (max. couple) Centrelink Pension & Benefits.

The article went on to advocate that you could receive both those very large sums and Centrelink fringe benefits such as rebates on your motor registration, rates, electricity, telephone and pharmaceutical costs, worth between $50 or more per fortnight for a single through to $90 or more per fortnight for a couple and indicated that persons wishing to take advantage of these matters should get in touch with Segue Portfolio Partners. The company placing this advertisement was...
probably breaking no laws in promoting this scheme; indeed, its principals may argue that it was simply promoting measures that the Howard government deliberately and proudly put in place. But how can our community afford to both provide a large rebate for private superannuation and also give maximum pension benefits to the well-off retired?

The last available taxation statistics—for the 1998-99 year—show that the direct cost of the rebate for private super contributions already exceeded $400 million per annum. There are arguable reasons why individuals who do not benefit from employer contributions should be treated advantageously by the tax system. But the rebate is skewed towards providing a far greater benefit to the already wealthy and to high income earners. This cries out for reform. Further, whatever we may think about the rights or wrongs of a rebate intended to promote private provision for retirement, any such scheme becomes scandalous and unsustainable if the rich retired can double-dip and also get the full benefit of an old age pension and all associated benefits from Centrelink.

With fewer people in the work force and an ageing population, our children will be crushed by these ongoing liabilities. More importantly, we risk becoming a nation racked and divided. We are already heading in that direction. Writing in the Age of 25 February 2002, Tim Colebatch summarised the findings of the director of the Luxembourg Income Study, Professor Timothy Smeeding, who is currently in Australia, by noting:

... while the well-off in Australia live better than their counterparts in Europe, low income households are far worse off.

And he added:

Low-income households are the poorest of almost any comparable Western country ...

It is time for the Treasurer to provide parliament and the community with transparent information regarding the cost of tax concessions and direct payments that subsidise those with high incomes or high wealth. All Australians are entitled to this information. We need to confront the monster that our government is creating.

The hidden scandal of the Howard government is this rorting and the freeloading of the rich at the expense of the poor. Those social democrats who infer that the conflict between those representing the interests of capital, wealth and power and Labor has ended are simply being pollyannas. It is undoubtedly hard resisting the ideological fashions of our time that have favoured privileging individualism, rolling back the state and accepting inequality. It is necessary to acknowledge that these things have happened, but we cannot pretend that they represent our victory.
grant, the grant of $7,000 for people buying an existing home or $14,000 for people buying a new home or having a new home built. One of the key aims of this measure was to provide adequate compensation for the increase in the cost of homes as a result of the GST. Therefore, regardless of a person’s income, the adequate compensation in the grant was a fair and just measure for anyone buying their first home.

The second point of that assistance, particularly the second $7,000 targeted at new homes, was designed as a stimulant for the building industry. It worked, and it worked marvellously well. In the September quarter last year, dwelling investment rose by a record 13.7 per cent. That boom in home building investment led to an increase in jobs and was one of the factors that was part of this government’s strong economic management that enabled us to grow strongly when the rest of the world was spiralling into recession. To this extent those measures, while they may not have been targeted in the terms of the motion of the member for Denison, were very effective and in fact led to benefits across the board for this country.

The other problem with the assumption in the motion is the confusion in the ALP over what is actually equitable. Equity does need to be considered, but it needs to be considered in the context of the total program and in the context of the objectives of the total program and not just as one program in isolation from other objectives, other benefits or other programs. Typically, many members of the ALP confuse equity with equality. The ghosts of their socialist backgrounds are coming back to haunt them. Equity is not equality of outcome but equality of opportunity, equality of process and a fair reward for fair effort. It is not necessarily equality of outcome. Sadly, this is where so many members opposite get confused. The appropriateness, therefore, of different measures needs to be evaluated, not just in terms of their direct impact in isolation on measures of equality of income but in terms of their overall impact on living standards. So often what we hear from the other side fails to do this. If measures provide an overall incentive in this country, if measures encourage investment, if measures stimulate productivity and stimulate production and therefore generate jobs, those measures are adding to the national income of this country, thus adding to the wellbeing of everyone and giving everyone the opportunity to participate and share in the growth of wealth in this country. Sadly, the member opposite fails to acknowledge that fact. There is a capacity, if the measures are appropriate, for all in the economy to benefit. The point is this: many of these measures, while they might not fit the strict criterion that the member for Denison might like to see, benefit potentially everyone in this country. This is exactly what is happening with a number of these measures.

The second point is that this motion is not borne out by the facts—in fact, quite clearly, the reverse. The facts show clearly that in recent years the overall thrust of coalition government assistance has been targeted to where the need is greatest, has improved the wellbeing of all sectors of the community and has particularly helped those on lower incomes, those in the greatest need. I refer the member for Denison to last year’s study produced by NATSEM, the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, an independent, well-respected research organisation. Its conclusions are very interesting. They totally destroy the argument of the member for Denison. This model looked at the first five years of the coalition government. It looked at a range of different family structures and types and it looked at real net disposable income; that is, income levels after allowing for tax changes and family allowances and child-care costs—the cost of living for families. It looked at 12 different scenarios. The conclusions are very revealing. First of all it found that all income groups have been better off under this government. In the last five years all income groups had their net real disposable income increased by between seven per cent and 19 per cent in real terms. All income groups, because of this government’s management, are better off.

The second point the NATSEM independent research model showed was that the poorer families, the low income families—
the most needy—received most government help, contrary to what the member for Denison would have us believe. If you look at the table showing the level of government help, a sole parent family with two children had on average an increase of 19 per cent in government assistance. A single income family on average weekly earnings with two children and no child care had a 76 per cent increase in government assistance. The average two-income family, one on average weekly earnings and one on half average weekly earnings, had a 29 per cent increase in government assistance, and the rich double income family where one partner was on twice average weekly earnings and the other one on average weekly earnings had a reduction of 36 per cent in government assistance. Clearly and unequivocally the level of government assistance has been targeted predominantly towards those on low incomes and has in fact been reduced to those on high incomes. Those figures cannot be disputed.

The third conclusion of the NATSEM study on the overall impact of these factors on net disposable income—looking at a person’s rise in income, looking at inflation and looking at all of those other factors and at government assistance—was similar. The sole parent family with two children had an improvement in wellbeing, net of everything—net of taxes, net of government assistance—of 19 per cent. They had a 19 per cent increase in real living standards in the last five years under this government. The single income family on average weekly earnings had a net rise in real disposable income of 16 per cent. The average two-income family had a net rise of nine per cent and the rich dual income family had a net rise of seven per cent. Those whose wellbeing has improved the most have been those on low incomes. The point is that all income levels, all of those family structures, are better off under this government. Those who have seen the biggest increase have been those with the greatest level of need, because the government’s programs have been targeted. Not only have they been targeted; they have led to incentive, greater productivity, greater production and greater benefit for everyone.

We hear the rhetoric all the time from the other side that, supposedly, they look after the battlers. The figures show very clearly that under this government the lower income earners are better off. It is this government, the coalition, that has delivered for the battlers in this country, not the opposition; this government has delivered. The figures are there in black and white. Low income earners are better off under the coalition government.

Ms HALL (Shortland) (4.27 p.m.)—I would have to say that after listening to the previous speaker I feel sad. I feel truly sad because he showed just how out of touch this government is. What the previous speaker did was produce figures that he has selectively chosen to prove his own argument. What I would suggest is that the member actually goes out and speaks to some people and sees the struggle and the difficulty that people are living under. He shows his total lack of understanding of these issues by talking about equity being equality of opportunity. For a start, people do not have equality of opportunity, just by their very nature and background. The children of people who have been unemployed for many, many years do not have the same opportunity as those of the previous member, who probably attend private schools.

The government does not understand the issue. It does not understand the problems that are being faced by people in the community and it is because of this that this government has directed large sums of money to those least in need of financial assistance at the expense of those in our society who are in the greatest need and who look to government for assistance. This is a government that has changed the meaning of cross-subsidisation. Previously it meant that those people who were better off and earned a little bit more money were prepared to pay more tax and this was then directed to those in our society who needed some financial assistance—people like pensioners, people that were unemployed, people that had disabilities. Then there was a move towards a situation where there was some equality of opportunity, where these people could actually send their children to school and have the
basic things that they needed to attend school, like books and pencils, rather than being able to afford to go to a private school.

Under this government, pensioners, disabled people, the unemployed and even children pay tax—the GST—at the same level as the most wealthy in our community, regardless of whether or not they can afford it. That is what happens when you have a regressive tax. It results in a lot of people going without. This government’s philosophy has led us to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, and it hits hardest those with the lowest disposable income. What it has done is create a great divide in our society, as the member for Denison pointed out previously. This can be seen in the area of health. The Howard government is subsidising the health insurance industry to the tune of $2.2 billion. This money is going to those people who can afford health insurance while those people who cannot afford it are going without. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the area of dental health. If you have the insurance, you can have the treatment. If you have no insurance you have to wait and, while you are waiting, you are suffering and you have poor health. Only last week I was speaking to a woman who had abscesses all through her mouth. She was very sick and had to have all her teeth removed. If she had not had them removed, she may have died. She is a single mother. Now she has to wait six months before she can get some teeth. I do not think that is good enough. On the one hand, the government is giving money to people who can afford it and, on the other hand, people like this lady are going without. It is the same in education: more money is going to private schools while public schools go without.

This is a government that gives billions of dollars to those who are well-off in our community at the expense of those who are in greatest need. The difference between the government and the Labor Party is that we on this side of the House are committed to social justice and to ensuring that everybody has a good, basic standard of living and that they do not have to go without. It is time the Treasurer came clean with the Australian people. It is time the Treasurer told the Australian people the cost of the tax concessions and the direct payments to those who have high incomes in Australia. (Time expired)

Mrs ELSON (Forde) (4.32 p.m.)—I appreciate the opportunity to speak against this ridiculous motion. I have said before in this House and I will say it again: you can always tell when Labor are in trouble, because they resort to the same tired old class warfare line. I can say that their new, or old, leadership team must not be travelling very well at all, because here we have yet another example of ‘let’s try to beat up some class division—some “them and us” discontent’. That is certainly what the member for Denison’s motion is all about. I am surprised that he referred to the private health insurance rebate and the first home owners grant as untargeted financial subsidies, which are the basis of this motion. I cannot believe that he named those two very highly successful government policies. To be critical of these two very important programs certainly goes against public opinion. The reason is that both these programs benefit middle-class Australians and the battlers that Labor still claims to represent.

The first home owners grant has been of enormous benefit to young Australians by helping them realise their dream of owning their own home. While it is available to everyone who has not previously owned a home, it is a significant benefit to those on lower incomes who may otherwise have had difficulties getting together a deposit. Hard-working families and young people like those I represent know that they can meet loan repayments, especially with the low interest rates that this government has helped create, but many need help with the deposit. These are the people who are being helped by this program. It is ridiculous for Labor to try to fan the flames of division by suggesting that the well-off are benefiting hugely from this program. I can assure the member for Denison that there are very few people who have never owned their own home but who are earning multiples of the average weekly wage.

The private health insurance rebate, which is also available to all Australians, is another scheme that more directly benefits the less
well-off. It is not just helping those on lower incomes with the cost of being privately insured; it is also helping to repair the private health system, and that is taking pressure off the public health system so that those who do not have private insurance can enjoy better access to quality health care. I note that MBF’s latest reports to members show that the fund is paying 20 per cent more for hospital admissions, which is further evidence that the pressure is being taken off the public health system. The member for Denison fails to point out that the Howard government has also put in place a Medicare surcharge for those on higher incomes to encourage health fund membership. This is hardly a measure to benefit the well-off. Under Labor, private health insurance was in sharp decline while the cost of public health was skyrocketing to totally unsustainable levels. If we had not introduced these policies, the public health system may have collapsed completely and the ones who would be most affected would be those Australians on low incomes who rely on our public system.

I am not one for giving advice to Labor Party members, but I suggest that the member for Denison think a little more before bringing such divisive and utterly ridiculous motions such as this one before the House. The public is sick and tired of the politics of envy and of the old class warfare rubbish that the Labor Party continually trot out in this House. The member for Denison should have done his research a little better. The figures he stated in his speech were very selective. I have more faith in the figures stated by the member for Macquarie to back up the motion. I find this motion quite hypocritical. In the member for Denison’s electorate he proudly boasts this booklet which promotes the government’s initiative, and he suggests that his constituents apply for it. He thinks it is a great scheme. He forgets to mention that the federal coalition government actually promotes this scheme. So I find it very hypocritical that the member for Denison should come out with something like that.

I do not have much time left, but I want to take a moment to point out the absolute hypocrisy of Labor on this issue. It was Labor who introduced the non-means tested child-care cash rebate that had taxpayers helping subsidise child-care costs of the very well-off. In 1997 the Howard government tightened that bill. I am sure that the irony will not have escaped many people listening to the Labor Party member for Denison when he was carrying on about the cost to the taxpayer. He did not seem to have any problems about imposing a costly by-election on Australian taxpayers shortly after the last election, on which he was then forced to back down. As he was forced to back down, I suggest that, while he is hanging around here for the next three years, he might try to add something constructive to the debate in this chamber instead of pointless motions such as this one.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hawker)—Order! The time allotted for this debate has expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Question proposed:
That grievances be noted.

Commercial Nominees of Australia Ltd

Mr MOSSFIELD (Greenway) (4.37 p.m.)—I feel grieved about the remarks made by the new Assistant Treasurer and Minister for Revenue in January this year when she expressed the view that the government would ultimately phase out age pensions. This would not be a view shared by the opposition. The aim of government should be to encourage more Australians to invest in superannuation by providing better protection for people who have superannuation savings.

Many members of this parliament would be aware of the plight of some 480 small superannuation fund members whose assets were managed by a government approved trustee, Commercial Nominees of Australia Ltd. In February 2001, the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) revoked Commercial Nominees’ licence as an approved trustee. But this action was too little too late, as by that time many small superannuation fund members had lost all their savings.
The two government regulatory authorities, APRA and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission, were aware that there were problems with CNA for over 12 months. Indeed, APRA removed CNA as a trustee for three large superannuation funds some two months before removing them as the trustee for the 480 small funds. What happened was that CNA used the money invested by these small superannuation funds for unsecured loans for the purchase of extremely dubious ventures such as a mushroom farm and vacant land, both of which were outside the scope of cash management funds controlled by APRA-approved trustees. It also appears that the directors of the mushroom farm venture were directors of CNA itself—they were loaning money to themselves and not paying it back.

APRA were criticised by the Senate Select Committee on Superannuation and Financial Services in August 2001 for being too slow to act on behalf of these funds, which has seen an estimated $25 million lost by several thousand investors. Members of these funds are asking: ‘How can the Australian public have the confidence to be responsible and save for retirement when we cannot trust an APRA-approved trustee?’

Many of the people affected by the CNA misadventure are now broke and have had to either return to the work force, borrow from relatives or live on a social security pension—the type which this government apparently intends to phase out. Unfortunately, they are still required by the temporary trustees, Oak Breeze Pty Ltd, to pay $10,000 for each family to cover administrative costs. In some cases, this $10,000 has not been enough and Oak Breeze have demanded even more.

APRA assured the committee that I referred to that Oak Breeze would have every fund audited and brought to a level of compliance by 31 October 2001. To date it appears that, of the 480 funds, fewer than five have been properly brought to compliance, with none completed by 31 October. And as the clock continues to tick away, the fees and charges mount up.

Members of these funds are asking that the government approve an application under section 229 of the Superannuation Industry (Supervision) Act 1993. Section 229 allows the minister to levy the industry to pay for a bail-out of the funds that have lost their savings due to fraudulent conduct or theft. This is what the Senate select committee, under the leadership of Senator John Watson, also recommended. That committee went on to recommend that the cost involved in the investigation and the operation of the temporary trustee should be borne by APRA or by the federal government.

There would be little doubt that fraudulent conduct has taken place, based on the remarks of the Chairman of the Senate Economics Legislation Committee, who said in an adjournment speech in the Senate in February 2001 on the Commercial Nominees issue:

It has been alleged that a former director of Commercial Nominees, who was a director in the early 1990s and until the middle 1990s, has potentially absconded with funds from certain investment entities with the Commercial Nominees group and/or their sister company, Strategic Superannuation Solutions.

Other trustees of CNA are alleged to have ‘rather than declare the losses and the resultant problems, used the funds from other entities within the CNAL-SSS stable to cover and maintain equity right across the group’.

In August 2001, the Senate Select Committee on Superannuation and Financial Services recommended that the government should expedite the application for financial assistance for funds affected by the CNA problem. The government has a responsibility to assist these small superannuation investors, particularly as its own investigatory authority, APRA, was informed of troubles at Commercial Nominees in early 1999 but, through either lack of legislative powers or substantial evidence, failed to act.

The temporary trustees, Oak Breeze Pty Ltd, have written to the fund members offering them three options. Fund members have had to select the most appropriate action to be taken with their fund and were told that ‘members may need to seek their own advice in order to make this choice’.
problem is that this is a legal exercise that would impose an extra cost on these impoverished investors that they are quite clearly unable to meet. Requests were formally made to the government in March and April last year to act under section 229 of the act, but close to 12 months later and with a new minister, there is still no response from the government.

Senator Watson, who chaired the Senate select committee, has also highlighted in the Senate other misdemeanours allegedly committed by former directors of CNA, such as running up huge hotel bills in New York on the company account. In his speech, Senator Watson raised the following point:

... we have a problem of people feeling that they had money in the security of an APRA-approved fund, whereas, in effect, they did not. It did raise the question in a lot of people’s minds: how safe is insurance? I agree with Senator Watson: this is the basic question that the government must address before they start to dismantle the safety net that retired people have in the form of the aged pension.

I now turn specifically to the circumstances of one of the small superannuation investors caught up in the CNA debacle: Mr Les Emerson. Members know that I have raised Mr Emerson’s case on a number of occasions in this House in the past. In early 1999, Mr Emerson accepted a voluntary redundancy payout after working at Nestle as a greaser for 29 years. His wife, Heather, had been a full-time carer for their disabled son for 25 years, and Mr Emerson thought it was time to give her a break. The Emersons invested their $149,000 superannuation savings with CNA on the advice of a financial adviser. At the time, Les was 54 and was unable to access his superannuation savings until he reached the age of 55.

In October 2000, Mr Emerson, who had become concerned about the fund’s fees being too high, sought to resign from CNA. He did not receive a specific reply to his resignation letter but was informed by the new directors of CNA that funds were frozen on 7 November 2000. But the records show that the Emersons’ money was withdrawn without their permission on 1 October 2000. Mr Emerson has financial statements from the ECMT cash management account for the period ending 13 December 2000. On 1 April 2000, it stood at $171,741; on 31 July 2000, it stood at $148,608; and on 31 December 2000, nil. $148,750 had been withdrawn on 1 October 2000 without Mr Emerson’s permission.

No explanation has been given to the Emersons as to who authorised the withdrawal of their funds. The case of the Emersons’ disappearing $148,000 would indicate that these investors are the victim of fraud or theft and that there has been a substantial diminution of their assets as a result, justifying the government’s use of section 229 of the act.

APRA wants the application granted, the temporary trustees want the application granted and the superannuation industry itself wants the application granted and has already agreed to the levy required to pay for it, so it will not cost the government a cent. The Senate select committee made a recommendation that not only should the application be granted but an ex gratia payment should be made in the interim so that the victims could get their money back as a matter of urgency. It seems everybody but the government wants this matter settled and settled quickly. The sad story of Commercial Nominees, and of APRA’s apparent failure to supervise or protect people’s life insurance adequately, demonstrates that the superannuation regime in Australia needs work. (Time expired)

Pollie Pedal

Mr ROSS CAMERON (Parramatta—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Family and Community Services) (4.47 p.m.)—I rise not to express a grievance but to express a great sense of invigoration, having just returned from an annual Pollie Pedal charity bike ride throughout western New South Wales with a number of colleagues. Members may be familiar with this initiative, now in its fifth year, which began on the inspiration of the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, the Hon. Tony Abbott; the member for Boothby, Dr Andrew Southcott; and New South Wales
Upper House MLC Charlie Lynn, the champion of the Kokoda Track.

The idea was to try to find a bit of scaffolding or structure in our annual calendars that would ensure we got out of our offices, our white cars and the airport lounges, away from the briefing notes and officials, and moved amongst the real people of regional Australia. We chose the bicycle as our preferred means of transportation and the caravan park as our form of accommodation, feeling that nothing could be more down-to-earth than laying out one’s swag by the river in a caravan park. We just returned yesterday from Albury—the conclusion of the ride—having begun 900 kilometres earlier at the township of Lightning Ridge.

In this, the Year of the Outback, we chose the Royal Flying Doctor Service as the charity for which we would raise money, in recognition of their extraordinary efforts over the past 70-odd years in providing health care and health services to individuals and families in the most remote corners of this vast continent, Terra Australis. The service began in Cloncurry in 1928, under the inspiration of the then travelling padre, John Flynn—truly one of the great Australians—who saw and heard in his travels throughout the bush of the countless people dying helplessly and alone due to the lack of medical care. Flynn had the idea of using aircraft, doctors and an ingenious Australian device called the pedal radio to bring health care to people in remote areas. The need is just as real today as it was then, and I am delighted to report that, through the generosity of our sponsors and the many individual men and women we met along the road, we have managed to raise $40,000 to contribute to the acquisition of a new aircraft.

We began in Lightning Ridge—truly a great, cosmopolitan, legendary town. In my estimation, no town more graphically and completely embodies the adventuring, enterprising spirit of the outback than does Lightning Ridge. This town attracts new migrants from all over the world as well as Australian men and women, still with that pioneering spirit of adventure and the willingness to take a risk—people focused more on seizing the opportunities before them than on looking to government to solve their problems. That spirit of enterprise infects the whole town.

From there we moved over 100 kilometres to our next stop, which was at Walgett. From Walgett we went to Coonamble, riding our bikes along the way, stopping and rattling our tin in the pubs and meeting people on the street. We came across countless examples of extraordinary generosity. I want to acknowledge a couple. When we pulled into the little township of Barmedman, between West Wyalong and Temora, Pat Wells—a woman just in the newsagency—came out and greeted us. She had heard about us on the radio, and she greeted us not like politicians but like long-lost sons and friends. She made a very generous contribution to our cause and sent us on our way with words of encouragement.

We had a situation where a woman stopped in the street, walked up to us—she would have been in her eighties—opened her purse and simply emptied it of all its contents, a handful of change. She said, ‘I would give you more, but my pension won’t arrive until Thursday.’ We walked into the offices of the Manildra Group, one of the great private Australian companies, one of the great value adders of Australian agriculture in milling and developing new energy sources for Australia in ethanol. We told Dick Honan, the proprietor, of our commitment to the Royal Flying Doctor Service. He calmly and without ceremony pulled the chequebook out of the desk and wrote us a cheque for $20,000.

From the least to the greatest we found community spirit. I note that the member for Deakin has just walked into the chamber. The member for Deakin gets the prize for the most improved political ‘pedaller’. He will, I am sure, give a demonstration of the firmness of his thighs to any other member who may care to inquire on that subject. He is very proud of the fitness he has achieved over several hundred kilometres in reconnecting with rural and regional Australia.

The little township of Gulargambone was one of the highlights of the trip for me. As we approached the town perimeter, we were greeted by 60 children on bicycles from Gu
largambone Central School. It only has 200 pupils from kindergarten to year 12, but the spirit of that town would inspire any Australian. The school had especially prepared a video of the various attractions and wonders of the town, which was presented to us before the children made a donation to our cause. I want to read you a short passage from a document that a parent at the school, Ms Sandra Kelly, gave us. She said:

I am very proud to tell my story of Gulargambone because ... we are a very dynamic little community, currently undergoing a remarkable change. We have recaptured that "can-do" attitude and we are achieving our goals. Just four or five years ago, the word "Gulargambone" used to trigger doubt in people's minds that we had any quality of life or future. I remember at Uni I used to say I came from "near Dubbo" then that became a bit westie so I'd say near the Warrumbungles ... At last I can proudly say I am from Gulargambone! All those warm ... feelings from my childhood have returned—hopes, dreams and that certainty that I am lucky to live here. Yes it is west, it is unique, original and full of surprises ... we have enough positive people to live rich and happy lives.

And we met many of them. Principal Ken Graham is running an Australian country English language college for Japanese and Korean visitors to Australia, teaching them English in Gulargambone.

I want to pay tribute to the minister at the table, the member for Richmond, who is already famous in his own electorate as a bike rider. He joined us for 150 kilometres passing through the township of Peak Hill, which was the birthplace of his grandfather. As with Gulargambone, Peak Hill is a thriving, vibrant but tiny community out in western New South Wales. I want to also mention my other colleagues who joined us. Kay Hull drove 200 kilometres to be with us in the Riverina. Susan Ley, the new member for Farrer—and what a charming and dynamic new member she is—rode 40 kilometres from Culcairn to Albury. John Cobb, the new member for Parkes, put his substantial frame into a bike seat between Dubbo and Narromine. We also had the Mayor of Goulburn—an independent mayor, I mention to the House—Max Hadlow, a fantastic bloke.

Ms Hall—Labor members can ride bikes too.

Mr ROSS CAMERON—We invited every Labor member to join us. I certainly hope that next year some Labor members and senators—perhaps David Cox, who is a good bloke, an expert in financial matters, but who would do well to put in a few kilometres on the bike—will join us.

I want to acknowledge other individuals who are out there in regional Australia doing great things. David Lowy from the Westfield family, known as a millionaire property developer, has put literally millions of dollars into the small town of Temora to assemble in that town the greatest collection of warbirds—warplanes from the First World War and the Second World War, including a Spitfire, two Dragonflies, a Wirraway and a Canberra bomber. He is putting that town on the map using initiative, and the community is getting behind the initiative of this entrepreneur.

I want to acknowledge our support crew, in particular John and Pat Byrne and Damien Green; our postie from Goulburn, Wendall Rosewarne, and his dog, Monty, who come with us each year; Bill Galvin from the Tourism Training Australia, who very generously supported us; Bonds; and Holden, who gave us two support vehicles. I want to challenge every member and senator to think about taking a couple of days next year to join us, to get out of this place and out into the clear air, under the brilliant crystal clear sky, under the Milky Way as you lay down in your swag at night. This is really where the strength of the Australian nation is to be found.

Unemployment: Government Policy

Ms HALL (Shortland) (4.57 p.m.)—One of the greatest challenges for government in Australia is to create an environment where all Australians looking for work can succeed in securing a job. To achieve this, government must create an environment where unemployed Australians, particularly those most disadvantaged, are assisted in their quest for work rather than punished for being unemployed. This government’s solution to the problem of unemployment in Australia
has been the introduction of the Job Network, coupled with labour market deregulation, and a number of draconian measures designed to force unemployed people to jump through hoops and punish them if they miss one of those hoops. It is a philosophy of ‘blame the victim and attack those that are least able to fight for themselves and to put forward their case’.

This has led to an increase in the number of long-term unemployed; it is growing at an alarming rate. It has also led to the most disadvantaged job seekers becoming more disadvantaged. It has led to many workers being disadvantaged, and it has led to the casualisation of the work force. In talking about the casualisation of the work force, I should at this stage refer to the case of a woman I was speaking to on Saturday. Along with this casualisation of the work force comes an erosion of workers’ entitlements and an erosion of protections for workers in her situation.

This lady had been on the supporting parent benefit and she really wanted to get back into the work force. She was still entitled to receive the supporting parent benefit. She went along to see one of the Job Network providers and was referred to a job on the Central Coast, where most of the jobs are casual jobs and are in non-unionised workplaces. This lady managed to secure a job. She worked there full-time as a casual every day. She knew when she was supposed to be there: start at 9.00 and finish at 5.00 or start at 7.00 and finish at 3.00. A couple of weeks ago the company decided that they were going to put off the casuals, call in the labour hire company and thereby cut their costs at the expense of the workers.

On the Central Coast of New South Wales everyone knows that there is an alarmingly high suicide rate. To say that you can look at the suicide rate in isolation from employment and employment opportunities would not be honest. The casualisation has led to the devaluing of workers. People are unable to plan for their future. It is a very alarming situation. The area that I represent is one of the areas of highest unemployment despite the fact that in the Hunter we have a very proactive approach to address the issue. We have set up the Hunter Net and a couple of other initiatives, but that does not get around the fact that this government is not addressing the issue.

It is important when we are looking at unemployment and the number of people who are employed to look at the definition of unemployment. All the official figures we see count only those people who do not have one hour’s work a week. If you have an hour’s work a week, you are employed according to this government. I really do not think that is good enough. Unemployment is an enormous cost to families—the choices that those families and individuals have and the future of families. A few moments ago when I was talking about equality of opportunity I was saying that, if you do not have a job, your choices are far fewer and opportunities for your children are far fewer.

I mentioned suicide a moment ago. I was talking to an ex-Ansett worker only last week. One fact that has not been released to the general community is that 14 ex-Ansett workers have committed suicide already. That is unbelievable. That is the cost. In our community every day people are losing their lives and losing their choices in life. It is not good enough. How many Australians spend their life by the telephone waiting for a call from the labour hire company, from a council or from industry? In the area that I live in the labour hire companies are one of the major sources of employment. The answer to the problem experienced by these workers is not more of the same and a further deregulation of the labour market, rather it requires recognition by the Howard government that workers are entitled to security and protection, that they are not just fodder for businesses, not just there to be exploited. They are real people with real needs.

Recently it has been brought to my attention that the practice of trialing workers has grown at an alarming rate. The practice of trialing is where workers are brought in to work for an hour, a day, a week or whatever and at the end of that they are either offered a job or told to go away. Recently I received a letter which pointed out to me that this practice is happening very regularly within the Hunter. There are businesses that are filling
30 to 40 per cent of their staff needs by trialing. This person checked with the department and the department told them that, if a person works an hour, they should be paid the minimum award wage. However, these people are not being paid anything at all. The letter went on to say that trialing is immoral and that it preys on the most vulnerable section of our society.

I was particularly concerned when I learnt that one retail store during the Christmas sales trialed 26 young women and not one of those women was offered a job. What is even more disturbing is that Job Network providers are referring the most vulnerable people, the people most desperate for a job, to these employers who are trialing them for a long period of time. I worked for 13 years with unemployed people, helping them find jobs, and in the first three years I worked with the CES. At that time trialing was frowned upon. If you found that a worker was being exploited, you did not send another worker so that that worker could also be exploited. The Howard government needs to do something about this. It cannot sanction a situation where young people and people desperate for work are being exploited.

I received another letter from Dean Papworth, who lived at Redhead. This young man wrote to me saying that he was absolutely disgusted with the current government because they said that there would be jobs for people in the country and since they came into power five years ago that has not happened. He is absolutely fed up with the distortion and cover up that is taking place. I worked with Dean some time ago. He had a disability. He has been in the Special Olympics. He referees and coaches basketball and he has played outdoor cricket. But in his job he injured his back and he is now doubly disadvantaged. The system in place is seeing Dean being passed over time and time again. He is to get married soon and he feels that he has absolutely no future.

What is even more disturbing is that this government is not acting on this issue. It really is time for the government to offer unemployed people hope and to assist them, not by giving them more of the same—shuffling the deck, eroding working conditions and blaming the victim—but by really getting in there and helping unemployed people. We should not have a situation where someone like Dean has got absolutely no hope for the future. He is trying desperately to find work, and yet the harder he tries the more knock-backs he receives. We have in place in this country a system that is failing unemployed workers, and until the government recognises that and addresses the issue nothing will change. (Time expired)

Insurance: Public Liability

FRAN BAILEY (McEwen— Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence) (5.07 p.m.)—Mansfield is a small community in my electorate on the brink of shutting up shop—literally. A collective decision has been made to close the town this Thursday to rally against soaring public liability insurance premiums and demonstrate just what could happen if this problem is not addressed. Small towns like Mansfield rely heavily on tourist activity related industries, and simply will not survive the 500 per cent increases in public liability insurance premiums. In the case of horseriding, for example, an insurer currently providing cover to a local operator has indicated that this cover simply will not be extended beyond December 2002. There have been increases from around $7,000 to $32,000.

Mansfield is a small community in a region boasting one of the strongest growing adventure tourism industries in Australia. It is the sort of place where shopkeepers are more accustomed to greeting those from the urban areas seeking retreat from the rat-race than they are to calling crisis meetings. But they have mobilised for fear that unless they act now they will be too late to save their town. Their concerns are so grave that they have established the Mansfield Public Liability Task Force, which will work towards the implementation of a locally developed strategy to beat the premiums. It is known as the Mansfield Proposal.

The Mansfield Proposal recommends a series of initiatives to be included in any future legislation of the Victorian state government. Such legislation should contain a statute definition of ‘serious injury’ and require adventure tourism operators to offer partici-
pants personal accident insurance, according to the Mansfield Proposal. Adventure park participants must also be willing to accept that minor injuries are a likely possibility from partaking of such activities as snow skiing, horseriding or tobogganing. The Mansfield Proposal also recommends practical initiatives for the adventure tourism sector, including risk management codes of practice and a research database for the adventure tourism industry.

This is a serious business for a region made famous by *The Man from Snowy River* and where the annual collective value of tourism in the region between Mansfield and Mount Buller is around $250 million. Hundreds of families throughout this region rely on the weekly wages provided through tourist operators and other related outdoor tourism industries, and many more families rely on the weekly wages of the associated hospitality industry that has grown up to accommodate the burgeoning adventure tourism market. It is these flow-on effects that will determine the viability of small towns like Mansfield if stripped of the adventure activities and holiday-making attractions that encourage people to the region.

We all know that public liability insurance premiums are costing communities across this country dearly, and it is certainly not a problem confined to just one community in my electorate of McEwen. Public liability insurance premiums have increased by more than 500 per cent in many cases, with no indication that this will be the extent of those increases. It is not just small business bearing the brunt of these increases, because many community events held for the benefit of the local community have had to be cancelled. We are seeing more and more of this as reports come in each week. Just last Christmas the Warburton Christmas carol concert had to be cancelled. That was the first time in the history of this local community event, run by the Warburton Advancement League, that it could not get public liability insurance to cover the event. That is a travesty. More and more events are, as I said, having to face the reality of not being able to get coverage or face such increases to the premiums that it makes it impossible to hold the events.

Public liability insurance has become an issue that has made its way onto the agenda of every local council, sporting association and community group right across my electorate. While everyone agrees that there is no quick fix, it is an issue that needs the immediate and undivided attention of every level of government. Small business, for example, accounts for 97 per cent of the 1.1 million businesses in Australia, which makes this issue possibly the most significant issue ever to face small business. According to Australian prudential regulation figures, public liability insurance claims have risen from 55,000 in 1998 to 88,000 in 2000—a massive 60 per cent increase, with the projection that it is set to rise even higher than that. This is the result of an increasingly litigious society and the promotion of no win, no fee remuneration for lawyers. Whether or not these are the things that have caused this increase in claims, what is clear is that small business and community groups can no longer afford the level of premiums for their public liability insurance.

The collapse of HIH Insurance calls into serious question the risk management practices and corporate transparency of the individual operators of major insurance companies everywhere. The insurance industry is one which has for too long escaped scrutiny, and now we are finding claims that it has become unsustainable in some areas and is threatening the very social wellbeing of our communities. Clearly we need to look closely at whether further safeguards are needed in this industry, and that will be the challenge for the government when the recommendations come down from the HIH royal commission.

In the meantime, what is needed is a nationwide debate encouraging the participation and involvement of every stakeholder group affected by the upward spiral of public liability insurance premiums. Only with a nationally consistent approach to this national crisis will we find a lasting solution and be able to provide any security for small business and be able to reinstate that wonderful community spirit and civic pride in com-
munities that are already counting their losses caused by unsustainable insurance premium hikes.

The states and territories have a clear and unambiguous responsibility for legislating change. In fact, many of the forms of relief being considered, such as the abolition of common law rights and capping of claims, fall within the jurisdiction directly of the states and territories. The federal government is leading the way by facilitating a national forum to be held here in Canberra on 27 March, and I congratulate the Assistant Treasurer, Senator Helen Coonan, and the Minister for Small Business and Tourism, Joe Hockey. We all hope that they will be able to bring all the states together and get that nationally consistent approach which is so much needed. My belief is that, to ease the premium burden, we certainly need to consider capping those sometimes quite extraordinary payments awarded by the courts, and we certainly must review the claims process in regard to no win, no fee remuneration and the role of lawyers advertising their services. The changes to regulations covering lawyers have led to the more active pursuit of class and other large style group actions since 1992. There must, of course, also be a consideration of the global issues and the business practices of multinational insurance companies, and I certainly hope that that will be on the agenda as well.

I will just give a couple of examples of insurance premium increases. In my electorate, the organisers of the Whittlesea Country Music Festival were this year faced with a threefold increase in their premiums. Many other community markets are also feeling the brunt of these unsustainable premium increases, and in Victoria the long running blue light disco has reported a 500 per cent increase as well. We have always been very strong advocates of volunteerism and celebrate those people who give their time to their local communities. The whole business of this increase in the public liability premium cost has simply got out of hand. Just yesterday in my electorate in Alexandra I was given an example of activities organised by legatees—they were taking young people on adventure activities—which also had to be cancelled. When we get to this stage, we have simply had enough. (Time expired)

Immigration: Detention Centres

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (5.17 p.m.)—On Friday of last week I visited the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. While the centre is located in the electorate of Blaxland, it is just a few hundred metres from the boundary of the Fowler electorate. My interest in conditions at Villawood comes from my concern for the treatment of long-term detainees held at detention centres. In the last parliament I was a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration. In the course of that committee’s work I had the opportunity to visit detention centres in Perth, Port Hedland, Curtin, Christmas Island and Darwin.

I have had the chance to see at first hand the physical conditions in most of the onshore processing and detention centres in use. At all times the visits were made with the condition that no communication with detainees was allowed. That makes these visits a bit like a doctor doing hospital rounds without examining a patient. There were plenty of chances to smell the fresh paint and disinfectant but no real chance to assess the effect of long-term detention on asylum seekers held in those centres. What cannot be hidden is the look of despair on the faces of the adults and children. No amount of playground equipment can hide the shadow of razor wire fences. No child can feel at home when they have to pass through double locked gates to eat at a communal cafeteria. And no child can feel secure in a home where nightly bed checks are carried out after midnight.

Thousands of asylum seekers have now been held in mandatory detention for more than half a year. That amount of time in detention can seem long enough to an adult, but to a child it is definitely an eternity. Yet we find in centres such as Villawood children and teenagers confined in a despair filled environment with little to stimulate their young minds. Children are wondering why they are being punished, wondering what they have done to deserve this treatment. These are children surrounded by despair;
these are children without hope for the future.

As of last Friday, 20 children or persons under 19 years of age were in Villawood. Two of those were unaccompanied, five families consisted of father, mother and children, and five families consisted of mother and children. Despite the best efforts of staff at Villawood and other centres to provide the basic needs for children, you cannot escape the fact that they are living in a closed environment, surrounded by razor wire and subject to muster calls at midnight and at four o’clock in the morning. They are denied the chance to go to a regular school, with limited schooling for high school aged children and no schooling at all for those over 15 years. They are living in a community surrounded by despair. It should be obvious that such an environment is harmful to the wellbeing and education of those children.

This government wants us to believe that those held in detention for long terms are sent home, but that does not happen in the great majority of cases. For asylum seekers arriving by boat in 2000-01, 78 per cent were granted protection visas. Almost four out of five asylum seekers subject to mandatory detention were eventually granted protection visas. So families and children, having been locked away and deprived of years of education, having been traumatised by events and the atmosphere of despair in detention centres, are then shunted off into the wider community.

I doubt that many can afford to live in the electorate of the Prime Minister or the leafy electorate of the minister for immigration. But many from Villawood find accommodation in surrounding electorates like Blaxland, Reid, Prospect and, of course, Fowler. And what special resources does the government provide? This government can find hundreds of millions of dollars to cage people away on Pacific atolls. What extra resources are made available to help settle protection visa holders, to help them learn English, to help them find work? None. Nothing at all. Zilch. Zero dollars—that is the sum total provided to settle protection visa holders in Western Sydney.

People have missed years of schooling while they have been locked away in detention centres. What resources does this government provide schools in electorates like Fowler that will take in these children—schools which will have to pick up the pieces of these beautiful, shattered lives, schools which are already stretched to provide education for their local community? What extra resources do the schools get? Again, nothing. Zero dollars. The school communities in areas like Fowler—schools that already suffer disadvantage—will have to make up for the failure of this government to accept its responsibility for the children it locks away. It would not sit well with the government’s message if it was seen to be helping asylum seekers, even after they had been granted a temporary protection visa.

What extra resources are there for community health bodies which will have to deal with the problems that these children and adults suffer from? Again, there is nothing in the way of extra funding to assist in the treatment of those released after being traumatised by months and years in mandatory detention. And what about assistance for people about to live in the community? What assistance is there for people with poor English language skills, with little knowledge of how to find work or rental accommodation? According to the department, caseworkers provide this assistance. But in reality all that is provided is pamphlets written in English, which are of little help to people with poor English skills. These people cannot read those pamphlets.

This gap in providing settlement assistance has had to be filled by private organisations. Groups such as the Islamic Council of New South Wales and affiliated Christian churches have stepped in to provide settlement services to people abandoned by the government. The affiliated Christian churches have recently opened a ‘welcome house’ in Carramar, in my electorate of Fowler, and I thank them deeply from the bottom of my heart for what they are doing. The house offers short-term accommodation for families released from detention centres and provides support to assist in their settlement into the community. The services pro-
vided by the welcome house include English skills and assistance in such basic things as registering at Centrelink, opening a bank account, obtaining a Medicare card, obtaining a tax file number and enrolling children at schools. These are all things that we in Australia take for granted in our daily lives. But they take time and understanding that require more than a simple brochure that they cannot read.

And with regard to finding employment, it should be noted that access to Job Network programs are limited for temporary protection visa holders. So far the welcome house has helped only a small number of families, but the demand for its services can be expected to grow. While its clients are mainly from the Villawood Detention Centre, as increasing numbers of people released from centres around Australia find their way to Sydney to join family and friends the demand for its services can be expected to increase.

This government does not want to be seen to be giving aid to refugees. What this government wants to avoid at all costs is to be seen giving assistance to people that it has demonised. Can you imagine how foolish this government would look? And it is all because the government wants to hide the fact that mandatory detention is an absolute farce. The government knows that it cannot send asylum seekers back to Iraq. That is why 91 per cent of asylum seekers from Iraq were granted temporary protection visas last year. But the Australian government wants to be seen to punish asylum seekers by locking them up for months and months, and it will do that in the most remote parts of Australia and the Pacific Ocean.

The message that the government sends to asylum seekers is simply this: if you come to Australia you will be eventually given a temporary protection visa, but we will make you and your children suffer before you get it, and once you have a temporary protection visa you will get no help to settle into the community.

Is there an alternative to mandatory detention for children and families? Of course there is. There is no good reason to detain children and genuine asylum seekers. (Time expired)

Immigration

Liquefied Petroleum Gas: Price

Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (5.27 p.m.)—I open my remarks by pointing the previous speaker, the member for Fowler, to the community support settlement program operated by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. The local Afghan community in my electorate do a terrific job in conjunction with the women in the south-east organisation in Melbourne to provide settlement and support programs. I am unclear why the comments of the previous speaker did not give some recognition to what is going on.

My contribution tonight relates to LPG. I know people in this place have heard me discuss LPG on a number of previous occasions. I put the question of LPG pricing among Stonehenge and the Bermuda Triangle as one of the great mysteries of the land. For some reason, the confidence of motorists in LPG is being seriously undermined by vast fluctuations in the price of LPG. As one beavers away to try to get a handle on why this needs to be the case, one comes away somewhat more informed but no more enlightened about why there are such wild fluctuations in the price of LPG.

Our region works off a Saudi benchmark price, and that is largely because the Saudis are the biggest suppliers of LP gas east of the Suez. As a result, the region within which we function has a price mechanism linked to this Saudi price and is largely dominated by what the Chinese, as the largest consumer, are prepared to pay. Our country is very much a price taker, even though we produce our own LPG. Local suppliers insist that the price that they charge for their LPG is based on whatever a purchaser might otherwise have to pay if they were not able to purchase our own local gas. So not only is the price that we are paying determined by someone else; it is based on supplies that would be obtained from somewhere else.

Our local price is guided by this Saudi benchmark price plus a freight cost—the argument being that, if you were obliged to
buy your gas somewhere else, you would have to get it to Australia—and on top of that a convenience premium, which leaves us to what is called the local parity price. It is a great mystery to me how that is defensible, but that is basically the way LP gas is priced in this country and it leaves plenty of scope for a very close investigation of how reasonable a pricing approach this is.

Mr Cox—You’ve been reading the opposition’s policy.

Mr Sidebottom interjecting—

Mr BILLSON—I will give you an understanding of what happens in my electorate of Dunkley—and I am grateful for the Labor Party’s support on this, as with many other good things that we talk about in this place. We sample and survey a little over a dozen fuel outlets in the local area. One of the local LP gas installers provides this information. If we look at the figures for the space of one week—for example, we are taking the week commencing 25 February, so it is not back in distant history; this is a fairly up-to-date figure—you can see the mystery that must confront LP gas motorists.

Take one example—the United station in Davey Street, Frankston, just down the road from my electorate office. Its highest price for the week was 34.5c a litre. You would marvel to know that just around the corner, at the Shell outlet at the corner of Beach Street and Nepean Highway, the lowest price for the week was 34.5c a litre. The United service station actually maintained a constant price for three days in a row—something you would not think was terribly remarkable, but actually it is remarkable. You can look around and see that even the BP cluster of service stations in the Frankston and Frankston North areas all crab along at the same pace, although on one day, the Friday of that week, you could actually pick up LPG at the Frankston Flinders Road-Hastings Road BP for 33.7c or duck into Klauer Street at Frankston North, another BP service station, where it was 33.5c. But you would be really having a bad day if you bought at the Nepean Highway BP service station where it was 45.9c. All these were on the same day and for the same cluster of companies. Even at the Shell service station on the corner of Beach Street and Nepean Highway the price of LPG moved 12½c overnight between the Friday and the Saturday. This is remarkable stuff, and all these are part of the great mysteries that put LPG pricing alongside the Bermuda Triangle and Stonehenge.

In Carrum Downs the 7 Eleven outlet and the Mobil Metro Fuel station in Dandenong Road just seem to do what each other does. I am not sure who comes first though but, whatever seems to happen there, they just follow one another. The really good thing though is that there is a bit of relief from the great mysteries at the Caltex service station on Dandenong Road and Frankston Road in Frankston North, opposite Long Island Golf Club. For a whole week they were able to maintain their prices within a 2½c band compared with another Caltex service station not more than two kilometres away that managed at least an 11c a litre swing. These are the mysteries that are driving motorists insane.

The only good news that comes out of these figures, confusing as they are, is that you can still maintain a spread of 44c to 46.5c a litre. The LPG industry and the fuel companies are shooting themselves in the foot. Here you have these price variations that are creating great irritation for the motorist when the business case to convert to LPG has never been better. The difference between the price of unleaded petrol and the price of LPG makes the business case for converting to LPG. Even though you have these great swings and roundabouts, you can still basically get a conversion payback for between 40,000 and 55,000 kilometres, which is good going for dual fuel and aftermarket conversions. If you purchase a dedicated LPG vehicle from Ford or someone like that, it is about a 17,000- to 20,000-kilometre payback. This is probably why fleet managers at the moment only have about six per cent of their fleet on LPG. But industry surveys suggest that they are going to move to a 29 per cent position of the vehicle fleet in Australia, which is another 348,000 vehicles on LPG—and that is good news, despite what is happening with the unbelievable pricing gymnastics that represent the mystery of LPG pricing.
Beyond pricing, there are issues of fuel performance, and I have talked in this place a number of times about how you get a brew of LPG. Some suppliers of LPG and some oil refinery companies cannot actually tell you what the proportions of butane and propane are in their fuel. They are the two main constituent gases of LPG. We have finally and successfully persuaded the industry to work with the government to implement a mandatory fuel standard. That work is nearing completion as we speak. The consultation period has ended, and the government is taking on board that input. There is even support within the industry itself for a mandated fifty-fifty mix. You would not think that would be too much to ask, but it is, because some of the oil companies cannot actually tell you what is in the fuel that they provide.

There is also the question of impurities. We have sulphur impurities of typically around 20 to 25 parts per million, rocketing up to 100 parts per million on a dirty day. We have phalates, the slippery little suckers that look like Vegemite in a converter and that no-one knows where they come from. I should add that to the mysteries: no-one knows where these phalates come from. All they know is that, if you have an LPG conversion and your car will not run, there is a fair chance that there is Vegemite gunk in the conversion. We should put that alongside Stonehenge, the Bermuda Triangle and pricing. We wonder where phalates come from, because no-one will accept responsibility for those.

Thankfully, the industry is recognising that it is a downfall of their product if they cannot provide fuel of quality. The reason for that is simple: how can you provide a $40,000 motor car relying on an LPG conversion—state-of-the-art technology—when you do not know what the brew going through your fuel system is? How can you design engine componentry and conversion components to be optimal in their performance and their reliability for a motorist when you have no idea what Heinz variety of fuel you have to work with? So the initiatives that the industry is now taking are fantastic.

The industry needs a genuine love-in—all the various stakeholders in the LPG industry really need to understand that they have a shared purpose that can only be achieved if they work together. It is no good the refiners saying to the wholesalers and retailers, ‘We give you the gas; what you do with it is up to you.’ It is no good them pointing at each other saying, ‘You’re the creator of the phalates, not us’—all we end up with are dissatisfied, dissatisfied motorists at a time when the business case for LPG conversion has never been better.

I commend the new ALPGA President, Alan Beale, who is also the Managing Director of Elgas, for his work in trying to take a broader view and bring the industry together. I welcome the interest of people in the fuel tax inquiry and hope that the exemption for excise on LPG continues into the future, because it is good for our environment, it is good for the economy and it is good for our motorists. At the end of the day, though, as we tread a little more lightly on the earth, we need to all work together to build confidence in LPG as a responsible, transitional environment fuel to meet our transport requirements. I hope I can report back at some point in the near future that the fog is clearing on LPG pricing, but my suspicion is that I will not be able to and there may be a need for further action to see how we arrive at bowser prices.

Centrelink: Overpayments

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (5.37 p.m.)—I wish to raise an issue on behalf of constituents Anthony and Tanya Miller of Somerset. Anthony contacted my office recently regarding his recent overpayment bill of $2,655.48 from Centrelink. I am absolutely confident that this case is replicated throughout Australia for constituents of members on both sides of this House. Something has to be done about it.

In July 2000, Anthony and his family were living in Brisbane. Tanya was at home caring for the children. An income estimate of $25,000 was given to Centrelink. In January 2001, they moved from Brisbane to Burnie. Tanya collected her superannuation of $15,000 to assist with the costs of moving. In February 2001, they saw a Centrelink
customer service officer in the Family Assistance Office and increased their income estimate to $38,000. At that time, Anthony stated that he was afraid that, because of the system, he may incur a bill at the end of the financial year and he wished to have some formula or assessment given to ensure that this did not occur. He was told that there was no possible way to work this out and they would have to wait until the end of the financial year to see whether they got a bill.

In March 2001, Anthony gained employment and grossed over $10,000 in 10 weeks. In May 2001, Tanya re-estimated their income to $56,000. Centrelink’s customer service office insisted they were entitled to more family payment; however, the Millers did not want to receive a higher payment for fear of incurring a debt. Their actual income for the financial year was $43,388. They had overestimated by $12,612 and still ended up with a huge debt!

When they received the bill from Centrelink, they arranged for an appointment with the Family Assistance Office to find out how this had occurred. Anthony and Tanya stated that they had been conscious of being proactive and honest in their transactions with Centrelink, had kept the Family Assistance Office up to date with the correct information with regard to changes to their financial situation and yet this still had not prevented such a negative and traumatic outcome for them.

As Anthony pointed out to me, the literature and brochures from Centrelink on estimating income stated, ‘How can I reduce the risk of an overpayment?’ claiming that clients should estimate their family income for the financial year as accurately as possible or overestimate your income and receive a top-up. If you think the estimate given is wrong or might have changed, tell us as soon as possible. The estimate can be changed as often as needed’. These statements do not reflect the potential risk of overpayment at the end of the year. Further, they give people the message that, if you continue to provide a re-estimate if your income has or is going to increase, there is less danger of receiving a bill. This implies that, if recipients continue to notify Centrelink, they will have family assistance payments adjusted accordingly. It was only when Anthony and Tanya attended a meeting with the customer service officer to look at their particular situation that they were hit with the realisation of just how difficult and complex the system is. I reiterate that this is replicated throughout the country for thousands of families.

How can a system such as this be supportive and complementary to changing life situations if it is based on the notion that nothing will change for people financially during the financial year? It simply cannot. If you are fortunate enough to get a pay increase, secure a better job, receive income from another source, secure casual employment or, if you wish to, have to move to secure employment then the reality is that the current system is not able to provide you with the information needed not to incur a bill or act as the safety net it was originally set up to be. Many of the constituents coming to my office—and no doubt many other offices throughout the nation—about this particular issue were trying to better themselves and their lifestyle and believed they could save the government money as well.

As a result of this, Anthony and Tanya were told that they incurred the debt in the first six months because they estimated that Tanya would not receive any income for the financial year. At the time of supplying Centrelink with this information, she had no intention of working. She had intended to stay at home and care for the children. The question needs to be asked: why is this unreasonable and why should she then be penalised down the track for a change that she could not have predicted at that time? Tanya asked me, ‘What incentive is there to make yourself financially better off and not a burden on the government?’ I was not able to give her an appropriate response.

Families who rely on family assistance payments every fortnight to meet the basic costs of daily living are being penalised and hurt through no fault of their own. We are already seeing more of a casualised work force in Australia. The current Centrelink system does not integrate well with this employment model and needs reform.
Anthony and Tanya would like to see a commonsense approach to this huge problem and the system changed. The system needs to look at previous payments, subtract from what the person is entitled to for the rest of the year and divide that by the remaining payments in that year. There also needs to be a mechanism put in place to notify earlier in the year people who are in danger of receiving a bill and not let them wait until the end of the financial year to find out their fate.

My office is hearing from constituents who say that, had they known what was going to happen, they would have asked Centrelink not to pay them anything for a period of time to save them a bill at the end of the year. It is an appalling concept that thousands of Australian families should have to go without what they are entitled to because they do not have all the facts at hand. Honest, hard-working and decent people are being made to feel like criminals in a system that is at fault. Yet, on Friday, 1 February this year, on AM, the Minister for Family and Community Services said:

... as families adjust to it they will appreciate that they can either have an overpayment and take that out of the next year’s entitlement or they can arrange to get underpaid and have a top-up at the end of the year.

In other words, they can go without that which they need or they can tell a fib. They are being asked to be dishonest in their estimation. That is unsatisfactory.

I have received other letters from constituents in my electorate of Braddon. I will refer to one of those letters to reiterate what I am saying. Essentially, these are honest people who are making honest estimates, but we have a system that cannot adjust, even minimally, to changes in people’s lifestyles. This letter is from Debbie Freeman of Somerset:

My reaction was of utmost disgust with a system so totally unexplained, even with brochures—

and she sent me a copy—

that omit to say anywhere that you need to over estimate so as not to incur a debt.

An officer queried where Debbie had made her changes. In her letter, Debbie goes on to say:

After advising her that the changes were made by phone, she informed me that had I gone to the local office, I would have been told that a debt would be raised if I did not over estimate. She also suggested—

that is, the officer—

that the best solution would be to cancel our fortnightly payments and make a claim at the end of the financial year.

You will not get that in a call centre when you seek information: you will have to go and make an appointment with the local officer to get that. She concluded:

In closing, I simply wish to voice my absolute disgust with a system that affects the genuine Aussie battling families who are trying to get ahead by honestly earning an income. My only wish is that thousands of people who will be in receipt of these bills will take it upon themselves to complain and make themselves heard.

That is why I am speaking on this matter today.

I would like to conclude by asking whether it is coincidence that we had these debts waived and announced prior to the election. I do not think so. I think people will get a major wake-up call when the next debts are estimated and called in and the $1,000 is not waived. Isn’t it also interesting that these debts, which were to be issued prior to the election, were in fact held back until after the election? Of course, we have been asked to believe that that was purely and simply an administrative oversight and a coincidence. I think not. We have a system that badly needs change. I think all members have realised this because they have had representations from their constituents that this is occurring and that we should do something about it to relieve these families of this unnecessary and very unhelpful burden. (Time expired)
Councillors and governments, both state and federal, are looking beyond current thinking to a future where we will be able to deliver more efficiencies and greater productivity from water, particularly in and around the electorate of Blair.

I rise today to speak on this subject because I think it is important for us to encourage this forward thinking. I think we should think laterally when it comes to the application of technology and to encouraging people to take a punt and to invest in water now. In the electorate of Blair we have good domestic water supplies in big urban areas such as Ipswich and Kingaroy, but there is no water supply available at all in the township of Coominya, for example—which is a serious issue, particularly if you live there. That brings me to the second area of water consumption: industrial water. In the Coominya area we also lack sufficient water for industrial purposes, so any possible expansion of the meatworks will not be able to occur. Across the electorate of Blair we have power stations, meatworks, engineering works, timber mills, wine crushers, construction companies and cement plants. All of those industries, and many others, consume industrial water and are looking to future supplies so developments can continue. On the agricultural front, we have perhaps some of the best agricultural land in Australia with the Lockyer Valley, the South Burnett and Brisbane Valley, the Kilcoy region, and the Crow’s Nest and Emu Creek catchment areas. Those areas have great potential. As members will shortly find out, there is new thinking about the way water resources can be handled in those areas.

To return to my case, particularly regarding the Coominya area, let me say once again that agricultural water is a problem because of the water supply at the Atkinson Dam. When the dam is full, it works well. We have an established irrigation network around there but, when the Atkinson Dam runs dry, grave strictures are placed upon local agriculture. It falls to us to try to find a way to improve that situation. Blair itself has an abundance of water supplies. We have the Wivenhoe and Somerset dams. When the water supply at the Tarong power station was low back in, I think, 1996-97, they built a special pipeline to link Wivenhoe Dam and Tarong to guard against the possibility that that plant should ever run short of water. I think we should now be looking to utilise that piece of infrastructure. Like all water infrastructure in the Blair area, it is expensive. It can operate very efficiently, but we have to find better ways to be able to use that resource so that the efficiency dividend is realised.

I will speak briefly on a couple of important points. Recently one of the local water administration authorities, SunWater, began talks with the Kingaroy council and other councils in the South Burnett region to look at the possibility of making greater agricultural and industrial use of water from the Boondooma to Tarong pipeline. About 531 megalitres have been unallocated. At the moment we are seeing a dramatic expansion of the pork industry in that region. Many new pig farms are looking to establish because of the potential to export through Swickers Abattoir. That potential gets bigger and stronger every day because that plant is being well run and is expanding rapidly. The plant has recently signed a deal with Hans Continental Smallgoods and is going to double in size once again. So we do have opportunity for development there.

We have people who want to get into the pork production industry and we need to be able to supply water. I urge SunWater to look very closely into that matter. They should not draw the line at the Boondooma to Tarong pipeline; they should also look at Wivenhoe to Tarong pipeline. It is a very effective pipeline but it is not being used and there is a huge demand around the Atkinson Dam area. A scoping study has already been done into the provision of a pipeline to link Wivenhoe Dam and Atkinson Dam. If that were to occur there would be a triple bottom line benefit—not for the environment, although that...
certainly would be an advantage—firstly, there would be industrial jobs at the proposed packing plant at the Coominya meatworks; secondly, there would be a domestic water supply for people in Coominya; and, thirdly, there would be reliable supplies for agricultural users in and around the Atkinson Dam.

That brings me to the final part of my discussion today: the Psi-Delta report into the potential for a reused water pipeline to connect Brisbane and the Lockyer Valley, which has been proposed for some time. There has been talk of supplying the Lockyer Valley and the Darling Downs with reused water from Brisbane. Let us just concentrate for the moment on the Lockyer Valley which is the subject of the Psi-Delta report. The Lockyer Valley comprises 40,000 hectares and five main valleys. It is one of the top three vegetable producing areas in Australia. For several reasons the potential for that to be realised in the future is coming under threat: several years of low rainfall and lack of rainfall, reduced yields and increasing salinity from bores, a reduction in allocations of water from the Department of Natural Resources and growers have reduced capacity to vary their levels of production because in many cases they are locking into longer term contracts and need to do so in order to remain competitive. The overall report of the Psi-Delta company into the potential for a reused water pipeline in the Lockyer is that if a price of between $100 and $150 a megalitre is deliverable into the Lockyer Valley, this will be one of the largest schemes in Australia; in fact, if the price is $100 a megalitre just to the Lockyer alone, this will be the largest scheme in Australia. That is the finding of Psi-Delta and it is something that is very significant for our region.

Let us go to the bottom line. In terms of employment, income and investment, by conducting the study, interviewing local farmers and projecting their future use, it was found that, provided the scheme goes ahead, the potential for the reused water pipeline in the Lockyer—this is a very conservative estimate based on the producers who have come forward to be interviewed—would be to deliver 287 additional full-time jobs in the immediate Lockyer farm area. The negative side is that if the scheme does not go ahead—because of rising salinity and other issues—we are headed for a drop of 242 jobs. We are not going to be able to tread water if we stay as we are, to use a pretty vague sort of a pun, but we need to provide this additional water in order to continue the agricultural production that is already there. Currently, across the whole of the Lockyer Valley area, 19,610 megalitres of water is coming from bores and 3,686 megalitres is coming from other sources. We need to correct that.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Barresi)—Order! The time for the grievance debate has expired. The debate is interrupted and I put the question:

That grievances be noted.

Question agreed to.

AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2002

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 21 February, on motion by Mr Hardgrave:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr CADMAN (Mitchell) (5.58 p.m.)—Mr Deputy Speaker Barresi, I am delighted to see you are in the chair because I know you have a long and well-established interest in these matters. The amendments the House is considering today to the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002 relate to the Citizenship Act. This legislation looks at the common bond that Australians share. There have been a number of reports commissioned by the government. The first that I am aware of goes back to a report that was prepared on the process of national consultation on multiculturalism and citizenship. A more recent examination was done by the Australian Citizenship Council. It reported in February 2000 and the government’s response was entitled Australian citizenship ... a common bond.

We are looking at things that really go to the essence of what it is to be an Australian. Something within us binds us to a country—there is an allegiance, a link. Most of us, I think, like to feel that we have a home, a
place that we can go back to, a place where we belong, a place where we are comfortable. Perhaps it is a place where we grew up. It is mostly the place of our birth and where we spend most of our years.

There are two aspects of citizenship—the political aspect and the character aspect. The political or legal part of citizenship is the tie or allegiance a person has within a society. They have a place there. They have a legal entity and a political entity within that society. The character of a citizen is the extraneous things which do not relate to the political or legal aspects—that is, a person may identify with certain obligations, responsibilities or freedoms. That is the character of citizenship. Both aspects are really significant.

Some countries look at only one part of citizenship. For instance, the oaths or statements of allegiance of some countries may reflect little of the character and a lot of the legal responsibilities while other countries reflect both. I believe that by studying the oaths or statements of allegiance of countries one can examine what the requirements, the characters and the political and legal aspects are of their citizenship.

The legislation before us today has gone through a process of consultation. There has been the Australian Citizenship Council’s report Australian citizenship for a new century, a government response and then legislation. There are a number of aspects to this legislation, and I will deal with all of them to some extent. The main ones are the government’s intention to strengthen citizenship and to update aspects of Australian law. No changes are being made to the basic criteria for the grant of Australian citizenship. Of interest to most Australians in this day and age is the issue of an Australian citizen who would seek to destroy or diminish Australia by taking arms against their country. They of course lose their Australian citizenship. None of those things will be changed by this legislation; nevertheless, there are some significant changes.

The main amendments in this bill include repealing section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act so that Australian citizens in future will be able to keep their Australian citizenship on acquiring another citizenship; extending the descent and resumption provisions to give young people more opportunities to acquire Australian citizenship; providing for children who acquire Australian citizenship with their responsible parent to be given then or at a later date their own certificates; strengthening aspects of the integrity of the Australian citizenship process, and taking some strong action against people who are involved in people-smuggling.

There are some aspects of this legislation that need to be dealt with in detail. The first issue is the repeal of section 17 and the dual nationality concept. This issue has been alive and well for a long time. In fact, the National consultations on multiculturalism and citizenship report stated that the feeling in the Australian community was that it was highly repugnant for a person who has been granted Australian citizenship to retain allegiance to another country or power. I think that is still the case. Whilst this may provide certain freedoms and opportunities for Australians to work in other countries—a process which is being driven mainly by the tourist industry to allow people to work elsewhere in the world—I think it is still highly repugnant to most Australians that people should bear allegiance to more than one country. Australians expect people to have allegiance to this nation and to no other. In fact, our citizenship oath used to have a clause which said ‘renouncing all other allegiances’. That clause was thought to be offensive to some people because it was aimed at the character and not at the political aspect of citizenship. My view has always been that it was part of a legal process and that it could have been much better stated than it was in a previous oath of allegiance or citizenship.

I believe the commitment to Australia is alive and well. Our migrant groups in particular have a huge and very passionate commitment to Australia. A study by Hugh Mackay some years ago found that 96 per cent of our largest migrant groups were absolutely committed and proud of our nation. I think the figure for migrant groups was higher than for those people born here. I think that is still the case. I think people still feel that way. The commitment of southern European people, in particular, figured
highly in that study. There is a sense of nationalism and regard for this country that is not engendered by any false jingoism or false patriotism; it is something that people genuinely feel. They understand the qualities of Australia compared with other countries. They understand that we have a long and well-tested democracy. They understand that we have freedom of the press and a court system that is equal to any in the world. They understand that the United Nations rates Australia as one of the top two or three countries as far as personal freedoms are concerned. People who come to be a part of this nation quickly state their value for it.

The values that we share run across political parties and backgrounds. The importance of our families, our homes and our individual freedoms and liberties are all values that Aussies, as a group, understand. When there is any thought that those values may be diminished, concerns can be detected in the community. Over a number of years it has been possible to see where tensions have started.

For people of Jewish background, the Law of Return automatically applies to people returning to Israel, something which many people of Jewish descent are unaware of until they actually arrive in Israel. The same situation may apply to people returning to Greece, where, at the age of 18, a person may be required to give military service. They may be unaware of that law and the fact that, despite any renunciation they make in Australia, the laws of Greece very strongly say, ‘If you are of Greek parents and you return to Greece, we regard you as a Greek and we are going to put you in the army whether or not you think you are an Aussie.’

The laws of citizenship vary from country to country, and Australians may inadvertently have responsibilities which they have no intention of fulfilling or following through. In many instances, they may be aware of the laws of another country that place obligations on them because of the nature of their birth or their place of birth. There have been difficulties in those areas over the years, and the process of renunciation made it easier for some but harder for others to state that they were Australians and that they could not fulfil the legal obligations of what now had become a foreign country.

I have been told that the changes in this legislation bring us in line with our friends in the United States, and so there is not too much need to worry about these changes. I have checked out what dual nationality means to an American. The US State Department’s dual nationality leaflet states:

In order to lose U.S. citizenship, the law requires that the person must apply for the foreign citizenship voluntarily, by free choice, and with the intention to give up U.S. citizenship.

Intent can be shown by the person’s statements or conduct. The U.S. Government recognizes that dual nationality exists but does not encourage it as a matter of policy because of the problems it may cause. Claims of other countries on dual national U.S. citizens may conflict with U.S. law, and dual nationality may limit U.S. Government efforts to assist citizens abroad. The country where a dual national is located generally has a stronger claim to that person’s allegiance.

However, dual nationals owe allegiance to both the United States and the foreign country. They are required to obey the laws of both countries. Either country has the right to enforce its laws, particularly if the person later travels there. Most U.S. citizens, including dual nationals, must use a U.S. passport to enter and leave the United States. So it is not quite as clear as it would first appear. There is difficulty in establishing allegiance where a person can take on the nationality of another country. I guess that aspect of it concerns me.

I think the other aspects and changes in this legislation are absolutely reasonable and excellent. The strengthening of the process, the people-smuggling and the certificates for youngsters are long overdue. They should have been available years ago. I am delighted that Mr Ruddock, the current Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, was instrumental in bringing these factors to the notice of the House and that they are now being followed through by Minister Hardgrave.

Dual nationality does create problems that not everybody has expected. I know the House will be interested in the impact that it may have on citizens from Malta, for example. I know my colleague opposite will understand that there is an impact on people.
from Malta. When Australian citizens who are born in Australia return to Malta they are forced to renounce their Australian citizenship and become a citizen of Malta in order to gain access to a whole lot of services. If they have been living in Malta for some time, they have no access to the changes that are being made here. In fact, most of them say, 'Don’t change the law.' That is the message I am getting from the people in Malta and from dear friends whom I have known for many years. They are saying that the largest number of people affected by this dual nationality decision are people of Maltese extraction. People who have been Australians, lived in Australia, grown up in Australia and made a contribution to Australia have felt compelled, without choice, to renounce Australian citizenship on return to Malta.

What are some of the reasons? One is study at university in order to get a job. Many jobs in Malta are limited to those with Maltese citizenship. Another is the purchase of property. A foreign passport holder is required to obtain a permit from the Maltese government in order to purchase property—which costs more than $100—and must purchase properties above a minimum threshold. The banking system is another. External accounts are only available to foreigners in Malta. Another is social security benefits. There are a great number of reasons why the people of Malta, those who were born in Australia and whose families may have worked really hard in this nation, feel disadvantaged. I am not sure that such a process applies to any other group.

I refer the House—and I will show this piece to the member opposite, shortly—to a piece written by a friend of mine, Lawrence Dimech. It is called Tough luck, mate, you’re too old at 25 years. The piece outlines pretty succinctly the difficulties that the Maltese community see with these changes. The limitation of 25 years is seen by Mr Dimech and a large number of people to cut out those born between 1964 and 2000. They miss out on the prospect of reclaiming their Australian citizenship unless they come back to Australia, live here for the required period and go through the process. That is the act as I understand it and as they understand it, and I hope that the minister in his reply will be able to bring some clarification, because I know that the people from Malta would like that. I have discussed this with the minister—he is aware of the situation—and I think that we need to get some clarification that we can show to people who are worried about the changes to the Australian Citizenship Act.

In general, I welcome the changes that are being made. I express some reservations about the decision to repeal section 17. I think that it will create some problems as to how we apply our laws and how we give diplomatic aid. Where a person is living in another country and commits some offence, and they are a citizen of that country and of Australia, they will appeal to our diplomatic representatives to support them in a country of which they are already a citizen.

The ultimate test of a person’s commitment is where their allegiance is. I am one of those people who happen to believe that you cannot hold two allegiances equally at the same time, that to one you must have an allegiance which is prime, which is above the others; otherwise, it is very difficult to know what you stand for: whether you are committed to the future and the wonderful prospects of this country, whether you are prepared to join the 96 per cent of people from overseas that have strong allegiance to and pride in this country, or whether you want to dilute that process by having more than one allegiance. I think it is physically and mentally impossible.

In the character of citizenship—whether it be the political aspects or whether it be the cultural character of citizenship—I do not believe that you can divide citizenship into four parts instead of two parts. I do not believe you can have the same political feeling of belonging or of being part of a regime or an entity in two places. I do not believe you can feel part of the character of two countries equally at the same time.

I guess life is about choices, and I think so many people have chosen to make Australia their home and they want to maintain it as it is. They want to keep building it, and they do not want half-hearted participants. So I
commend the bill to the House but I express reservations about the repeal of section 17.

Mr ZAHRA (McMillan) (6.18 p.m.)—I welcome the opportunity to make some remarks in relation to the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002. This is the first time that I have really been given the opportunity to contribute to debate in this parliament. I have not had my opportunity to speak in the address-in-reply yet. It is appropriate in some ways, Mr Acting Deputy Speaker Barresi, that I get the chance to speak on this particular bill because, as you would be aware with a surname like Barresi—and me with a surname like Zahra—my family are migrants. In fact, I was born overseas and came over to Australia when I was just three years old after my family had been back to Malta for a short time, my father having originally come to Australia in 1950.

I was pleased—and I am sure you recall this, Mr Acting Deputy Speaker—that in 1998, when I was elected, I became the first Maltese-born Australian to serve in this parliament. That was a source of some significance and, I think, celebration for the Maltese community in Australia. I think it is important that we recognise that migrants come to Australia and participate in all parts of cultural, civic and political life. That is just as people envisaged it when they came up with the idea of that massive migration push which took place in Australia after World War II.

Unquestionably, the post World War II migration programs have been an amazing success in Australia. They are programs which have enormously enriched the cultural life of our country. In places like the Latrobe Valley, which I represent, which our family grew up in and in which I still live, those programs made it possible for the important national infrastructure that we have to be built. Without the work that was put in by so many migrant workers throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, Victoria would not have the electricity industry which it relies on for so much of its prosperity.

I know a lot of people talk with a great deal of celebration and a great deal of fondness about the achievements of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. What people do not always appreciate is the fact that probably second only to that scheme was the achievement of so many people in building the Latrobe Valley’s power assets, which we take so much for granted in Victoria today. Without those assets it would have been impossible for Victoria to become the hub of Australia’s manufacturing, which it unquestionably has been for the last 25 or 30 years. That great supply of electricity, sourced from the Latrobe Valley’s massive brown coal deposits and produced by the electricity production assets built by migrant labour, has been so much a part of the prosperity not just of the Latrobe Valley but of the state of Victoria and our nation more generally. This is just one very small benefit which migration has brought to our region.

Migration was very much a part of the cultural renewal of the Latrobe Valley as well. For so many years the Latrobe Valley had been little more than a farming district with a very small population, characterised by a few landholders holding large amounts of capital, investing it in agriculture and employing people on that basis. With the post World War II migration programs and the development of Victoria’s brown coal energy assets, we saw a cultural renewal in the Latrobe Valley.

I had cause to speak to a historian at a Trafalgar Australia Day ceremony a little while ago, and he told me that he had written a history of St Keiran’s Catholic parish in Moe. He spoke to me about how amazing this exercise had been for him. He reflected on the fact that people had come from so many different parts of the world to St Keiran’s parish in Moe—people from Italy and Ireland, the Maltese, the Dutch, so many different people from so many different areas. Some were hardly able to speak English but all wanted to contribute to the work of developing that parish and that community in Moe. He regarded it as a remarkable achievement that these people with so little formal education had so much determination to build that parish and to establish St Keiran’s School, the Presentation Sisters Convent and St Keiran’s church—all very important community assets in that district,
assets which made an enormous contribution to the life of Moe.

It is one small example of how civic-minded and how prepared to work and contribute those migrants were. There was a great sense of acceptance of the need to get into Australian life and make your contribution in it. People were grateful for the chance, grateful for the opportunity to build a new life, where the only test of how successful they would be was how smart they were and how hard they worked. Coming to a new country like Australia was a great leveller. People wanted to get away from the old prejudices, the old ideas and the old class systems that many had been trapped in in the countries that they had come from.

The people that came to the Latrobe Valley in particular—but Gippsland more generally—really did prove that they were prepared to work and contribute to the life of our community. There are so many examples now of people who came as part of that post World War II migration program and whose sons and daughters have made enormous contributions to our district. In the Latrobe Valley, we are very fond of saying that we were practising multiculturalism long before anyone ever coined the phrase. We had an accepting culture amongst the various ethnic groups that we had in the Latrobe Valley.

My father, who came to the Latrobe Valley in 1950, tells me of the preparedness of people from many different ethnic groups to all work together. Those groups had in common an understanding that there was a certain dignity in work and that you defined yourself by the work you did. When there is a lot of work to be done—and there was plenty of work to be done in the Latrobe Valley—the only way you can get it done is by everyone doing their bit. People were prepared to do their bit. They were prepared to do the work cheerfully and they were grateful for the opportunity which they had. One of the things which set apart the success of migration in the Latrobe Valley was, unquestionably, the fact that every migrant who came to the Latrobe Valley had work. We did not have a situation in the Latrobe Valley where migrants were arriving and not working; everyone was contributing.

An elderly gentleman from Traralgon, my home town, spoke to me about how Traralgon was when all these new migrants arrived. It had been what you might call an Anglo community up to that point, and people were quite confronted by quite a large number of Italians coming to our district. They did not quite know what to make of these people living in their streets. He told me a great story about the Italian family next door to him: how much they became a part of his life and how he had attended every christening, every communion, every confirmation, every wedding and every graduation ceremony of all of the children of that Italian family—he never missed one of them. There was the great exchange which took place between those families in terms of cultural life as well—barbies in backyards, people over for a great Italian meal and that great sharing of experience.

It is something very special which we have really benefited from—and experienced perhaps better than a lot of other places—in the Latrobe Valley. That defining quality of why it was such a success for us was that everyone worked together, everyone had work and they came to the Latrobe Valley to work. We did not have any of that ill will that is sometimes bred by people perhaps not seeing migrants as active citizens. In the Latrobe Valley all of the migrants who came to our district were active citizens—active in work, active in community life—and, as I mentioned in the example of St Keiran’s parish in Moe, were prepared to try very hard to build communities and some of the assets which they did not have at the time but from which those areas are certainly benefiting now.

Earlier, I heard the member for Mitchell make some reference to the idea of dual citizenship being in some way repugnant. I take issue with that, because there are many people in Australia who hold dual citizenship, and I do not think we have any right at all to question their loyalty to Australia, their understanding of our way of life or their commitment to our way of life simply on the basis that they hold another citizenship. So I take issue with the member for Mitchell in relation to that. There is something quite
cruel and quite cold in requiring that someone, by virtue of where they have been born, who their parents are and where their parents have been born—

Sitting suspended from 6.30 p.m. to 8.00 p.m.

Mr ZAHRA—I welcome the opportunity to continue my remarks on this citizenship legislation, having been interrupted at the rising of the House at 6.30 p.m. I was in the process of saying—and I think it is an important point to make—that the member for Mitchell in his remarks on this bill had indicated his concern. I do not seek to question his right to make those comments, only to challenge the comments that he has made. He questioned whether it was okay for people to have more than one citizenship. I think there is something quite cruel and cold in a country or community saying to people who happen to be born overseas that they must go through the process of renouncing their citizenship in order to be citizens of our country, Australia. I think what we expect those citizens to do is far harsher than what we expect of other citizens who happen to be born in Australia. So I think there is something quite cruel and cold in a country or community saying to people who happen to be born overseas that they must go through the process of renouncing their citizenship in order to be citizens of our country, Australia. I think what we expect those citizens to do is far harsher than what we expect of other citizens who happen to be born in Australia. So I think the member for Mitchell is wrong when he says that every single Australian should either renounce the citizenship that they have to another country or else not really be full participants in our society, our civic life, our cultural life and our political life. I think he is wrong about that. I think it is important that people in this parliament make clear their opposition to that view which he has espoused.

As I mentioned before, I am very proud of the wonderful achievements of the Latrobe Valley when it comes to celebrating the different cultures that people in our region have come from. We are very proud of our multicultural history. We are very proud of the big contribution made by those people who came from eastern Europe. We are very proud of the contribution made by those people who came from southern Europe, particularly from Italy, Malta and Greece. We are very proud of all those migrants who have come to our region from the various parts of the United Kingdom. They have all been excellent migrants, but people did have a lot of fears then.

The community in the Gippsland region has gone through a revolution since those times when all of those migrants arrived after World War II. Back then there was not a great deal of understanding of what this great movement, this great push of migration, this great number of migrants arriving in our district, would mean. I think people had fears and there was a fair bit of trepidation. There was all of that concern that people had about people arriving in our country and not mixing, not settling in and having cultures that would clash with the Australian way of life—all of those things which people held up as being dear to them being challenged. In our region we have been able to take the best of what all of those people have provided and celebrate it within a framework that is uniquely and proudly Australian. I think what we have in the Latrobe Valley really is a great practical working example of multiculturalism.

I am proud of it in particular because so many people associate country districts with a view of society which says that multiculturalism is not really something that we enjoy; multiculturalism is something that we are not really keen to be a part of. In our region, the Latrobe Valley, we are very much a part of Australia’s great multicultural tradition. As I mentioned before, we like to think that we were practising multiculturalism long before anyone coined that phrase. We are proud of our achievement—so proud, in fact, that when I stood for the first time for the seat of McMillan in 1998 no-one even blinked an eyelid that the son of a migrant building worker and a migrant textile worker who was even born overseas would have the audacity to run for parliament, one of the highest political offices in our district. No-one batted an eyelid. It was no big deal and it is still no big deal because migrants are a part of our community.

We accept migrants in our community. We would like more of them; we would like more migrants. We have had that great renewal in our district associated with the post World War II migration push which our country benefited from enormously. But we in the Latrobe Valley, as in so many country districts, have not benefited from the more
recent arrivals which places, particularly Melbourne and Sydney, have benefited from. We would like that; we would like to be a part of that great change which is taking place in Australia. We do not want to be left out of that; we do not want to be separate from that cultural change which is taking place right across our country.

We have plenty of room in the Latrobe Valley. We have plenty of understanding about the needs of newly arrived migrants. I had a great experience a little while ago when I met a couple of young people—who are well into their teens and early twenties—who arrived in the Latrobe Valley as part of a group of Bosnian refugees. They came to us at a very difficult time in their country’s history and in their own family’s history.

I was very pleased and thrilled to be presenting Zelea Clico of Lowanna College in Moe with a number of awards, including an award which I started after I got elected, the Gippsland Public Leadership Award. Here is someone who came to us in difficult circumstances who has gone on to make an outstanding contribution. We are, of course, extremely proud of her and proud of her family. She is a very popular girl. If I recall correctly, that night she probably won one-third of all the awards available for year 12 students at Lowanna College in Moe. We are very proud of her.

I was back at the college not that long ago. On my way out, after having spoken to some of the students about my work, her brother, who is serving in the Australian Defence Force, was coming in to give a presentation to the students at the school about what it was to be in Australia’s defence forces. So there are two outstanding role models amongst newly arrived migrants. These are two great examples of people who have come to Australia as migrants and who have made an outstanding contribution over a very short period of time. We want more people like that in our district. We will welcome them in our district, as we always have, and celebrate their cultures and the richness of the diversity which they bring to us.

We in Australia are proud of our multi-cultural history—and we should be. We should celebrate it at every turn. We should not just hope to be tolerant of each other; we should celebrate and be proud of the diversity which we have. I know that I am and I know that the people of my electorate are very proud of it as well. (Time expired)

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (8.08 p.m.)—It is always a great joy to come into this place and hear comments from members on the other side, in this case from the member for McMillan. I agree with him, because I grew up in a small town called Narrogin in the wheatbelt in Western Australia, and I now have the great privilege of representing that country town in my electorate. Narrogin and one of its sister regional centres, Northam, which is also now in my electorate and a place I visited a lot as a child, benefited greatly from migration in the fifties. In fact, Northam has very proudly for the last couple of years held a Back to Northam function for the migrants who arrived in Northam and lived in fairly difficult conditions in the migrant camps there, but made a tremendous contribution to the region. It is a great credit to the town and the leaders of Northam that they have had the foresight to introduce a Back to Northam weekend. Many hundreds of people have gone back there to remember those times and to celebrate the great diversity of the Australian country towns. Many of them benefited greatly from the migration in that time, so I agree with many of the comments my colleagues have made tonight.

But I am here tonight particularly to address the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002. This bill had its origin in a report by the Australian Citizenship Council titled Australian Citizenship for a New Century. This report was followed by a discussion paper released by the government. Public submissions were sought and strongly supported the government’s proposal to repeal section 17 of the Migration Act 1958. The review led to the government response Australian citizenship ... a common bond. This is designed to encourage all Australians to value their citizenship. The report also reflects the changing nature of the Australian community. One of the most significant changes in the legislation is the repeal of section 17. And again I endorse the com-
ments of my colleague the member for McMillan, because we live in a very mobile society and we need only examine the number of arrivals in and departures from Australia to fully appreciate that fact.

According to the discussion paper in relation to section 17, 85,000 Australian residents left for 12 months or more in 1999-2000, and almost half, 41,000 Australians, left permanently. Half of these were Australian born. This is the highest permanent emigration figure for 27 years. The paper pointed out that this reflects the increasing internationalisation of labour markets and greater overseas opportunities for Australians in fields such as business and education and, indeed, science and medicine. There are few of us who do not today have a close relative living and working abroad for a period of time. Many of our young people travel. They seek employment opportunities abroad, and they often marry a partner from another country and raise a family. This has given rise to the situation where many Australian-born citizens have been faced with the loss of their Australian citizenship on acquisition of another citizenship. I agree that is a totally unacceptable situation. Dual citizenship is available to citizens of the UK, the USA, New Zealand and many other countries. Under this bill, Australian-born people will now be able to lawfully possess dual citizenship.

Over four million Australians who have migrated to Australia have been able to possess dual citizenship since the law was changed in 1986, creating an anomaly for Australian-born citizens travelling for business or family reasons. In 1949, citizenship law was based on the old Hague rules that a person could have only one nationality. The world is a very different place in 2002, and people should not be placed in the situation where they must choose between their career and other opportunities and their Australian citizenship. This bill brings Australia into line with contemporary reality.

In my view, the arguments for repealing section 17 far outweighed the arguments against it, in particular the discriminatory nature of a law that allows some citizens to hold dual citizenship and others, through dint of birth, to be denied that right. It is fair to say that the arguments for maintaining section 17 were not, in my view, very compelling. In other countries, such as Ireland, which have allowed dual citizenship for 40 years, there have been no discernible problems as a result of that policy. Some of those opposing this change based their disagreement on this particular point; that problems could arise in terms of loyalty. It is interesting to examine some of the submissions to the council. One that I would like to quote said:

An increasing number of us function, by necessity, as world citizens. This does not reduce our loyalty or affection for our countries of origin, but it can create some very real personal difficulties... It makes no sense to have barriers, whether psychological or financial, that make it less likely that Australia will gain from the contributions and the resources of people who have extensive international experience.

... ... ...

Australians living overseas ... promote Australia ... create opportunities at home and abroad.

There are far more compelling reasons to bring about this change than there are of the opposite view. The bill addresses dual citizenship, along with other measures. These include extending the descent and resumption provisions to give young adult Australians more opportunities to acquire Australian citizenship. The bill also ensures that children who acquire Australian citizenship with their parents or at a later date are given their own citizenship certificates, and it strengthens the integrity of the Australian citizenship process, especially in relation to good character. The four million Australians who already have dual citizenship will not be affected by the proposed amendments. The repeal of section 17 is not retrospective, and it will only affect those who apply for another citizenship after the amending act receives the royal assent.

The report released in 2000 by the Australian Citizenship Council, Australian citizenship for a new Australia, was followed by an issues paper, Contemporary Australian citizenship. The council strongly recommended the repeal of section 17, but they also made a lot of other important points in relation to citizenship. One of the proposals
was that citizenship should help us to build common bonds and should be promoted as something of great value both to people born in Australia as well as to those adopting Australia as their home.

The airing of views by 200 respondents to the initial issues paper released by the council and the government’s response provide us with a wonderful opportunity to continue to talk about the contemporary issues of what it is to be an Australian citizen and how we want to shape Australia and the Australian values in this new century. The Centenary of Federation year gave us an unprecedented opportunity to discuss and debate issues of future concern and to learn more about our history. This was certainly evident in the electorate of Pearce, where so many people took a great deal of time to explore, discover and rediscover some of the marvellous history and wonderful examples of people who struggled and fought to open up the land and to establish our cities and who established visionary projects—for example, the pipeline from Perth to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, which is a project of amazing dimensions even by today’s standards, and the struggles that took place to achieve that project. So we have had a wonderful opportunity to learn a lot more about our history and to hopefully strengthen those bonds and to understand more about what it is to be a citizen.

The settlement of Australia and the culture that it brought provide us with a dramatic chapter in the book of knowledge and wisdom that really first belongs to the ancient people of this land, and like all great dramas we must accept and learn from both its tragedies and its triumphs. Understanding more about the history of Australia and the place of migration in Australia is pivotal to moving forward into the future. Indeed, our history’s most noble aspect is the promise it holds for the future: that is, that in this magnificent landscape—and it is a magnificent landscape—we may yet build the most inclusive and the most humane society in human history. That is the potential that we have and that is the potential which can only come from appreciating the past and taking it with us into the future and by recognising the great diversity of our country. We can create this type of society if we continue to learn and if we teach our children and our children’s children what it means to be truly inclusive.

In this respect, recommendations 10 and 12 of the report are particularly welcome. Recommendation 10 endorses the Discovering Democracy Program—a Commonwealth initiative to teach civics and citizenship in schools. It recommends that the program continue to be available to schools and that it be extended to years 11 and 12. The government allocated considerable funding to this program over four years until 2004 and is considering its extension to years 11 and 12. Our young people need to know that the hallmark of a civil society is one that is great for its learning, for its sense of justice, for its commitment to reasoned compassion and for its courage to defend itself against any totalitarian aggressor. Recommendation 12 recommends that affirmation ceremonies for Australian-born citizens be conducted as appropriate. The government authorised a number of affirmation ceremonies held during the Centenary of Federation and will continue to encourage these ceremonies wherever Australian-born citizens want to affirm their commitment to Australia, to its people and to its civic principles and institutions.

I thought the Australian compact suggested in recommendation 2 was worth a broader public discussion. The report listed seven basic principles of the compact:

- To respect and care for the land we share;
- To maintain the rule of law and the ideal of equality under the law of all Australians;
- To strengthen Australia as a representative liberal democracy based on universal adult suffrage and on freedom of opinion;
- To uphold the ideal of Australia as a tolerant and fair society;
- To recognise and celebrate Australia as an inclusive multicultural society which values its diversity;
- To continue to develop Australia as a society devoted to the wellbeing of its people;
- To value the unique status of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

These are great principles for us to promote. They are worthy of broader public discussion. We should consider adopting them as a compact.
In finishing tonight, I would like to congratulate the Australian Citizenship Council for an excellent report. There is a lot of good reading in the report and I commend it to those who have not had the opportunity to read it. We now have a minister for multicultural affairs, and I take the opportunity to wish the new minister well in implementing the recommendations of the report. I support the passage of this bill through the House in the interests of fairer rules for Australian citizenship and legislation that makes important changes.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (8.24 p.m.)—It is with some pleasure that I rise this evening to support the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002. For some considerable years, both sides of the House have baulked at the intent of the bill being debated this evening—the intent to actually embrace the concept of dual citizenship. In that context, I would like to congratulate the Australian Citizenship Council for the report it released in February 2000 entitled Australian citizenship for a new century. That report said, at page 65:

... the Council strongly recommends that section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948 be repealed so that Australian Citizens over the age of 18 do not lose their Australian Citizenship on acquisition of another Citizenship.

Finally this parliament has matured to the point at which we are prepared to debate this bill this evening and, hopefully, pass it in the very near future.

This bill embraces and recognises the importance of dual citizenship. Australia should not be fearful of that concept. We are doing no less than what a lot of other countries have already done. I refer in passing to a report of June 2001 entitled Loss of Australian citizenship on acquisition of another citizenship. On page 17 of that report, there is a list of countries that have already done what we intend doing through this bill—countries whose legislation already provides for acquisition of another citizenship. They include Canada, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Western Samoa. Many other countries detailed in that report also provide for dual citizenship.

I have said that I support the bill before the House this evening, but I would also like to make the point that I regard the debate about dual citizenship as unfinished business, because there are some outstanding issues that need to be faced up to by the parliament in the foreseeable future. Putting that aside, I want to say that I regard citizenship as exceptionally important. I regard it as a central element—a core element—of the debate about the importance of migration. With the passage of this bill—and I think we all expect it to pass both houses—we should not forget that the job with respect to dual citizenship is only half done. I encourage the government to go that one step further. As has already been stated by our shadow minister for citizenship and multicultural affairs, we are supportive of going further with respect to some of the changes that we believe should have been picked up by the bill before the House. We did not pursue those changes by way of amendment, because we thought it was more important to start the process and then encourage the government, having enacted this legislation, to review outstanding issues.

I refer, for example, to the requirements for resumption of citizenship as they currently stand, under which any person losing their citizenship must lodge a declaration that they wish to resume their citizenship. The declaration must be accompanied by a statement that the assumption of foreign citizenship was done in ignorance, to avoid significant hardship or detriment. The person, if overseas, must also commit to return to Australia within three years and resume residence. Unfortunately, this bill does nothing for people born and bred in Australia who have lost their Australian citizenship because of section 17. I regard that issue as unfinished business and something that the parliament should visit sooner rather than later. As we all appreciate, many Australians who have been working overseas for some years and have lost their citizenship need to be given an opportunity to resume their former status. Some—for example, those who have acted in order to secure an inheritance—may not be intending to reside in Australia during the next three years. Many work overseas in occupations where a claim of ignorance
would not ring true, and also may not wish to return permanently for some time. Those people do not meet the requirements for resumption of citizenship as they currently stand. We are going part of the way with respect to our willingness to recognise dual citizenship this evening; let us finish the job by visiting some of those issues, with respect to the capacity of people to resume citizenship, that will remain outstanding after this bill is passed.

Having said that, I very much support the bill. I do so because I actually believe, as I have stated, that citizenship is exceptionally important to Australia. I believe it is intimately related to our debate about migration. As we all appreciate, Australia has a long tradition of immigration. Importantly, independent research clearly shows that a balanced migration program is good for our society, good for our economy and good for the budget bottom line. We should also not lose sight of the fact that, despite some criticism offered by those beyond Australian shores and within Australia at the moment, we are one of the few countries in the world that has operated a planned immigration program for over 50 years. We should never be ashamed of that; it has actually helped shape Australia. Some of the critics of Australia’s immigration laws at this particular point in time should actually consider in an objective, constructive way our success on the immigration front, having operated a planned immigration program for over 50 years.

We should not also forget in that context that almost one in four Australians were born overseas, a ratio significantly higher than that of any other comparable country, including some countries that offer criticism of Australia’s humanitarian program at this point in time. Take, for example, the United States: only one in 10 of the people of the United States were born overseas, compared with one in four Australians. Success on that front, so far as I am concerned, is not unrelated to the fact that for the last 50 years our support for immigration and multiculturalism has been underpinned by the essential core value of citizenship. It is about defining Australia, and the bill before us this evening further defines Australia where it says that both within Australia and internationally—to intending migrants to Australia or alternatively to Australians who want to go overseas—we are not ashamed of facing up to our responsibilities to also grant dual citizenship in the same way in which many other countries have fronted up to that challenge.

On that note we should also acknowledge that it only takes two years of permanent residence to become an Australian citizen, and that is one of the shortest waiting periods anywhere in the world. And some would dare to suggest at this point in time that we are unwelcoming to people from overseas! On the grant of permanent residence, it only takes two years to become an Australian citizen. But what about support in the Australian community for citizenship? On Australia Day this year alone, 8,172 people pledged their commitment to Australia in 219 citizenship ceremonies around Australia. That was a record. What also flows from that fact is that all of those 8,172 made an individual decision that they actually wanted to become Australian citizens and, in doing so, to give the following commitment publicly to Australia as a nation:

From this time forward, under God, I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey.

It is not an insignificant decision to take out Australian citizenship, to actually make that public declaration of support for Australia as a nation. I congratulate each and every one of those people and, in doing so, I encourage others who have not taken up the opportunity to become Australian citizens to do so in the foreseeable future. Since I was elected as the member for Batman in 1996, I have never missed a citizenship ceremony in the city of Darebin, the main municipal area that makes up my electorate of Batman, which is in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. That is despite the fact that in those six years in parliament I have always served on the front-bench of the opposition.

So far as I am concerned, if those people are prepared to make that public commitment to Australia, there is an obligation on their elected representative to also make the time available to attend those citizenship ceremo-
nies. We should not lose sight of the individual decision each and every one of them makes in deciding to become an Australian citizen. So on that note I say that, contrary to the impression the casual news reader might have received of late, Australia is a nation that manages its immigration flows well and has a high tolerance for change and of acceptance of new people. That is because we treat each and every one of them as equals. My electorate of Batman is a prime example of that—one of the most multicultural electorates in Australia. Not only is it an example of the success of the people who came in the post-Second World War wave of immigration, but it is also an electorate that has to accept the responsibility of settling the new refugees by whatever means they are coming to Australia at this particular point in our history.

To actually travel around the electorate of Batman is not only to see the highest concentration of indigenous people in metropolitan Melbourne; it is also to see a clear example of the success of immigration, acceptance of multiculturalism and the issue of tolerance, and a willingness by those people to actually embrace citizenship because they want to support their new country. They understand that in doing so we do not require them to forget the country of origin from which they came or to forget their traditions and culture. That is why immigration in Australia has been so successful: we have not only welcomed people and encouraged them to embrace Australian citizenship; we have also clearly accepted publicly that we want to support their new country. They understand that in doing so we do not require them to walk away from the tradition and culture of the country from which they came. Australia is not a closed, xenophobic nation. So far as I am concerned, and I am sure it is the majority view of the members of the House of Representatives, we remain at the forefront of immigration and are a truly diverse and successful nation.

Ironically, resistance to permanent migration is strongest in some of those countries whose press has recently been most critical of Australia’s managed immigration program. It is a managed immigration program and so it ought to be, because it is about making sure that immigration is considered not only in a humanitarian way but also in the context of what is best for Australia.

I urge people to examine all aspects of Australia’s immigration program. On the humanitarian front, we provide those people who are granted refugee status the most comprehensive assistance of any nation in the world. In per capita terms, we have the second highest refugee intake of all Western countries. But we are not only active on the humanitarian front; we are also active when it comes to skilled migration, family reunion and business migration. One of the challenges on the migration front in the foreseeable future is to work out how we might encourage some of those people to no longer just settle in our capital cities but to do as they did in the past—that is, to be more willing to settle in our vibrant regional communities. It is a challenge to both sides of the parliament. We must give serious consideration as to how, in the context of the debate about population, we might take a lead on that front.

I want to also acknowledge that, for those born in Australia, perhaps it is time we gave more serious thought to the value attached to Australian citizenship. It is very important that the government continues to promote the value of citizenship. It should be regarded as being of value not only by those who come to Australia and want to become Australian citizens but also by all of us who were fortunate enough to be born in the lucky country.

One of the reasons we require this bill is that, in the past, those of us who were born in Australia never actually thought about the importance of Australian citizenship until we had to face up to a decision about giving up Australian citizenship because we wanted to work overseas or whatever. This bill, in some ways, takes away that difficult decision and makes it easier for us. But, having said that, it should not take away our responsibility as a nation to promote the benefits and strengths of Australian citizenship. This is exceptionally important, because it goes to the very heart of our original Australian Citizenship Act 1948. I believe the act applies not only to those who want to come to Australia to become Australian citizens but also equally to each and every one of us born in
I urge people to examine the act, because it not only gives us rights as Australian citizens; it also requires us to accept obligations. Those obligations include, firstly, pledging loyalty to Australia and its people; secondly, sharing Australia’s democratic beliefs—if you have any doubts about that this evening, just have a look at what is going on in Zimbabwe at this very point in time; one of the strengths of Australian society is our democratic way of life, and it is one of the reasons Australia is so attractive to people seeking to come to Australia—thirdly, respecting the rights and liberties of Australians; and, finally, upholding and obeying the laws of Australia.

I am very proud to be an Australian and I am very proud of the fact that, for the last 50 years, we have put in place one of the most highly successful managed immigration programs in the world. The core of that success goes to the issue of citizenship and our willingness to grant citizenship to people seeking to come to Australia. But, in doing so, we must never forget the fact that citizenship gives us rights and it gives us obligations. When a person becomes an Australian citizen, they actually accept those obligations. That is why I am not fearful this evening about supporting dual citizenship, because each and every one of us in making that decision to become an Australian citizen has to accept those rights and obligations. There are no torn allegiances, because you have embraced those things that are respected and supported by the great majority of Australians. The reason for that is that not one of the many temporary and permanent newcomers to Australia is chosen on the basis of race, colour, ethnicity or religion. That is why we are successful on the immigration front, and that is why so many people want to become citizens of Australia.

It has not been easy for Australia to get to this point. Throughout the history of support for immigration, we have had our trials and our tribulations. As a nation, we were finally mature enough some years ago to dump the White Australia policy. Step by step we have also changed the composition of our new-settler arrivals. Originally, the great majority were from Europe; in more recent times, they have come from Asia, Africa and Oceania.

In conclusion, we have enormous diversity as a nation. We have people from all around the world that make up Australia and make it such a great nation. Australia is a place to which people want to come to have the opportunity of a better way of life. The key to that is to continue to promote Australian citizenship and to grant dual citizenship this evening. But it also means for us as a nation that we must defend that whatever the cost. We must make sure that we never underestimate the importance of citizenship and our rights and obligations.
as a nation and it was part of his story, part of the development of his life. What this bill offers above all else is the opportunity for Australians to have that same chance to fulfil their own heritage, to maintain links with their own origins and to be part of a broader community. It links Australia to the broader world.

So we should speak in support of this bill on three bases: firstly, by describing what it does; secondly, by looking at the reasons why we should support it and why we are supporting it on both sides of the House and, thirdly, by looking at the how, at the way in which the bill operates and at the particular elements which encourage not just dual citizenship but a stronger understanding of what it is to be an Australian and to take Australian citizenship.

In looking at the nature of the bill, at the elements of it, there are four key amendments which this bill contains. The first amendment proposes to repeal section 17 of the Citizenship Act so that adult Australian citizens in the future will not lose their Australian citizenship on acquisition of another citizenship. Second, it will extend the descent and resumption provisions to give young people more opportunities to acquire Australian citizenship, so those who have a right but have not taken it up in time will be able to do that. Third, it will provide for children who acquire Australian citizenship with their responsible parent or at a later date to be given their own citizenship certificates. It might be a simple act but it is one with great meaning that will have great relevance for those who partake of the opportunity. Fourth, it will strengthen aspects of the integrity of the Australian citizenship process by closing anomalies. That is what the bill will do.

Why is it that we should be supporting the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002? First, there are existing current anomalies. There are 4.4 million Australians who currently maintain dual citizenship already, and they do that without threat to Australia, without derogating in any way from the sense of what we are as a nation, and in fact by being able to do so they add to our links with the world and our connections at an individual level with the cultures from which people have come. But the anomaly exists whereby it is not possible for a number of Australians to take up existing entitlements that they maintain either through their country of birth, their country of descent through parental lineage, or their country of residency. So, given those anomalies, there are very strong reasons to support the provisions of the bill.

In particular, there are four compelling reasons. The first is to allow ethnic Australians and the children of Australians who are second generation in this country to re-link with their own heritage. In my own community of Flinders we have over 9,700 people who were born in the United Kingdom. We have over 1,000 people from the Italian, the Dutch and the New Zealand communities who were born abroad and who have moved to Australia. All in turn have children who may seek entitlements, if they so wish, to be citizens of both countries—that of their country of domicile, that of the country which is home to them, and that of the country which was home to their parents. In particular I want to talk about two of those communities, the Italian community and the Greek community. The Italian community is a very rich and vibrant community both on the Mornington Peninsula and around Westernport. Laurie D’Alia leads that community with an extraordinary sense of vigour. It shows the way in which that Italian community makes a commitment to Australia and at the same time reflects the heritage from which it comes. We also have the Greek community. Yesterday I was fortunate enough to attend, and to present a message of congratulations from the Prime Minister, the laying of the foundation stone for the Greek Orthodox Church in Red Hill. There were over 5,000 members of the Greek Orthodox Church or the Greek community present at the function, and they came not just from Flinders but from throughout Melbourne. His Eminence Archbishop Stylianos laid the foundation stone, and the leader of the local Greek community, Father Tatsis, a very generous and very wise man, presided over the event. What struck me was the extraordinary sense of commitment to the nation from that group, yet at the same time they were able to
celebrate their culture. So, by allowing their children to re-link with their origins, to adopt the citizenship of their parents without losing their own citizenships, we strengthen our links as a nation because we do not force people to choose. We say, ‘You can be us and of us, but you can be more than that: you can supplement who you are.’

A second very important reason why this bill should be supported is that it gives mobile Australians greater choice in the way in which they seek to work. The modern work environment is such that Australians do move abroad—borders are permeable and people flow. The nature of labour is that young Australians seek opportunity abroad. This bill allows them to make the most of that opportunity without having to forgo their Australian citizenship so they can work for extended periods in the European Union if it involves taking up EU citizenship, in the United States if it involves taking up American citizenship and in Asia or in other places where that is appropriate. It is not only a critical human thing that young Australians be able to maintain their roots, but it is also a smart, practical decision as a nation about the way in which we operate in the world. It says to our young Australians, ‘We offer you the chance to be a full part of a genuinely global community and those steps you have to take to participate to develop your potential and to develop the economic potential of Australia you can take without fear of losing your identity and your heritage.’ That is something we should be very proud of.

The third reason to support the bill is that it represents the integration of modern Australia in a very tangible, practical way. It is about breaking down geographical and legal barriers which cut us out of blocs such as the European Union and North America. It helps break down the cultural groupings so as to present the view that we are not so much of an isolated island. That is a remarkable step. As was pointed out by the member for Batman, this country has a planned and successful immigration program and has had one for 50 years. This takes it one step further because it gives people a choice and an opportunity. The fourth reason to support the bill is that it is consistent with international princi-
ship of this House. It is the one job in the country which dual citizens are prevented from entering. I am not saying it is for resolution tonight, but it is something for the future which I believe we should address because it is an anomaly. To me it seems curious that those people who are good enough to hold Australian citizenship are not considered worthy of representing the nation within this House. But it is an excellent bill and I am delighted to support it. I commend this bill to the House and I urge that all members pass it at the earliest opportunity.

_Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (8.58 p.m.)_—I am happy to stand in the House this evening and speak on the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002. The measures contained in this bill are welcome and they are definitely overdue. The repeal of section 17 of the Citizenship Act was recommended by the Joint Standing Committee on Migration back in 1994 but for some reason governments have failed to act on this common-sense reform. So here we are, more than seven years after the committee’s recommendation, finally getting around to this long overdue amendment to the Citizenship Act.

The parts dealing with the raising of age limits for registration of persons born overseas to Australian parents are also welcomed. If we believe that taking citizenship of a country is an adult decision then requiring a person to register to do that before they become an adult at the age of 18 seems very ridiculous. Extending the age for registration to 25 years is a sensible measure. It allows individuals some years as an adult to consider their status and to make an informed decision on their citizenship. The changes to the act which allow the provision of citizenship certificates to eligible children under 16 is a practical step which will help many citizens to avoid problems when they need access to documents which prove their citizenship status.

As someone who has attended many citizenship ceremonies, I know the pride that people take in being presented with their certificates. I am sure a number of members of the House would understand what I am saying. On Australia Day this year I had the pleasure of being with Maxine McKew from the ABC, who was our Australia Day ambassador at the Fairfield City Farm. It was a fantastic day held for people in my electorate of Fowler. Over 4,000 people attended, and over 100 people became Australian citizens on that day. It was wonderful to see the pride on their faces when they received their Australian citizenship certificate. There were many photos taken. I actually went home quite blinded from all the flashing light bulbs. I am sure that on their lounge room walls or on their bedside tables in their homes they have a photo of themselves being presented with their Australian certificate of citizenship. I am sure that the taking of Australian citizenship will be a meaningful experience for children, especially when they receive their own certificate.

For some time the issue of loss of Australian citizenship under section 17 has been a cause of concern for many Australian citizens who for personal, employment or business reasons have faced the decision of taking citizenship of another country or have lost citizenship of their former country. While many Western countries allow for dual citizenship, there is still a long list of countries with which Australians have links and which may require them to take citizenship to participate in employment, property ownership or business administration in that country. I know of several cases where Australians have come up against this problem. In most cases they had no choice. To inherit family property left to them in another country, to develop businesses overseas and even to protect their legal rights in other countries, they have had to forfeit their Australian citizenship. This was something they did not want to do. They still regard themselves as loyal Australians, but in many cases it was something they were forced to do. One thing this bill fails to do is to provide a remedy so that those people who for genuine reasons have given up Australian citizenship may be able to regain their status in the most convenient way.

We live in a changing world. Globalisation is an economic and social reality. The spread of free trade agreements means that goods and services are traded across national borders without restriction. International fi-
Financial arrangements have led to finance and capital flowing between countries at the touch of a computer key. Information technology flows freely across networks around the world. But the movement and status of people has not caught up with these developments. To gain the benefits of globalisation we must allow our citizens, the citizens of Australia, to participate fully in the global economy. We must allow them to develop their knowledge and skills by working and studying overseas. We must also allow business leaders to expand businesses in other countries. We must make better use of the language skills and crosscultural knowledge that we have in our multicultural communities. But this means we must take a fresh look at the narrow view that we have had on Australian citizenship.

There are of course many critics of dual citizenship. There are those who believe that a citizen can only be loyal to one country. The experience of the European Union shows the benefit of cooperation between nations. It is worth pointing out that the United States of America allows dual citizenship. This is a country that we tend to think of as being very patriotic. I am sure we can all think of examples of hand-over-the-heart patriotism that is practised there. If, like me, you have watched any of the television coverage during the Winter Olympics, you would have seen just how far that patriotic fever is carried. I remember that John Cleese, in describing the self-centred patriotism of the United States, remarked that when they have a baseball world series they do not even invite other countries. But, as I said, the United States allows dual citizenship.

Even in Australia the concept of citizenship is becoming blurred. If you were to ask a person in the street to name a famous Australian actor, chances are they would name actors like Russell Crowe, Mel Gibson or Nicole Kidman. I do not know the exact citizenship status of these actors, but I think it shows that individuals can claim more than one nationality, and countries can claim as honorary citizens people who may not have the legal status of a citizen.

The Australian Citizenship Act does not require persons taking citizenship to renounce their citizenship of another country. So we now have a situation where more than four million Australians hold some type of dual citizenship. As the minister himself said only the other day, of the one million permanent residents eligible to take Australian citizenship, 400,000 are from the United Kingdom and hold British citizenship. For many of that number, they have the same rights and privileges as Australian citizens, including the right to vote in Australian elections. There is a large group of Australians who may have held dual citizenship, but, as a result of changes in their country of origin, are now being denied dual citizenship. Australian citizens who came from parts of the former state of Yugoslavia now find that they would lose their Australian citizenship if they were to take citizenship of the state which now exists.

A common complaint has come from people from what is now the Republic of Croatia. I have a lot of these lovely people in my electorate. As members would be aware, there has been a change in the status of their country of origin. If the modern state of Croatia had existed at the time that they came to Australia, they may have been able to hold dual citizenship. But, with the passing of these changes to section 17, they will be able to take dual citizenship of Australia and Croatia. Other people from former Yugoslav republics may be able to do the same, and that may also apply to people from the old Soviet Union. I know that these changes will be welcomed by the many people affected. As the changes come into effect, I am sure we will see the benefits in increased trade, investment and tourism between Australia and Croatia. The same will apply with other countries.

The effects of globalisation and the experience of groups of nations such as the European Union may cause us to review our citizenship laws. The need for skilled labour and the emergence of a footloose global work force in the coming years may force us to rethink our citizenship laws. The interests of Australians working overseas and other nationals working in Australia will definitely
need to be considered. Much has changed since our citizenship laws were framed 50 years ago. We will need to constantly review our citizenship laws to ensure that they keep pace with changes in the way citizenship is defined.

In my closing remarks, Madam Deputy Speaker Corcoran, I would like to congratulate you on being elected to the role of Deputy Speaker. I am sure you will do your constituents proud in the great seat of Isaacs that I know you love and admire dearly.

Ms GAMBARO (Petrie) (9.09 p.m.)—Madam Deputy Speaker Corcoran, I also wish to add my words of congratulations. Today, though, it is with great pleasure that I rise to speak to the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002. The bill principally seeks to not only repeal section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act of 1948 but also strengthen the value that we place on Australian citizens and the integrity of the Australian Citizenship Act.

As a result of the globalisation of the work force, many Australians successfully find work abroad for extended periods of time. They relocate and successfully establish their lives in other countries. Some even marry while abroad and remain there in much the same way as millions of people who come to Australia to work and establish new lives. However, they do not take out citizenship of another country, because to do so under the current legislation would mean that they would have to forfeit their Australian citizenship.

Several years ago, a young man from Everton Park in my electorate set out to do what many 20-year-old people do: to travel overseas and possibly find work in the United Kingdom. What started out as a working holiday arrangement soon turned into an extended stay. He established a very successful career in London, married a British girl and they presently live in London. Although he is eligible to take out British citizenship, he does not want to do so at the expense of his Australian citizenship. This has caused him some concern over the years, and in June last year his mother contacted my office to see what could be done.

The news of this bill and how the repeal of section 17 of the act would benefit her son has subsequently delighted her. And she is not alone. There are thousands of households across Australia which are feeling just like this. The repeal of section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act of 1948 will ensure that in the future Australian citizens aged 18 years or over who acquire another citizenship do not automatically lose their Australian citizenship. This change ideally reflects the growing trend among Australians to travel abroad whilst still maintaining that connection to Australia. The proposed changes bring Australia into line with other countries such as France, New Zealand, Canada, Italy, the United Kingdom and the USA.

The government’s decision to repeal section 17 is in response to the views held by many Australians. In the past few years, widespread community consultation, initially undertaken by the Australian Citizenship Council, and by the government through the release of a discussion paper in June 2001, has given strong support for this decision. Of all the submissions received by the Australian Citizenship Council, 75 per cent of the submissions addressed the loss of Australian citizenship upon the acquisition of another.

Earlier, the member for Batman spoke about provisions for resumption under our citizenship law, and they are already very generous. Ninety per cent of those who apply are allowed to resume Australian citizenship. The Australian Citizenship Council, chaired by Sir Ninian Stephen, examined submissions arguing for wider resumption provisions. On page 65 of their report, Australian citizenship for a new century, they concluded:

We consider existing resumption provisions are adequate for those who have already lost Australian citizenship under s.17.

Of this 75 per cent that I spoke about earlier, 86 per cent were in support of the repeal of section 17, while 14 per cent were opposed. Each year, some 600 people, of which 68 per cent are Australian born, are identified as having lost their Australian citizenship. If citizenship is lost while abroad then the person ceases to have any right of entry into Australia. To obtain re-entry into Australia,
they therefore need to apply for a visa or to resume their Australian citizenship. Around 500 people a year apply to resume Australian citizenship, and the approval rate is around 95 per cent.

If this bill is passed then adult Australian citizens will no longer lose their Australian citizenship upon acquiring another citizenship. However, those who have lost their citizenship before the repeal will not be affected. They will therefore continue to have access to the existing provisions for the resumption of Australian citizenship as currently exist.

It is estimated that there will be a relatively small increase in the number of dual Australian citizens over the current number of 4.4 million. These people are most likely Australians who currently will not acquire the citizenship of another country in which they are working, because they are not willing to lose their Australian citizenship—much like the fellow from Everton Park that I spoke about earlier who now lives and resides in London. Given the mobility of Australians as an increasing force in the global labour market, the repeal of section 17 will bring us in line with a number of other countries that have permitted dual citizenship for some time.

New Zealand and the United Kingdom have permitted dual citizenship for over 50 years; Ireland, for over 40 years; and France and Canada, for 20 years. Italy and the US have made changes in the last 10 years to permit dual citizenship. From their experiences, there is no evidence to suggest that the value placed on these countries’ citizenship has diminished.

There have been few government initiatives that have received the resounding community support that the repeal of section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act has. The response to the government’s discussion paper in June 2001 was overwhelming support for repeal. Of the 825 submissions, 813 strongly supported the decision to repeal section 17. In a country that is made up of so many cultures from a myriad of countries from all around the world, dual citizenship is a progressive step forward in formally acknowledging the ties that many Australians have to many other countries. It does not diminish the value that is placed on our own citizenship or dilute the identity of who we are as Australians. In one of the submissions to the Australian Citizenship Council on the repeal of section 17, the writer noted that to permit dual citizenship is a positive force for world peace. Another noted that failure to allow dual citizenship was inconsistent with the Australian notion of having a fair go, an ideal that we apply to sport and to the workplace.

In a submission opposed to repeal, the writer queried the impact that dual citizenship would have on our electoral system. Previously, the member for Flinders mentioned the fact that a person who holds public office or is an elected representative is not allowed at the moment to hold dual citizenship. However, the changes involved in this bill should not drastically affect the number of Australians who travel abroad and who are eligible to vote, because of the reality of the situation and the practical limitations of registration. For Australian citizens who reside offshore, there are controls that limit the number of voters. An Australian citizen already enrolled to vote can register as an overseas elector if they indicate that they will return to Australia within six years. There is also a provision for a one-year extension after the six-year registration. An Australian citizen is able to register as an overseas voter but is only permitted to do so up to two years after leaving Australia. Those who are not enrolled to vote can only do so within two years of leaving Australia and then they are subject to certain conditions.

Although this bill focuses on the repeal of section 17 of the act, there are a number of other features that help to strengthen the definition of what it means to be an Australian citizen. The bill does not change the basic criteria for the granting of Australian citizenship; however, it does alter requirements associated with the granting of that citizenship and invokes certain powers to ministers in the process.

As a direct consequence of the repeal of section 17 of the act, a new subsection has been created as an amendment to the current Australian Citizenship Act 1948. The new
subsection will have an effect on the children of those parents who are no longer Australian citizens. If a child under the age of 18 ceases to be an Australian citizen as a consequence of their parents’ losing, renouncing or being deprived of their citizenship, they may now be able to resume citizenship should they meet the requirements of citizenship as outlined in the amendments.

Under the current act, a person seeking to register as an Australian citizen by descent must do so before they turn 18 years of age. This bill extends that age limit up to 25 years of age. The decision reflects the fact that many people aged between 18 and 25 choose to re-examine their identity and, subsequently, their future. The change will give them greater flexibility when they are acquiring or resuming their citizenship.

For children under the age of 16, the bill also provides for them if they acquire citizenship by grant with their parents or at a later date through their own application. Currently, children under the age of 16 years have their names endorsed on the reverse of their parents’ certificate. By granting these children their own citizenship certificates, we will recognise their individual citizenship status; and having appropriate citizenship documentation may assist them in the future.

Under the current system, children are not given their own identity at the time of citizenship. Being included on the back of their parents’ certificate can also create logistical problems—you are using a single piece of evidence of Australian citizenship—particularly when children reach adulthood. The changes contained in this bill will enable all children under the age of 16 years to be included in their parents’ application for citizenship and to be granted their own Australian citizenship certificates at no additional cost. Where an application for a replacement certificate is made, the replacement will be identical to the original. Individual certificates will only be provided once this legislation is passed.

One of the changes to the act will strengthen the integrity of the citizenship program. It is the requirement that people of adult age seeking citizenship must be of good character. Not only does this requirement enforce a criterion for people seeking citizenship but it also demonstrates the value that all Australians should place on their own citizenship.

According to the Australian Citizenship Council, citizenship is about encompassing the ideals of civic life. These ideals can be seen as the public core values that traverse the different cultural and ethnic origins of our community. The requirement of a 10-year ban on the granting of citizenship to a serious repeat offender therefore underscores the importance we place on our public core values and indeed on our Australian citizenship.

The taking of Australian citizenship is not something that should be seen as a certificate of some sort of attendance in this country. It intones an understanding of who we are as a nation. To take out citizenship is to honour the value systems of the country and to oblige those value systems. Australia is a wonderful country, a country of many cultures. We pride ourselves on the belief that everyone in this country can have a fair go.

Part of the undertaking of Australian citizenship is the pledge that we honour our nation and its people. When sportspeople representing their country win medals, as they did at the Olympic events, they often cry when the flag is raised. We saw at Salt Lake City in the 2002 Winter Olympics last week the joy at the likes of Brisbane skater Steven Bradbury and aerial skier Alisa Camplin winning gold, and that makes us feel proud as a nation. Quite often we get those goose bumps and we join them in feeling pride when the national anthem is played. Why do we cry? We cry because we are proud, we cry because all of those things represent what being an Australian is all about. We come from a country that prides itself in giving people from all countries an opportunity to champion the causes and to demonstrate that they can challenge the odds to succeed. That is what the Australian spirit is all about and what being Australian is all about.

One of the changes proposed in this bill relates to the taking of the pledge of commitment, the demonstration that the candidate values what it means to be an Australian citizen. The bill will provide the minister
with the power to revoke the grant of the certificate of Australian citizenship before the conferment of citizenship if a person fails to make the pledge of commitment within 12 months. The acquisition of Australian citizenship is a two-stage process: firstly, the approval of the granting of the certificate of Australian citizenship is made and, secondly, the Australian citizenship is conferred at a ceremony. At the citizenship ceremony, the current act requires applicants to make a pledge of commitment, and by making that pledge they become Australian citizens. However, the current act does not impose a time limit between the approval of the granting of a certificate of Australian citizenship and the taking of that pledge.

The pledge of commitment is an important part of the citizenship process and an integral part of being an Australian citizen. For the 50th anniversary of Australian citizenship celebrations, the pledge was modified to give all Australians an opportunity to pledge their loyalty to their country and their peoples. The ideals contained in this pledge speak about our rights and our freedoms. We pledge to honour our democratic beliefs that we share and to uphold and obey our laws, being part of the political community of this country, whether as a voter or a politician. It is about understanding and obliging the values and principles of a democratic society and participating in that democratic process. In undertaking that pledge, we demonstrate being part of Australia and what it means to be Australian. It also seeks to update measures such as dual citizenship, which has the support of the community, and these changes are long overdue.

In concluding, I would like to say that Australia is a significant contributor to a rapidly growing global market. The very mobility of the labour force requires us to update our citizenship processes. This will be no threat to the integrity of the process or to the value that we place on citizenship. These changes will bring our citizenship process in line with the 21st century. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr LATHAM (Werriwa) (9.25 p.m.)—The Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002 is quite an important piece of legislation. It seeks to modernise Australia’s citizenship laws in response to the rise of globalisation. The bill makes a useful start in this regard but, in my assessment, it does not go far enough. I welcome the provisions for dual citizenship through the abolition of section 17. In the past, Australian citizenship suffered from an unacceptable double standard: naturalised Australians could keep the citizenship of their country of origin, as an estimated 4.4 million Australians have done, while Australians by birth were not able to acquire the citizenship of other countries without losing their Australian citizenship. Under the provisions of this bill, all Australians can potentially take advantage of the benefits of dual citizenship.

Increasingly, we live in an internationally mobile society—a world with fewer borders and barriers for the movement of people, ideas and commodities. Australians should be able to access these opportunities and regard themselves as international citizens, without necessarily jeopardising their citizenship and affinity with this country. I also welcome the provisions of the bill that extend the age limit for the resumption of Australian citizenship from 18 to 25 years. As younger Australians sort out their identity and residential arrangements, this new provision will give them much greater flexibility.

In a fast changing society, citizenship is becoming more important, not less. People are looking for values and shared aspirations that can unite us as a nation. They are looking for the politics of common purpose. Australian citizenship has a vital role to play in this process. In this country, it does not matter where you were born, the clothes you wear, the food you eat, the religion you practise or the culture you live in. What matters in our multicultural society is the commitment to Australia; the commitment to this nation is all-important.

Of course it must be a commitment beyond rhetoric. It is easy for politicians in this place to say these things. It is easy to celebrate diversity for diversity’s sake. But our commitment to the country, our commitment to a solid society, must be more than just rhetorical. It must be practised in our values; it must be shared in our aspirations; it must
indeed be a shared experience as an Australian people. Citizenship must have a unifying core. It must be able to accommodate difference and diversity, most certainly—that is the essence of a multicultural society—but if citizenship is to have meaning in the relationship between people, it must have a unifying core.

I try and make this point at citizenship ceremonies in my electorate. Citizenship is most certainly about rights. It gives new citizens the right to vote in our democratic system, it gives people certain freedoms in this country—the freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of movement—and of course it gives people the right to be protected under our laws when they travel overseas. But citizenship is not just about rights; it is about responsibilities. Increasingly these days it is about responsibilities. We all have a responsibility to be good citizens, to take an interest in our local communities, get involved in the local schools, local government programs, local initiatives in the neighbourhoods, that make a difference. People are looking for things in common—how we talk to our neighbours, how we communicate across social, cultural and ethnic boundaries. There are also important national responsibilities for the good of this country.

I take very much a communitarian approach: it is not just rights, it is also responsibilities. In fact, the rights of citizenship go together with the responsibilities of citizenship. For this reason, beyond the rhetoric, I believe we need a new concept of citizenship—a concept that meets the challenges of globalisation and the new politics of common purpose. One of the characteristics of the rights agenda is the way in which it subdivides society into a series of categories based on gender, ethnicity and culture. Most people, however, are quite uncomfortable with this process. They do not see themselves as fitting neatly into the various categories. For those excluded from single identity politics there is a strong feeling of resentment.

In an era of globalisation and mass information, citizenship has become more complex and challenging. It involves everything from local, national and international loyalties to a range of personal characteristics and identities. This is why citizenship needs to be as inclusive as possible. Modern citizenship needs to be a big tent within which the many identities of society can coexist rather than compete against each other. Identity politics was an invention of the 1960s. It was well intentioned and even well suited to its time, but I would argue that by today’s standards it has become divisive and out of touch. In a society facing constant change and uncertainty, people do not want the political system to create further fragmentation; they want the politics of common aspiration.

As a parliament we need to meet this demand. We need to conceptualise citizenship as a big tent, fostering the values of coexistence and commonality. The task for policy makers is to allow multiple identities to live together within individuals as well as between them. Governments need to find ways of lifting people across their cultural differences. We need to become a society of boundary crossers, moving easily across a range of geographic loyalties and personal identities. This is what I would term ‘multiple identity citizenship’—citizenship that features and fosters many forms of identity; multiple identity citizenship, as opposed to the sorts of single identity politics that might have been practised in the 1960s and beyond.

I support Premier Bob Carr’s decision to establish a department of citizenship in New South Wales to replace the ethnic affairs category. He has modernised the New South Wales government’s approach to citizenship and multiculturalism. Carr has recognised the limited shelf life of identity politics, both politically and philosophically. In a complex society it is more likely to create divisions than to heal them. It must be replaced by a more inclusive and modern concept of citizenship. The modernisation task also applies to our national policy of multiculturalism. For all our diversity as a society, Australians still need a unifying idea of national identity. All countries need to define a sense of common purpose and belonging for their people. The objective is to strike the right balance. I think it is very much a question of balance between solidarity and diversity—that is, to
accommodate cultural differences but not to be overwhelmed by them.

Multiculturalism has been a great success in our nation. We are one of the most tolerant and pluralistic societies in the world. But for all this success we need to be vigilant. We need to continually reinforce the strengths and successes of multiculturalism. We need to constantly update and explain our understanding of this policy to the Australian people. For those of us who have always supported multiculturalism we cannot take its legitimacy for granted. We need to strengthen its foundations. We need to further underpin its success and to explain, explain and continue to explain to the Australian people what we mean by multiculturalism and how it can be used as a unifying rather than a divisive force in our society.

The reason for vigilance is self-apparent in this parliament. There are some in this parliament who oppose a multicultural citizenship. In the senior ranks of the government, for instance, the Prime Minister cannot bring himself to use the term publicly. For the Prime Minister of Australia multiculturalism is the policy that dare not speak its name. He cannot bring himself to use that term publicly. The Treasurer, who is often labelled as the leader of the moderates on the government side, has been a past opponent of multiculturalism. If you look at the recent biography by Shaun Carney, you will find the following extract:

Costello, in the mid-1980s, was also opposed to multiculturalism telling Gerard Henderson in an interview that the policy created an industry that was destabilising the social fabric. ‘Multiculturalism was,’ said Costello, ‘part of the cultural cringe because it showed that Australia was embarrassed to ask migrants to embrace a distinct Australian culture.’

There is the member for Higgins in the mid-1980s declaring himself at the HR Nicholls Society to be a firm opponent of multiculturalism.

Further down the ranks of the Liberal Party we come to the member for Warringah. It should never be forgotten in this parliament that the One Nation Party was born in the office of the member for Warringah through the role of David Oldfield as his chief of staff. Some time later, in July 1998, the member for Warringah, speaking of Oldfield, said, ‘He has some aggressive and intimidatory views on the questions of migration, Aboriginal affairs and multiculturalism.’ But these views of course never stopped the member for Warringah employing Mr Oldfield as his chief of staff. He was happy to have him as his chief of staff until he found out that these views were being used to establish the One Nation Party in his own office.

I fear, in an era of wedge politics, that this government may be planning to use multiculturalism as the next wedge. Once they have milked the asylum seeker policy as a wedge they will inevitably turn to other issues, perhaps even a divisive national debate to try to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of multiculturalism.

But I believe that for those of us who support this policy it is important to modernise. As we modernise citizenship, we also need to modernise multiculturalism. This does not require a return to past practices and the politics of sameness; we need to develop a new approach to national identity beyond the crude conformity of assimilation and the empty celebration of diversity. This policy needs to acknowledge the human desire to share things in common with other people. This is what we call community. Multiculturalism in Australia has fostered many communities. It now needs to build bridges between them to create a community of communities.

In a diverse nation social cohesion is as important as respect for difference. It provides the foundations by which cultures can interact and learn from each other. This is the key to national progress: our capacity to absorb the best of the world’s cultures and create a stronger Australia. It is a mistake to treat citizenship and culture as static forces. I maintain that our national unity relies on a certain set of values, values that should be reflected in our national policy for citizenship: support for the universal rights and responsibilities of Western society, the traditional migrant values of hard work and educational achievement, the practical role of English in maximising contact and solidarity.
between cultures, and the need for national pride, civic engagement and social tolerance.

If people live by these values then the great traditions of Australian identity such as mateship and egalitarianism can easily co-exist with new arrivals and new cultures. If people live their lives by these values, then multiculturalism in this country will always be a success. As a nation we must reject cultural practices that discriminate against people. The big tent of Australian citizenship should have no room for bigotry and exclusion. Citizenship has a vital role to play in this process—in the modernisation of multiculturalism, in the modernisation of Australian national identity. We need to value the role of citizenship as a unifying force, as a unifying element in our society. Citizenship is not something we should give away easily.

I agree with the previous speaker, the member for Petrie, who pointed out that a citizenship certificate should not be like a certificate of attendance. It should not be a certificate that simply signifies that someone went to a ceremony to take out their Australian citizenship. We should value citizenship beyond the ceremony, beyond the piece of paper, beyond the certificate. If we are to value citizenship in this nation it must be something that is earned, not just something that is given away.

I am very much impressed by the American and Canadian models for citizenship. They require people to earn the citizenship of their nations, and we should learn from these models. In the United States, citizen applicants must be able to demonstrate an understanding of American history and government through a 100-question short-answer test. In Canada, the applicants must pass a test that includes questions on the rights guaranteed to citizens, the responsibilities of a citizen and the history and geography of Canada. It is a test that has 180 general questions plus more regarding their political system, their culture and their history. So, in the United States in Canada, it is not just a question of people receiving their certificates of citizenship upon application; there is a requirement for civics—a basic understanding of the history, the culture and the political system of those nations. Some of the questions are quite simple, but they signify commitment to and understanding of the nation which these citizens are joining. I will go through these for the benefit of the House.

In the American test, the first question is:

What are the colors of our flag?

Other questions are:

What is the significance of 4 July?
Who is the President of the United States today?
What do we call a change to the Constitution?
What are the three branches of our government?
And on it goes for 100 questions about their political system, their history and their culture. In Canada, some of the questions are:

Who are the Aboriginal peoples of Canada?
In which parts of Canada did the Aboriginal peoples first live?
Where did the first European settlers in Canada come from?
In which type of industry did most early European settlers work?
When was the Canadian Pacific Railway finished?

If people do not produce a satisfactory result from these tests, they go away and do civics courses. They go and learn about the history of the nation of which they are seeking citizenship. They learn about the culture and the political system. They learn about democracy.

We all know in this place that Australian citizens, new and old, do not know enough about the democratic system. They do not know enough about Australian history. We want to deepen the knowledge and understanding of our great nation, its history, its politics and its culture, so I would have thought that we could replicate these citizenship tests and support them with civic education courses to ensure that people who do not succeed the first time learn more about our country. We can learn more about each other through this process and have a better understanding of each other as Australians.

In this country generally we have under-valued the role of adult and community education—we have undervalued the role of civics. I believe citizenship can be a means by which we improve that particular outcome. Our system of government relies
heavily on all Australians being informed. Without information, our citizens can never develop the skills to ensure that our democratic institutions are protected. If citizens are deprived of knowledge about democracy and history, then this House and its processes empty out. The 1994 report of the Civics Expert Group highlighted the problem. A majority of Australians do not know the contents of our Constitution or the role of the High Court or the Governor-General. They do not know about the division of powers between tiers of government or who constitutes the cabinet. Only one-third of citizens understand the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. So, in Australia, citizens new and old have a lot of improvement to make. We have a lot of ground to make up. The civics report also identified a lack of understanding of civics in migrant groups, particularly those of non-English-speaking backgrounds. A person who does not understand basic civics cannot understand the significance of having a vote. A person who does not know our law, our history and our heritage cannot know the significance we attach to being Australians.

I am a very strong supporter of underpinning the foundations of citizenship through a civic education process. If we are to value citizenship, we should ask people to earn this particular right in our society. For the Labor Party, I say these things are doubly important. For our side of politics, it is doubly important to underpin the foundations of citizenship and multiculturalism. We invented these policies. The public know that we own them. In my own electorate of Werriwa, Gough Whitlam, who was one of the founding fathers of multiculturalism in this nation, always placed great store on the importance of rights and responsibilities; on getting the basics right as well as conferring citizenship upon new arrivals in this country. I have had the pleasure and privilege of reading dozens of Gough Whitlam’s speeches at citizenship ceremonies in Werriwa, and I can assure the House that he always linked multiculturalism to the basics. His argument was that it would not be right and proper to bring large numbers of migrants to Australia unless we were providing the urban services and settlement patterns that gave them a decent quality of life in this country. It was important then to link citizenship to the basic services in our society.

I say it is important now also to link citizenship and multiculturalism to the basics. We need to get the basics right to build social cohesion rather than division, to build a social commitment to this nation among all of our citizens. For those of us who value multiculturalism it is absolutely critical that we strengthen it; that we never rest, that we never stop explaining this policy, that we never stop trying to find new ways of strengthening multiculturalism. I believe this bill assists in small but significant ways, but much more needs to be done in moving towards a concept of multiple identity citizenship. Much more needs to be done in building civics education and understanding into the process of citizenship itself.

Mr RIPOLL (Oxley) (9.44 p.m.)—It is a great pleasure to be speaking on the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002. It is a rare honour in this place to speak on a bill that has dramatic consequences and changes that will have a profound impact on a whole range of people. In this particular case, that profound impact will be a very strong and positive one. This bill is well supported in the parliament and has support obviously from both sides of the House. It has even much greater support from a whole range people in the community, from all sorts of backgrounds, from all walks of life. I think it brings forward the maturity of Australia and brings forward our own sense of who we are, our culture and our nationhood.

This bill is extremely important. It is about our citizens, our citizenship and who we are as a people. Perhaps this bill in a sense should be a very controversial one, and just a few years ago it probably would have been and for some people it may still be. But there is no reason why this bill should be controversial at all, because tonight we have seen the finalisation of what has been in the making for over 100 years, since our Federation in 1901, and since the Australian Citizenship Act 1948—our own definition of what it means to be an Australian. Dual citizenship defines what it means to be an Aus-
Australian not only in part but in whole. This country of ours is made up purely of immigrants, except of course our first Australians—our Aboriginal people. This country is made up of people who have come from some other country. This bill is an extremely significant part of what is in definition our own past and what is in definition our own future.

Tonight I want to speak on a range of things, particularly about our great Australian history, how Australia was built, our democracy and our tolerance. Our past is not perfect, particularly, looking back on recent history, the White Australia policy, which today is inconceivable but in those days obviously was more widely accepted. There is certainly a great change from the Australia of 30 to 40 years ago to the Australia of today. I am very proud to be able to speak on this bill because, as I said, this bill defines our maturity. This whole issue of dual citizenship and the range of other things contained in the bill have been around for some time. A number of committees have looked at it and a number of recommendations have been made. I suppose the difficulty has always been a political one rather than a need for change. It is now good to see that that need for change has overtaken and surpassed the political difficulties, or maybe it just really is a case that the time is right for this to happen.

I have had great pleasure over many years in going to citizenship ceremonies. Many people have spoken tonight about what those citizenship ceremonies mean. I have retaken the oath many times with new Australians at those citizenship ceremonies, and every time I did it gave me a great sense of pride not only in my country but in who I am. It gave me a great sense that I was giving something back. I can understand how difficult a decision it is for new Australians to make that final commitment which is so important in this country. I think every person who decides to make Australia their home should become an Australian citizen. I have no doubt in my mind of that importance. At those ceremonies you see great joy, you see a lot of pride and you see people make commitments. They often do not speak English very well. Some have been here for 30 years and have finally taken that leap of faith, and others do it as soon as it is available to them under law. There is a great variety and our history is made up of that very fact.

When we look at our history and look at immigration in general, we see that this country has been built on the back of immigration, on the fluctuations in immigrants—be they Italian, Greek, Chinese, Vietnamese or Middle Eastern. No matter at what point in history, no matter what our immigration at that time, there has always been some great contribution. That contribution today makes up who we are and how we define ourselves. I have often pondered this question: who are we as Australians? How do we define ourselves as Australians? If you start analysing each section of what defines who we are, it never just comes down to one thing, be it flag waving or another aspect. It comes down to a range of things. It comes down to our food and to the many languages that we are aware of.

So many languages are spoken in Australia every day. I always have great joy in going to places like Carlton in Melbourne and hearing different sounds, different music and people talking other languages. To me that is a symbol of Australia. As funny as hearing somebody talking a foreign language in your own country may sound, it actually strengthens our definition of what it means to be Australian. Because our definition of what we are as Australians is so strong, we do not fear that other people might talk another language. We do not fear that other people might celebrate their culture. We do not fear that other people might actually hold, for example, a Greek festival, an Italian festival or, as we have just celebrated in my electorate, a Vietnamese Tet festival. These things are Australian. This is the great thing about our country.

I recently attended the Tet festival in Darra in my electorate. It is a great multicultural festival where the Vietnamese community come together and invite the rest of the Australian community to come to celebrate with them a bit of their own past, a bit of their own culture. The Vietnamese in my electorate are very proud Australians and
very happy to yell from the rooftops that they are Australian. They are also happy to be able to live in a country that not only accepts them as Vietnamese Australians but allows them to celebrate their past and to hang on to their culture, to their traditions and even to their language, because that is so important to so many people in this country.

All of these things are wrapped up together. You cannot unravel them. You cannot just define things by saying that somehow Australia, this lucky country, has some monolithic culture that runs down one thread of our convict past or some other thread. There are people who have migrated from Ireland, Britain, Europe, Asia—from every part of the world. All of those things coming together are what defines who we are as a people.

My electorate of Oxley was made infamous by a person whose name I will not mention, a former member for Oxley. There is a lot of irony in that when you think about it. In Oxley there are over 140 different cultures—people sharing and living together in harmony in one community. We do not see separation based on ethnicity, language or culture. What we see is, to use a cliche, a melting pot of all these people together. When I walk out in the streets and talk to people, I get a great sense of pride. When I look at Pacific Islanders or Vietnamese in my electorate—all these Australians—what I see is our Australian culture. That gives me a great sense of dignity and pride in our country, and it shows the strength of what we are about. To me, that strength defines in part why this bill is so safe, why it is not controversial and why it is so overdue and so necessary.

I will quickly go through the purposes of this bill. The bill proposes to repeal section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948 with the effect that adult Australian citizens do not lose their Australian citizenship on acquisition of another citizenship. It also extends the descent and resumption provisions to give young people more opportunities to acquire Australian citizenship; provides for children who acquire Australian citizenship with their responsible parent, or at a later date, to be given their own citizenship certificates; strengthens aspects of the integrity of the Australian citizenship process; and provides a range of references to people-smuggling offences and a range of other things. While the bill extends the availability of dual citizenship, it also tightens up a few other areas.

The real point of what I want to say tonight concerns the whole issue of dual citizenship, of Australian citizens born in Australia having the ability to take up citizenship of another country and remain Australian. We have an anomaly where, if you come from another country and take up Australian citizenship, you are entitled to it and also to your original citizenship. No matter how many other citizenships you might have, that is fine. But somehow, up until now, the law dictated that, if you were born Australian—sixth generation, seventh, eighth, second, whatever—you could not take up the citizenship of another country because you would forgo your Australian-ness, you would forgo your Australian citizenship. I find that a ridiculous proposition, and that is why I am so glad it is going to change. It will strengthen our own cultural base and our own sense of who we are.

As an exercise, I thought I would have a look at what pillar of strength defines our country, our democracy and all those things. A lot of people would say that it is our parliament. I hope that is what most people would say is a central pillar of our democracy and our structure. I thought I would look at the make-up of our own members of parliament, elected by the citizens—by the electors, all those people entitled to vote, all those Australian citizens. Who do they decide should be the people to govern, to rule, this country?

I will look briefly at the most recent make-up. I will not name anybody, although I am sure they would be very glad to be named, as would I, being a person who was not born in this country. Let me go through some of the countries where some members were born and some of their origins: Germany; Italy; Italy; father born in Italy; Italian parents; Holland; Italy; Greece; Dutch father, Australian mother; born in Hong Kong, Chinese mother, English father; Lebanese par-
ents; Greek parents; Slovenian parents; Abor-
iginal background; France—I think that is me;
Italy; Hungary; Croatian father; China,
of Chinese parents; Greece; Malaysia; Malta.
They relate just to the recent members, the
ones who were born in another country be-
fore meeting all the requirements to be
elected to this place here.

But in today's context of a more multi-
cultural society, what is much more interest-
ing is to go back and look at senators born
overseas. From 1901 until the last parlia-
ment, 102 senators were born overseas—in
places such as Germany, England, Ireland,
India, the Channel Islands, India, Zimbabwe,
Scotland, New Zealand, England, the United
Kingdom, Canada, the United States of
America, the UK again, Northern Ireland,
Scotland, Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Ireland
again, Scotland again. The list goes on and
on. There is New Zealand. There is a variety,
right through. There is China, Wiltshire in
the UK and a whole range of places. People
were born all over this world and yet they
were elected to this parliament. They made
this country, through democracy, a great
country.

Let us look at the members of the House
of Representatives, this chamber, who were
born overseas. Since Federation, the figure is
144. Again, the countries include the UK,
Britain, Canada, the USA, New Zealand,
Netherlands and Greece. You name it, there
is somebody representing nearly every cor-
nner of the world. There is Egypt, Malta
again, Chile, Cyprus, Germany. It amazed
me when I was going through this list; I did
not realise there were so many people who
were born overseas and were then elected to
this parliament. There are few countries in
the world where that is possible. Maybe
other countries fear that their own citizens,
their own people, will not have loyalty. In
this country we do not fear that possible lack
of loyalty. We have nothing to fear: this
country was built on a great base, and it is
that great base that keeps us going so
strongly.

What this bill does is fix an anomaly. As I
explained before, if you are an Australian
citizen born in Australia, you cannot take up
the citizenship of another country, but if you
come to this country you can take up Aus-
tralian citizenship and retain your original citi-
zenship. When you think about it, it is a bit
ridiculous. There are living examples of this
situation. Every year, this affects about 600
Australian citizens, for one reason or another.
They may marry somebody in Australia from
another country and move to that country for
a number of years, perhaps have children
there and then need, for whatever reason,
to take up that citizenship. They would lose
their right to be an Australian. It is prepos-
terous to think that a person who was born
here, whose family could have been here for
X number of generations, with Australian
parents and so forth and so on, would lose
that right to be an Australian merely because
they had taken up the citizenship of another
country.

This bill strengthens Australia. It strength-
ens our cultural base. It strengthens our de-
finition of who we are as a people. We have
nothing to fear from this bill. What this bill
will do is make this an even greater country
and an even luckier country for the oh so
many people who make Australia their
home.

Mr Kerr (Denison) (10.00 p.m.)—May I
say at the outset that I too support the pas-
sage of this legislation, the Australian Citi-
zenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002.
But I intend to direct my remarks to areas
somewhat different from those of most of my
colleagues, notwithstanding that I do not
dissent from their proposition that Australia
is, in broad, a country of great tolerance that
has benefited immensely from the patterns of
migration that have occurred since World
War II. However, I want to say something
that leads the House to reflect on some of the
larger issues. The notion we are talking
about, Australian citizenship, is not inherent
in our Constitution. The notion of citizenship
is mentioned only once, and it is not men-
tioned in the context of the acquisition of
Australian citizenship. Australian citizenship
as such is not a constitutional element; it is
not a constitutional term at all. The expres-
sion ‘citizenship’ is entirely a matter of Aus-
tralian statutory law.

Where citizenship is mentioned in the
Australian Constitution it is only to preclude
members of this House holding citizenship of a foreign power, and I will return to that subject in a minute to discuss how that concept itself has changed dramatically over the 100 years or so that our nation has been in existence. What I want to do is to draw attention to the fact that we ought to recognise how fragile some of the things that we talk so glibly about are, because those who founded the Australian Constitution would have conceived of the rights of those resident in this country in entirely different ways than we do now. Remember that at the time Australia was founded there was a thoroughgoing belief that we should exclude from the Australian polity all of those whose skin was of a different colour. The White Australia Policy was the dominant ideology of the labour movement and accepted by those of a conservative disposition on the other side. We also had an environment where those who were the original inhabitants of this country, the indigenous Aboriginal citizens, were not to be included in the voting power of the Australian parliament unless they were already registered in a state franchise. Although some were previously registered in a state franchise, if you look at the history of the first 40 or so years post Federation, you see that Australia’s political history is actually darkened by various attempts to exclude those already on the rolls from the right to vote in federal elections and to ensure that no others ever obtained that right. So our starting point when we think about Australian citizenship is to recognise that in 1901, when the Australian federation came into existence, we were initially a British colony.

Those who formed the first parliament were of the view that, in using the language of the Constitution that still actually exists, when they spoke about ‘people of the Commonwealth’—in section 24—or ‘subjects of the Queen’—in sections 34 and 117—those words were not intended to be of an inclusive nature. They were words which applied indiscriminately to those who were members of the Australian community because of their birth here and those who came from what was then called ‘the Mother Country’, England, or from other countries of the empire. It was not a particularly unusual thing for persons who were aspiring to high political office to perhaps serve as a member of a colonial legislature in New South Wales or in the federal parliament and later to seek election to the imperial parliament, the British House of Commons. Indeed a number of such instances occurred probably in the lifetimes of members of this House. So the initial foundation of this Australian Commonwealth was not, as we have heard it, in relation to the strength of the Australian polity but, rather, things that we now turn our backs on quite properly as things that would divide us.

What we discover is that as we have evolved constitutionally so too has the idea we hold of our citizenship or what is meant by being people of the Commonwealth. One of the most significant turning points was the decision of the High Court in Sue and Hill. The court decided that those of us who hold seats in the parliament cannot equally hold British citizenship. That is not something that most would regard as unusual now. Once the decision was made, it seemed almost self-evident that an Australian who also held citizenship of the United Kingdom could be characterised as being a citizen of a foreign power as well as a citizen of Australia. But, of course, given the constitutional history of this country—we were first a colony of the imperial parliament or the imperial Crown and then over time we evolved to dominion status and only more recently, since the passage of the Australia Acts, have we claimed or asserted full independence—it was quite a surprise to many that that in fact was the case.

I might interpose, given that the previous speaker, my friend the member for Oxley, mentioned the antecedents of members of this House. I recall someone—I think he was thought to be a little obsessed—who claimed to be a silk writing to all members saying that he would challenge the legitimacy of anybody who was a dual holder of citizenship under section 44 of the Constitution. I remember at the time the great degree of concern held by many in this House who did actually hold dual citizenship as a result of descent. They were, predominantly, people who held citizenship by descent because of the fact that their father had been born in
Britain and they automatically had inherited British citizenship, but in some instances it was citizenship of descent because of Greek ancestry or ancestry from other countries. Before the decision was made in Sue and Hill, people had to make some hard decisions whether or not to renounce those other citizenships that they might have held.

As a matter of individual reflection, before I entered this parliament, I had actually renounced citizenship I held, through my mother, of the United States of America. I knew that that was a foreign citizenship and, under the Australian Constitution, it had to be abandoned in order to hold a seat in this House. I was not aware that, because my father was born in Scotland, I actually held British citizenship as well. I, like a number of members of this House that found themselves in that situation, chose to renounce it before the 1990 or 1993 election—whichever it was—and fortunately was not caught up in the same circumstances as members who were found in breach of the Constitution. But I would be certain that many in this House—quite large numbers—would have been technically incompetent of holding their seat as a result of those constitutional provisions had those matters been tested.

So our constitutional framework and our legal environment where citizenship is such a large issue are constantly changing. Might I make the obvious point that we are today making quite a substantial change to the way in which Australian citizenship will apply. We have accepted for a long time that those who come to join us as new citizens do not necessarily have to renounce any former loyalties. They are expected, of course, to give proper acknowledgment to the primacy of their responsibilities as new citizens to their new country—to Australia—but we do not expect them to abandon any connection with their former countries. That has been the case for many years. But we have in the past said that anyone who is already an Australian citizen and who takes the citizenship of a further country automatically loses their Australian citizenship.

We are making the step today of saying that that will no longer be the case. Logically, we should look further and amend the Australian Constitution so that we apply the same rules to the Australian parliament. It would seem that that is a logical and appropriate course. Indeed, it is a measure which has been passed by the last national conference of the Australian Labor Party as its policy framework to go forward into the future. But I believe it should command support across all who serve in this parliament, because it is a logical consequence of what we have undertaken today to say that Australian citizens are entitled to hold office in this parliament on the same terms as they hold citizenship in this country. If we give to those Australian citizens the right to take second citizenship without loss of their primary identification with Australia, there is no proper case to be had to retain the provisions of section 44(i) of the Constitution.

Can I say a couple of things about what we frequently omit in discussion about citizenship. We tend to enter these debates with the idea that an emotional connection to this country is going to see us through the difficult times ahead. We talk about the ‘fair go’ and ‘those common threads that bind us together’ as if they will be glue sufficient to ensure that we survive the ups and downs that may confront us as a nation in the future. One of the difficulties we do face is that the whole idea of national citizenship and nationalism is increasingly becoming unglued. If you look at what is occurring both within nation states and between nation states, we are seeing the increasing pressure on those who might claim in a sense to be global citizens—that is, they can take advantage of great travel opportunities and great enrichment opportunities, they are well educated, their skills are in high demand, international boundaries for them are of no moment as they can travel virtually at will and they are welcomed wherever they go, and they perhaps see themselves as having more in common with their cosmopolitan counterparts who are also part of the knowledge economy, part of the global success story of open markets, than they have with their fellow citizens. This is exaggerated or exacerbated by the growth of global cities—the division between, say, Sydney and the rest of Australia. Global cities such as London and New York are resource-rich hubs in the world
They link economic and political elites through financial, informational and other commercial and institutional networks.

As a consequence, people living in such cities often experience different economic interests to those of their fellow citizens in the nation-state. I am particularly aware of this, of course, coming from Tasmania, which, unlike Sydney, has not benefited from the success of our integration with the global economy. If you look at Tasmania’s economy—despite what I believe to be a remarkably successful state administration working under extraordinarily adverse circumstances—the statistics do show that we live in almost a different country. Tasmanians’ lives are on average about a year shorter than those of other Australians—except for those who live in the Northern Territory, the statistics for which of course are brought down by the high level of indigenous participation in that community. Tasmanians are more likely to suffer from cancer and heart disease. They are also subject to obesity and diabetes. They are less linked to the global information economy. They have much higher rates of unemployment—about two per cent higher, I believe—and persistently so. We do find that, unlike many other parts of the world which are doing extraordinarily well out of the open economy, some parts such as Tasmania and, I believe, South Australia have done quite poorly.

So, if we are serious about Australian citizenship, we also have to look at the distributional issues and at what holds us together as a nation. It is no good just patting ourselves on the back and saying, ‘Aren’t we wonderful, multicultural and tolerant.’ What we are doing is forgetting that there are many people in Australia who are being left behind by this multicultural, wonderful and tolerant society. As part of what we are currently, we are privileging those who are exposed to the globally traded economy, we are privileging individualism and we are turning our backs on some of the things that were the foundational elements of Australian society. We have turned our backs properly on some of the worst elements, the White Australia Policy and a number of other aspects of what was called ‘the Australian settlement’, but we should not turn our backs on the fair go and the foundation of federalism, which was designed to ensure that there was proper accountability so that all Australians, wherever they lived, were not massively disadvantaged.

The problem is, of course, that that requires of those who are doing well a willingness to help those who are doing not so well. Increasingly, we are seeing less of that willingness being demonstrated. The other day I noticed the Committee for Sydney making statements that suggested that Sydney should not be asked to provide assistance to some regions of Australia—and I think they were identifying my own state of Tasmania and the state of South Australia—because they were sick of their economic advantage being used as the horsepower to draw up the rest of Australia. In talking about citizenship and about Australia, I have to say that, if we allow that kind of selfishness for those components of the federation which are doing well to turn their backs on those components of the federation which are not doing well, we are putting together a recipe for political division, for social division and for the long-term unravelling of those things that we assert that we hold in common.

There is no reason why we need to tolerate a two-tiered society. There is no need for this in a country that, despite our criticisms across the chamber from time to time, is still essentially a wealthy and prosperous community and one which always will be. One crosses one’s fingers when one says that, but I think at least the realistic prospect is that in relative terms Australia will always be a desirable place to live. But it is becoming a far less desirable place for many people who are the least well off in our society, as the benefits are going increasingly to those at the highest end of the income scale and to particular pockets such as Sydney and—to a lesser extent but still significantly—Melbourne, thus disadvantaging large sections of those who are being excluded from economic gain. This is just part of the globalisation that Mark Latham talked of. Yes, it has its advantages; yes, it has its importance. But if it is going to survive as a system it will only
survive effectively if we recognise that in obtaining a common assent to its propositions there has to be a safety net to make certain that those who are not going to be its winners are properly accommodated and catered for. And that is not just within our nation; we also have to look beyond our nation to the international effects and the polarisation of wealth between rich and poor beyond our borders. But we have to look particularly within this country, where we are directly responsible as legislators. We would be irresponsible if we did not see that as our first priority. (Time expired)

Mr LEO McLEAY (Watson) (10.20 p.m.)—Tonight we are discussing the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2002. This legislation seeks to amend the Citizenship Act 1948 in a number of areas. To summarise, the bill proposes to repeal section 17 of the principal act so that Australian citizens will not lose their Australian citizenship on the acquisition of another citizenship; to extend the descent and resumption provisions to give young people an increased opportunity to acquire Australian citizenship; to provide for children whose parents acquire Australian citizenship to get their own citizenship certificates; to strengthen aspects of the integrity of the Australian citizenship process; and to insert a reference to people-smuggling offences in the existing provisions of the 1948 act.

During the latter half of the previous century in particular, we witnessed a change in attitude towards the concept of Australian citizenship. Indeed, I remember discussing amendments that the previous government—of which I was a member—made to the citizenship bill in 1984. That was a very lively debate—a lot livelier debate than this one. Michael Hodgman—the mad predecessor of my colleague the member for Denison, who has just spoken—alleged that we were leaving God out of the Constitution and that we were taking the Queen out of the citizenship oath, and the current Speaker suggested that somehow or other there were some problems with the Irish and all that. It was a much more interesting debate than this one. Even that suggests, I think, that we have probably moved to a sane approach to what we are as Australians than the approach we may have taken in 1984—if one listened to what members of the current government said at the time.

I think a lot of that had to do with the fact that even in the middle of the last century we were still seeing ourselves as a part of the far-flung British Empire but later on, and I think more so today, we are definitely aware of the fact that we are a nation in our own right even though the Prime Minister still wants us to cling to the British Empire in various ways. We moved from being British subjects to being Australian citizens and part of our pride in our citizenship meant that when we changed we decided that people had to take on all the characteristics of Australian citizenship and that to be anything other than an Australian citizen meant somehow or other that you did not care for this country. It was considered to be an expression of loyalty. It was part of building a cohesive nation; a nation in its own right with its own identity. This attitude of course was understandable at the time when we were really making ourselves a country, but now we are more confident, more sure of ourselves and less insistent on sticking to what has become an almost outdated concept in the modern world. The world has changed and section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act would provide that, except in relation to an act of marriage, a person who does anything the sole or dominant purpose of which is and the effect of which is to acquire the nationality or citizenship of a foreign country shall, upon that acquisition, cease to be an Australian citizen. That is what we said in the past, but I think we now realise that that is unjustly discriminatory and anachronistic.

Naturalised Australians are able to hold dual citizenship but those who have been Australian citizens from birth are prevented from acquiring the citizenship of another country without losing their Australian citizenship. There are some citizens who do not have citizenship of another country. For example, some Australians enjoy dual citizenship because their countries of origin or citizenship before they came to Australia not only allow them to have dual citizenship but also will not let them go. For instance, if you
are person of Greek or Russian heritage they consider you to be a Greek or a Russian no matter that you want to let that citizenship go. The British are not all that keen on letting you go; you have to write them a letter and attempt to get out of British citizenship as well. So they are quite happy for people who live in Australia to be Australian citizens and still hold citizenship of their country but we do not allow that ourselves.

The current system discriminates against those who are Australian born and who wish to move to another country to live or work—as the minister called them, the internationally mobile Australians. They may have to give up their Australian citizenship to take up a job in another country and I suppose the most famous of those is Rupert Murdoch. When he wanted to take over a lot of business in the US he had to become an American citizen but we said, ‘Because you have become an American citizen you can no longer be an Australian citizen.’ What Murdoch showed very publicly was something that also happens to a lot of Australians in a very private way if they want to go and work in another country. I think that this piece of legislation is fairly sensible. It allows those people who are going offshore to find work to acquire the citizenship of another country to do that. It does not make them any less an Australian. It probably makes them a more well rounded person.

Particularly in the area of scientific research, where so many Australian born citizens travel overseas and can do excellent work, unless they take on the citizenship of another country—often of America—they lose their ability to work in their field of expertise. A lot of those people will come back to Australia after they have done some of their work overseas. By saying to them that they must give up their Australian citizenship we do both them and ourselves an injustice. I think that we cause Australians who have gone offshore to find work in their area of expertise to be unable to come back to Australia. We are saying to them under the current arrangements of the citizenship legislation, ‘You can make a choice; it is either us or them.’ I think in this modern world you can make the choice between being one of us and being one of them. I have a few other things I would like to say in this debate, Mr Speaker, but I have been told that you want to say something as well so I move that the debate be adjourned and I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

PRIVILEGE: HANSARD EXTRACTS

The SPEAKER (10.27 p.m.)—I thank the member for Watson for his accommodation and he will have opportunity to continue speaking when the debate is resumed. I wish to inform members that since the House last met I have considered a request from the Australian Government Solicitor for permission to produce an extract from Hansard in a court case concerning actions in the Timor Gap. Such requests have normally been put to the House for decision. However, when the House has not been sitting, Speakers have sometimes given permission and informed the House of their decision when it next met. In this case I was not aware of any reason why the request should not be agreed to and so the AGS was informed accordingly. The advice to the AGS noted the need for the substantive restrictions required by the law of parliamentary privilege to be observed. For the information of members I table a copy of the correspondence.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr ROSS CAMERON (Parramatta—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Family and Community Services) (10.28 p.m.)—I move:

That the House do now adjourn.

Opening of Parliament: Procedures

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (10.29 p.m.)—Speaking on the adjournment debate this evening I desire to address a report on the procedures for the opening of parliament. The report I specifically refer to is the report of the procedure committee entitled Balancing traditions and progress. As a member of this House’s Standing Committee on Procedure in the last parliament I was fortunate enough to participate in a comprehensive review of the procedures of the opening of this place. The bipartisan standing committee on which the member for Parramatta also served made eight unani-
mous recommendations as a result of that review. In endorsing those changes as to the procedures for the opening of parliament the desire of the committee—and it worked very hard to get a unanimous position—was that some of those recommendations may have been implemented in the opening of the current parliament.

Mr Speaker, as you and I both know, this parliament was the first new parliament since the Centenary of Federation, the centenary of the parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. I would have thought that no better time existed to break with tradition and make reference to the Australian people than when opening this parliament. We all recognise that the opening ceremony for this place is steeped in tradition—a tradition that has evolved considerably over the century to its current form. Now is the time, without a doubt, to continue its evolution to incorporate a more modern, inclusive and Australian opening ceremony. However, as a result of the complete rejection and unwillingness of the government to consider the unanimous and practical reforms of the committee, one has to ask oneself from time to time what is the real value in serving on some of the committees of this parliament when you are treated with absolute contempt, despite an endeavour by both sides of the parliament to pursue practical reform.

In that context, people in this place need to be constantly reminded that we represent the people of Australia or, as Sir William Deane stated at the commemorative centenary sitting of the parliament in Melbourne on 9 May 2001:

... the ultimate source of all government power and authority in this land is the people—all the people—of our Commonwealth.

Surely, at this time, it is appropriate to continue the evolution of the opening of this place to enable greater recognition of Australian people. Surely it is time to consider the modernisation of the form of the oath and affirmation of allegiance taken by members and senators. It is without a doubt the government’s responsibility and moral obligation to take note of the committee’s recommendations and, in doing so, to develop a proposed new form of the oath and the affirmation to be put to the people of Australia in a referendum. Similarly, I trust that the government will develop a form of the address-in-reply with a view to including recognition of the Australian people.

I note in passing that on 16 October 2001 the new Northern Territory government made a significant break from tradition by making special recognition of indigenous culture and identity. The Northern Territory government is clearly intent on achieving reconciliation by reinforcing a message of inclusiveness and unity. This government could and should have taken a leaf out of their book to clearly demonstrate that this place exists to serve indigenous people too. If it was good enough for our Centenary of Federation celebration in Melbourne then it should also have been good enough for the opening of the current parliament. That is what the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation recommended when it stated:

All Parliaments, governments and organisations observe protocols and negotiate with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders or representative bodies to include appropriate Indigenous ceremony into official events.

Clearly, the enlightened Northern Territory government recognised the importance of this, but sadly this government has not. It reflects unfavourably on the government and basically says to people who try to do the right thing in serving on committees that maybe it is about time you asked yourself if your effort is really worth it when you consider the arrogant manner in which the government dismissed that report.

The standing committee was unanimous on its eight sound and well reasoned decisions which were aimed at updating this parliament and making it more accessible to the Australian people. It is shameful that none of the recommendations have been actioned by the Prime Minister. It is simply another lost opportunity by a government without a third term agenda. Once again the Prime Minister and the government have shown themselves to be blinkered by tradition and incapable of action. (Time expired)

Queensland Police: Staffing Levels

Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (10.34 p.m.)—I rise this evening to highlight to this House
the Queensland Beattie government’s absolute dereliction of duty on the Gold Coast. Like any average criminal, the Queensland Labor government is tiptoeing around, hoping no-one will notice that something is missing. And what is it that is missing? The answer is police officers. Gold Coast police officers are missing. I am pleased to acknowledge that 584 police officers who are stationed on the Gold Coast do an excellent job. But 584 police officers are simply not enough for a city with a population of more than 400,000 people.

To give this House an idea of how understaffed the Gold Coast police force is, let us compare it to other regions around Queensland. Cairns has a police force of 340 officers to service around 150,000 people. Townsville has a police force of 408 officers to service around 200,000 people. The question that must be asked is why Cairns, a city with less than 50 per cent of the Gold Coast population, has 58 per cent of our police force. Why does Townsville, a city about half the size of the Gold Coast, have 70 per cent of our police force?

It is no wonder that crime and drugs are two of the biggest issues for residents in my electorate. This has been confirmed by numerous local surveys I have conducted. In fact, the situation has become so dire that an editorial in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* last year stated:

When people wait 12 hours for officers to respond to emergency calls, or when people don’t feel confident enough to call the police about prowlers, break and enters and neighbourhood rows, that is not fine. This is not a public safety issue that can be swept under the carpet.

Crime on the Gold Coast is a serious problem. The latest Queensland police statistics show that the Gold Coast has the highest crime rate of any city in Queensland. We have more offences such as arson, break and enter, car theft, fraud, assault, drug offences and homicide per head of population than any other city.

Even the Queensland Police Union President is on the record as stating that the Gold Coast has the highest crime rate in the state, and police face massive odds on the ground. He described Gold Coast police numbers as ‘severely deficient’. If this dire situation is not rectified, if the Beattie Labor government fails to put more police on the beat, the Gold Coast will become the crime capital of Queensland. This is a situation to which I am well and truly opposed. I am not prepared to stand by and watch more Gold Coast residents and business owners become victims of burglary, vandalism or worse. That is why, in stark contrast to the state Labor government, I have listened to local residents and that is why I have acted.

I have distributed a petition throughout the community, calling on Premier Beattie and his ‘silent seven’ Gold Coast members to address this serious problem. Hundreds of Moncrieff residents have signed this petition. These residents have all joined with me to deliver a simple message to the Beattie government: we need more police. But the desperate calls have fallen on deaf ears. Indeed, residents’ calls have been ignored by Labor for years. In August last year, the Queensland police minister told state parliament that the Gold Coast was overstaffed with police. He said that we had too many police on the Gold Coast. I can say that Labor’s point of view is the opposite to mine and that of the Police Commissioner, the police union and Gold Coast residents.

What is very clear—and this was highlighted again this evening on *A Current Affair*—is that there is a growing problem, particularly in relation to crime and drugs. I saw on this evening’s program reference to a drug racket that was being run by a Gold Coast limousine company. This just served to highlight the need and the urgency for there to be more police on the beat. At the coal-face, it is through more police that we will address this problem. As the fastest growing region in the country, it is important that these extra police are put on the ground as soon as possible. The facts are clear: more police mean less crime. The Gold Coast needs an active and effective police presence in its neighbourhoods. We need the state Labor government to stop ignoring the No. 1 concern of local residents and to deliver more police.
In the brief time I have tonight I want to take the opportunity to pay respect to three notable people in my area, all of whom, sadly, have passed on since this House last met last year. This is the first opportunity I have had to pay this regard. It is always sad when someone does die, but when you consider the contribution of some people it really does warrant the contribution that I want to put into the Hansard this evening.

The first person I want to talk about is Kath Bourke. Kath Bourke was President of the National Council of Women of the ACT from February 1965 until 1967. She served as a member of the Churchill Trust, she was President of the Council on the Ageing ACT and a director of ACOTA. In 1978, Kath was made a Member of the Order of Australia in recognition of her work in the community. In 1989, she was ACT Citizen of the Year, which is indeed a very high honour. Kath Bourke attended her first meeting of the National Council of Women in 1956, as a delegate from St Christopher’s Catholic Women’s League. During this period of the 1950s and 1960s, groups came together willingly to work for the good of the life of the community as a whole—a really new community here in Canberra where there was a strong spirit and much need. One of the major concerns during Kath’s term as president of the council and beyond was the Emergency Housekeeping Service, first set up in 1962.

Typical of Kath, by 1966, after a lot of lobbying and many lengthy discussions between the then Department of the Interior, the council and the ACT, the council newsletter happily reported that the ‘government had agreed to meet all administrative costs of the service’. This is just one very small but very important example of the dedication that Kath Bourke gave to this community. I remember Kath Bourke over the last 20 years—not so much in the last few, because she was not well towards the end of her life. I certainly remember this very vital, small, dynamic woman buzzing around this town, always with the care and concern of others uppermost in her mind. She had a large loving family. She is very sadly missed, particularly by women’s groups. She was always very concerned about looking after and furthering the cause of women, particularly here in Canberra.

The next person I would like to pay regard to is Ursula Callus. Sadly, Ursula died in Canberra on 5 December last year after a long illness. She was born in Adelaide in 1939, came to Canberra during the mid-1960s and graduated with a bachelor of music degree from the ANU. The really important thing I want to note about Ursula Callus, despite her very long and impressive CV and contribution, is her effort in respect of an organisation called Pro Musica. Pro Musica, under Ursula’s guidance, ended up establishing what is now regarded as the Canberra International Festival of Chamber Music, again coming up in May of this year. Ursula persisted and, regardless of all the difficulties that ever faced her and the organisation, determinedly went on and turned this into a festival of music for people to enjoy with master classes and the best chamber music performers around the world coming to Canberra to participate not only in the festival program but in the master classes for young students of music both from here and elsewhere. That festival has now reached the stage of high recognition in the ACT and beyond. I would say without any fear of contradiction that the advancement of that festival was due to Ursula’s determined belief in the ACT and in what this festival could do for both this place and the people who participate in it. She is going to be very sadly missed.

The third person I want to refer to is Lieutenant Colonel Neil Harris Rtd. As a member of the Lions Club here, I am sure that many other members of the Lions Club would understand the determination and dedication that people put into the Lions clubs. Neil was a long-serving, staunch supporter of the Lions clubs, along with a lot of other organisations. His list of achievements, awards and recognition is very long. He was also nominated for many community awards.
here in the ACT. He passed away in February. At his memorial service, the dedications came from people throughout the community. His care for his fellow community members here through the Lions organisation has to be applauded by all who knew him. It was indeed an honour to know him, and it is an honour to be able to stand here tonight and mention his passing.

Connolly, Mr Don

Mr DUTTON (Dickson) (10.44 p.m.)—I rise tonight to pay tribute to the many unsung heroes in the electorate of Dickson, the people who do not seek praise but who are certainly deserving of it. The people I am talking about are the ones who have, in many cases, given up large parts of their lives to make a positive contribution to the local community. They have done this through their work in the many service and community groups that operate in the great electorate of Dickson.

It gave me enormous pleasure, as the newly elected federal representative for Dickson, to nominate the eventual winner, Mr Don Connolly, for the award of Pine Rivers Shire Australia Day Citizen of the Year. Don has demonstrated over the past 40 years his dedication not only to the local community but also to the welfare of many others. It is the people like Don, the quiet achievers who exist in every part of this great country, that make Australia the place it is today—for, indeed, without citizens of this calibre our community would undoubtedly be deprived.

Don’s response, when he was asked to comment on the award, really sums up the fantastic attitude that he takes to life. He said:

I believe helping those less fortunate than myself is a rewarding experience.

These are very simple but very telling words. This is the attitude that has helped shape many local communities throughout the country into the friendly places they are today.

To give an indication of the level of community support undertaken by Don Connolly over the years in the Dickson electorate would require and deserve much more time than I am permitted today. However, as a mere indication of the contribution Mr Connolly has made to the local community, I can say the following. Don Connolly was the inaugural member of the Strathpine Rotary Club in 1981. Since that time he has achieved a 100 per cent attendance record; he has never missed a meeting in over 20 years. In fact, the same can be said for Don’s involvement in Apex, where he again maintained a 100 per cent attendance record over more than 20 years of involvement. As a fellow member of the Strathpine Rotary Club, I am also privileged to be involved with the great work that that organisation carries out in the community on a daily basis. In fact, last week I attended a night in celebration of Don’s achievement, and it was attended by many local community leaders and people who contribute a great deal to the electorate of Dickson.

In 1988, Don helped form the Pine Rivers Police Citizens Youth Club. He served as the inaugural branch chairman, and was honoured with life membership in 1999. There are many other very worthy organisations and community groups that Don has been involved with, all of which have made Dickson a better place for all of us who live in the electorate. While Don is only one man, he is a shining example of what can be achieved through the power of one.

Mr Speaker, it is often said that you get out of life what you put into it. More profound words could not be spoken. For the thousands of volunteers across Australia, it is not the fame and glory that is attractive; it is the satisfaction that comes with a job well done and the knowledge that a difference has been made to someone else’s life. According to ABS research on voluntary work, there were 4,395,000-odd volunteers in the year 2000—or 32 per cent of the population aged 18 years and over. In 1995, this figure was around 24 per cent of the adult population.

According to the ABS, in the year 2000 volunteers contributed in excess of 704 million working hours to Australia’s communities. As with Mr Don Connolly, a resident of Dickson whom I have spoken of today, 47 per cent of volunteers committed their time to help the community. A further 43 per cent
did so because they relished the personal satisfaction achieved. For 18- to 24-year-olds, 17 per cent participated to gain work experience.

I pay tribute today to the volunteers of Dickson and the enormous amount of time they spend on helping others reach their full potential, often in the face of extreme adversity. One of the most satisfying jobs I have had the pleasure of doing since becoming a member in this great place was to present certificates of appreciation to the volunteers at the Petrie Respite Centre—a group of people who, day in and day out, give up their time to help make someone else’s day that much more enjoyable. They are paid with the smiles on faces, and nothing more. I am proud to represent an electorate that is based around a strong community spirit—whether volunteers are involved in sporting clubs, the Dayboro Pony Club, Apex, Lions, Rotary, Neighbourhood Watch or the school P&C.

Burke Electorate: Health Services

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Burke) (10.49 p.m.)—I rise to raise concerns about services provided within the region of Sunbury and Macedon. I think it is incumbent upon me to inform the parliament of the recent shortages of medical and health services within my electorate of Burke. One month ago today, many pregnant women and their families were notified of the pending closure of the maternity ward of the Mayne Health hospital located in Sunbury. Let me assure you that my electorate has enough to worry about with the collapse of Ansett and the consequential job losses in the region. In fact, I should inform the House that a local delegation will meet with government ministers and shadow ministers this week to see what assistance can be provided in creating employment opportunities and attracting investment in this region—but more of that at a later date.

I return to the maternity ward closure. I indicate that this matter was brought to my attention by those most affected by the closure—namely, those women who were promised a bed in the hospital so they could have their child in Sunbury. These women, and their partners and families, were provided with written guarantees that they had a place in the maternity ward. These expecting mothers found out only last month that this commitment by Mayne Health would not be honoured.

In meetings last week and the week before between representatives of Mayne Health, representatives of the women affected and me, the hospital acknowledged that the decision to close the ward—effective from 5 April this year—was made in late November last year. But the women affected were not informed until 11 February 2002. In short, the hospital saw fit to inform its patients almost three months after it had made the decision. I have further been informed that Mayne Health was continuing to book women into the hospital, into the maternity ward, knowing it had already decided to close the doors of this ward.

Further, this belated proposal to provide an alternative bed at Frances Perry hospital in the city was not ideal for many women affected. A transfer of this kind is likely to lead to greater costs for those affected and will inconvenience the families who wish to be involved in the birth—and of course Frances Perry, in the city, is some 45 kilometres from Sunbury. The tyranny of distance is of course worse for those who reside north of Sunbury in the communities of Gisborne, Riddell, Romsey, Lancefield and Macedon.

I am still waiting to see what evidence the hospital has formed for this decision to be made. I am also still waiting to see Mayne Health properly compensate those families for the loss suffered as a result of the closure. Mayne Health is a major player in this country’s private health service. It must realise that, if it wishes to remain in this critical area, it must be credible and it has to be accountable to its patients, not merely its shareholders. The community are increasingly sceptical of $2 billion per year of taxpayers’ money being provided to private health operators, when as the privately insured they cannot get access to health benefits promised in glossy brochures. As many said to me last week, what is the point of
paying for private health insurance when we cannot get into our preferred hospital?

Indeed, this whole issue raises the spectre of so-called cherry picking, where on occasion private hospitals are sometimes accused of keeping profitable services and shifting more costly services to public hospitals. This of course does not occur all the time— I hope it would occur rarely— but it certainly leads people to conclude that way on occasion. As I indicated earlier, I have given Mayne Health until next Friday to provide me with the evidential material which was the basis for its decision to close the ward, and information about what compensation it will provide to its patients affected by the decision.

**Fishing: Illegal Operators**

Mr RANDALL (Canning) (10.53 p.m.)— I wish to draw to the attention of this House the challenges we face as a nation in the protection of a valuable Australian natural resource: the patagonian toothfish fishery off Heard Island. Last week I had the opportunity to visit the recently seized long-line fishing vessels the Lena and the Volga near my electorate of Canning. These two boats await Australian justice alongside the convicted illegal long-line fishing vessel the South Tomi, which was apprehended one year ago after a dramatic chase across the Southern Ocean.

Following my visit to these vessels and subsequent discussions and inquiries, it is apparent that the activities of these fishing vessels are not at all to be confused with those types of artisanal Indonesian incursions that we see to our north. The Lena and the Volga are highly sophisticated, have been specifically modified for the purpose of catching toothfish in the Southern Ocean and are part of an organisation that is deliberate and calculating about the theft of this valuable resource. We have reason to believe that the Lena and the Volga are just two of a fleet of 10 boats now active in the region with elements of common ownership. Sister ships are thought to be the Ural and the Neva and then what is known as the ABCDEF fleet, made up of the long-liners Austin, Boston, Champion, Darwin, Eva and Florence.

Many of these fleet are very old boats, and they are considered expendable by the thieves that own them. They are valued at less than $1 million and carry two or three times their value in the catch of patagonian toothfish. They employ a very small number of skilled fishing and engineering crew, but most of the work is done by sweated labour sourced from China and Indonesia, paid by a monthly salary of perhaps $200 a month, and they stay out to sea for months on end.

The structures that stand behind these companies are very complex and have been designed to hide the identity of the beneficial owners. They use flags of convenience and third-country financing to further distance the vessels, crew and catch from the beneficial owner. The marketing and distribution arrangements are developed to circumvent efforts by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources to control the trade in toothfish. Mother ships are used to deliver the catch to ports in Asia, such as Jakarta. It then goes to factories in China, where it is further processed and blended with other cargoes for export to Japan or the USA.

This is nothing less than international organised crime. I want to warn these companies that Australia will not stand for the flouting of our national laws, breaches of our sovereign territories or destruction of our environment. I can assure them that the government will do everything in its power to track down their linkages and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law. I have complete faith in my ministerial colleagues and their departments, and we will see the Mr Bigs of the illegal fishing world exposed and penalised for their crimes.

They have come to plunder one of the best managed toothfish fisheries in the world. The legal Australian commercial fishery operates with stringent environmental controls, 200 per cent observer coverage and substantial requirements for cost recovery and research. The industry contributes about $1 million towards this. It is a fishery to be proud of in the way it has been developed cooperatively between industry, government and conservation groups. Yet the very fact it has been managed and developed so well is now
turning into a negative for Australia, because it has also now become one of the most lucrative fishing grounds for illegal fishermen to target the patagonian toothfish.

The illegals have already decimated the toothfish stocks of South Africa, and they have depleted the French stocks of toothfish, so the Australian stocks and region are now looking more attractive than ever. Estimates of the value of the catch removed illegally from Australian waters over the past four years is in excess of $120 million—almost one-third more than that removed by the legal Australian industry. This is a horrendous crime.

As Senator Hill recently stated, we will leave no stone unturned to catch these pirates. Agencies such as the defence department, Environment Australia, Customs, Coastwatch, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and the Australian Fisheries Management Authority are all combining forces to eliminate these acts of environmental vandalism and theft from Australian waters. My very direct advice to those organising and benefiting from this trade is: just get out.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the considerable efforts of the Royal Australian Navy and the many passionate, committed and hardworking individuals across many agencies who are making a difference in this battle against illegal fishing. I put out a stern warning to those involved in this illicit industry. I know the identity of the international company that runs this very illegal enterprise, and I intend to name it when I address this issue at my very next opportunity in this House.

Media: Cross-media Ownership Rules

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (10.58 p.m.)—The Howard government is soon to introduce the Broadcasting Services Amendment (Media Ownership) Bill 2002 into the federal parliament. The effect of this bill is to tear apart Australia’s cross-media ownership laws by allowing a person to own and control newspapers, television stations and radio stations or both in the same market. While most people are aware that in Australia there are two prominent media owners—Mr Rupert Murdoch and Mr Kerry Packer—most people do not truly appreciate the stranglehold their companies have on our commercial media and the influence they hold over the political process and our democracy.

The role of the media is crucial in any democracy. Diversity of media ownership ensures diversity of opinion, and that is in the public interest and healthy for our democracy. Overwhelmingly, Australians still get their news and information from traditional media sources: radio stations, newspapers and television stations. It is these sources that influence the way the public thinks and votes. I therefore ask: how can it be in the public interest for the Howard government to want to change Australia’s cross-media ownership laws by allowing Mr Murdoch’s News Limited or Mr Packer’s PBL to add further media to their vast existing interests in the media? In promoting its changes to our media laws, the Howard government is arguing that somehow you can separate newsrooms from their owners. I reject this proposition. The government should cease forthwith any attempt to change our cross-media ownership laws, because they are critical for the future of our democracy.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 11 p.m., the debate is interrupted.

House adjourned at 11.00 p.m.

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Mr Murphy to move:
That this House prohibits further stem cell research from existing or new embryos.

Mr Abbott to move:
That, unless otherwise ordered, the following amendment to the standing orders be made:
Omit standing order 324 and substitute the following standing order:
General purpose standing committees

324 (a) The following general purpose standing committees shall be appointed:

(i) Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs;
(ii) Standing Committee on Ageing;
(iii) Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry;
(iv) Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts;
(v) Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration;
(vi) Standing Committee on Education and Training;
(vii) Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations;
(viii) Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage;
(ix) Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs;
(x) Standing Committee on Industry and Resources;
(xi) Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs;
(xii) Standing Committee on Science and Innovation; and
(xiii) Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services.

(b) A standing committee appointed pursuant to paragraph (a) shall be empowered to inquire into and report on any matter referred to it by either the House or a Minister, including any pre-legislation proposal, bill, motion, petition, vote or expenditure, other financial matter, report or paper.

Annual reports of government departments and authorities and reports of the Auditor-General tabled in the House shall stand referred to the relevant committee for any inquiry the committee may wish to make. Reports shall stand referred to committees in accordance with a schedule tabled by the Speaker to record the areas of responsibility of each committee.

Provided that:
(i) any question concerning responsibility for a report or a part of a report shall be determined by the Speaker;
(ii) the period during which an inquiry concerning an annual report may be commenced by a committee shall end on the day on which the next annual report of that department or authority is presented to the House; and
(iii) if a committee intends to inquire into all or part of a report of the Auditor-General, it shall notify the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, in writing, of its intention.

(c) Each committee appointed under sub-paragraphs (a)(i) to (a)(xiii) shall consist of 10 members, six government and four non-government members. Each committee may be supplemented with up to two members for a particular inquiry: provided that a maximum of one government and one non-government member may be appointed as supplementary members.

Mr Williams to present a bill for an act to enhance the Commonwealth’s ability to combat terrorism, treason and politically motivated violence, and for related purposes.


Mr Williams to present a bill for an act to create offences relating to international terrorist activities using explosive or lethal devices, and for related purposes.

Mr Williams to present a bill for an act to amend the law relating to border security, and for other purposes.

Mr Williams to present a bill for an act to amend the law relating to telecommunications interceptions, and for related purposes.

Mr Ruddock to present a bill for an act to amend the Migration Act 1958, and for related purposes.
Monday, 11 March 2002

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. I.R. Causley) took the chair at 4.00 p.m.

GOVERNOR-GENERAL’S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

Debate resumed from 21 February, on motion by Ms Ley:

That the address be agreed to.

Mr SAWFORD (Port Adelaide) (4.00 p.m.)—Mr Deputy Speaker, congratulations on your appointment. There are three matters I wish to speak about in this address-in-reply debate: the first is the absence of analysis and political commentary in this country, the second is the estrangement of people from the political process and the third, if I get time, is the structural collapse of the education framework.

Political commentary, particularly around election time, is not as cracked up as it ought to be. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people in this country are involved in political commentary in some form or another. However, the question needs to be asked why so much election comment is nothing more than speculative opinion spiced with well-placed leaks that, combined, often amount to no more than idle gossip. Is analysis so out of favour with political commentators in this country that no-one can identify the significant factors that determine success in federal elections?

Although leadership, individual policies, media influence, views of elites and particular events—for example, the MV *Tampa*, the Vietnam War and the Petrov affair—can influence the winning or losing of individual seats, none of those factors alone or considered together determine who will win government. There is a set of determining factors; it has ever been so. Why did no-one identify those factors at the November federal election? In the circumstances of the 2001 federal election, no opposition has ever won government in Australia. In fact, I will go further than that and state categorically that no opposition in the Western world—that is, a democracy—has ever won government in the circumstances that faced Labor.

What were those circumstances? They were as follows: it was a normal electoral cycle in length of time—three years—and, measured election to election, interest rates fell from 6.7 per cent to 6.3 per cent and the unemployment rate fell from eight per cent to 6.9 per cent. In those circumstances, no opposition in Australia has ever won government. I believe that will also prove to be correct in all national elections in all democracies.

If Australian evidence is required to support the proposition, an examination of the 1963 election will confirm that, when interest rates and unemployment fall, the government of the day is returned. But the most talked about and classic example is 1993. Forty-nine of the 51 federal press gallery journalists got it wrong. I think Laura Tingle and Amanda Buckley were the only two who got it right.

Most coalition members were equally confident about the 1993 election, particularly after Fightback 1 and then Fightback 2. This was John Hewson’s so-called unlosable election. He never had a chance. Labor was never going to lose the 1993 federal election. Although unemployment had skyrocketed to almost 11 per cent, both interest rates and inflation fell, and fell dramatically—from 17 per cent to 10 per cent and 8.6 per cent to 1.2 per cent respectively. In those circumstances, the coalition could not win. I am sure that the current foreign affairs minister will confirm my confidence and my successful prediction of that particular election result, as will a few other members in the Liberal party room. What passed as political comment prior to, during and post the 1993 election was largely synthesised and it was almost all wrong.
But in 2001-02 it has not improved; there is no analysis. I contend that in all democracies, including Australia, it is fairly straightforward to predict the winner of a federal or national election as soon as the election is called. Something else happens in state or local government elections, but that is another story. Certainly, margins of victory can be in doubt but not the party or the parties that will emerge victorious. Even in 1961, the closest ever federal election, sharp knives in the political commentators’ drawer would have gone for Menzies by the barest possible margin: one seat. Why? Because interest rates went up, inflation fell and the unemployment rate remained the same, measured election to election. Menzies did in fact win by one seat.

Commentators will be quick to point out the exceptions to what I am putting forward this afternoon by referring either to the 1974 federal election or the 1984 federal election, or both. On both of those occasions the government of the day was returned. The changed factor was that because the electoral cycle was less than two years in both cases, the circumstances of 1972 and 1983 continued to prevail—and they did. The only time oppositions can win within a two- to three-year electoral cycle is when at least two of the three indicators of interest rates, inflation and unemployment go up, measured election to election. When three of them go up dramatically, as in 1975 and 1983, oppositions win handsomely. If you have followed this so far and consider yourself a bit of a political pundit, you ignore analysis at the risk of successful prediction. Whilst there are few certainties in life, applying analysis and the grey matter to federal election predictions appears to be one of them.

To state that there has been an estrangement of people from the political process in Australia would surprise few people, but maybe the reasons why this is so have crept under the radar. There are many theories going around post-election as to how the Australian political process can be progressed. Whether they are the views of the third way, the libertarian or totalitarian left or the capitalist free market or protected market right, there are common elements of failure. The proponents and the propaganda all too often ignore the basic fundamentals of human behaviour. Life is far more complex than many political theorists or commentators acknowledge or would have us believe. Too much of the political propaganda ignores the everyday realities most people face.

People do not ignore reality. They have their own insights, they have their own intuitions and, more often than not, they are right. They know instinctively that the most powerful impact on human behaviour is the quality of the impact of one mind upon another. Certainly, it has a physical, an emotional and a spiritual dimension, but essentially it is the power and growth of the connectedness of mind upon mind. It is face to face; it is the trinity of human behaviour; it is the exchange of ideas, visions, philosophies, objectives and purposes; it is the exchange and transfer of processes, strategies and the means of doing things; it is the exchange and achievement of outcomes and the completion of tasks; but, importantly, it is the coherence of that trinity that includes people and does not exclude them.

Many people are not clear about what the political process ought to be. But I can tell you this: they know what it should not be. It is not the stated word or the passive receipt of words on paper or screens; it is not the passive viewing of images or personalities on screens or elsewhere; it is not the knowledge based—the lowest intellectual skill—exchanges, passive or active, on the Internet; it is the complex, fraught with risk and danger, everyday exchanges of ideas, strategies and outcomes between and with people that build the intellect, strengthen the emotions and free the spirit.

Much of the alienation so present in our society today is a direct result of the decreasing opportunities for so many people to relate to others in their everyday lives—working or otherwise. For too many hours each day, there is an emptying out of people from too many neighbourhoods—and even when people are home they are isolated and locked out from each
other. There are exceptions, of course, particularly with the highly paid in cafe and pub society, but for many there is a lack of real contact and exchange in so many activities that dominate everyday life. Even everyday shopping is largely impersonal; so too are financial transactions in the street at ATMs, on the Internet or via those evil poker machines; so too is the viewing of spectator sports via television; so too is working from home, increasing alarmingly; so too is working in domestic services, in transport, courier and call centre jobs; so too is the casualisation of labour so favoured by this government and the short-term contracts being offered to increasing numbers of professional people, particularly teachers, but soon to hit doctors, dentists and lawyers, as their work will be outsourced to the third world.

Many of these casual jobs limit the potential richness of connecting relationships and the possibilities for personal growth. People have turned off the media because so much of the commentary in the media has little of relevance to say to them. People have turned off the political process because they cannot see any reason to connect to political actions that they reject and that they believe ignore their everyday reality—take the falling primary vote of both major political parties for example.

But people do want to connect; it is a basic need. People do want to grow; it is a basic need. People do want to respond positively, but they will refuse and they will dig their toes in if they detect that what is being said is simply situationally convenient, politically clever or in the interest of the proponent rather than for active engagement with the receiver. People are not looking for glib political theories. People are not looking for opinions and commentaries that exclude them. They are looking for ideas, they are looking for strategies and they are looking for outcomes. They will test the coherence and the connectedness of each on its own. That is how people grow—it is how we all grow—when they can participate in the process.

Too many political theorists and political commentators lecture and preach—and many with far too much missionary zeal. There is a difference between passion and haranguing. It has ever been so. Whether in ancient Greece or Rome, revolutionary France or Russia or contemporary Australian politics, people know the difference. Political theories and commentaries that ignore the trinity of human behaviour simply wither on the vine. There is no connection and there is no growth. When the fundamentals of human behaviour are ignored in the political process and in political commentary, as was evidenced in the last election, the estrangement of people only increases. That can be counteracted by the acknowledgment that the most potent human activity will be the impact of one mind upon another.

The third area I would like to address is the failure to address the structural collapse of the education framework in Australia, and it is perhaps one of the reasons why the subjects of the first two parts of my address are happening. In the last 10 or 20 years, much has been written about the increasing alienation and failure of boys, in particular, in education compared to the achievement of girls. My own views on this matter confirm the increasing rejection of the needs of boys in education but also acknowledge that the structural collapse of the education framework has not helped girls, either.

Education has always been a balancing act between differences, and all differences—all things in this world—have positive and negative aspects. Take the contrasting concepts of cooperation and competition as an example. These days, cooperation is encouraged; competition is discouraged. Yet both have positive and negative impacts. Cooperation builds team play, but it also often results in the lowest common denominator prevailing and mediocrity being the result. Certainly, competition can be unfair, but it can also challenge children to operate at a much higher level. It is not a matter of cooperation in place of competition; it ought to be the balancing of both. Similar situations exist when the promotion of either analytical or synthesising skills are considered. Analysis in this country is out of favour. It is really out of favour. It is out of favour in our universities; there is a huge debate going on there. The ques-
tion is: why is this happening? It is not a matter of either; it ought to be a sensible combination of both.

The same thing applies to research in this country, particularly educational research. In educational research, there is much reliance on subjective qualitative research. We introduced a gender equity program in 1997 in this country in every school, private and public. There is no objective evidence to support it. What has happened to objective quantitative research? Why is that out of favour? Don’t we want to do things properly? This does not mean that I do not think that qualitative research is necessary; I think it is. It has a role to play but not without the other. Skills in our nation involving description and presentation appear more valued than comprehension and organisation. Again, the question is: why is that? Favoured learning theories would include matters of nurture: intuition, feelings, passive learning, unstructured learning, expression, continuous assessment, safety, disaggregation of statistics. They are all worthy theories. But learning theories out of favour appear to be those concerning nature: the differences between boys and girls—you must not talk about those things!—insight, which is more likely to be a male skill; attributes; the ability to list and organise things; active learning; structured learning; retention; examinations; testing; risk-taking; aggregation. They are all worthy theories too, but they have almost been totally wiped out of the educational framework in this country. All of those theories have value for children. The key for good teachers and good principals is a balance between them all.

Over the last 10-20 years, it appears to me that 50 per cent of the educational framework has been discredited, downgraded or just omitted. Why? Who has been disadvantaged? Who has been disadvantaged? Who made those decisions? On what were they based? In fact, my proposition would be that all children are disadvantaged when only half of a possible educational framework is considered. I think people are deluding themselves as to the achievements of girls compared to boys: they are all being disadvantaged. But there are some children who are being harmed much more than others and they include a lot of kids in my electorate. They are from a working-class or a migrant background, and boys are particularly disadvantaged.

Good teachers and good principals in schools around Australia have rejected the one-sided orthodoxies promoted by so many academics, education bureaucrats and even some foolish union researchers and, unfortunately, they are finding themselves in the minority. Retention rates in my state are down to 53 per cent, meaning that in some areas we are under 40 per cent. On any school day in any shopping mall in Australia all of us can see the presence of school-aged children who have rejected the educational framework presented to them. No-one ought to be surprised. Their needs and wants have been ignored. They find purpose in being dysfunctional, antisocial and harming both themselves and others. They do not owe anything to anyone, because they have been abandoned.

The determining factor in any successful school is the quality of the educational program presented to the children by good teachers and good principals. How is that possible when up to half of the framework is removed without analysis, without any research, without any supporting arguments for those actions? No wonder the educational framework in this country has collapsed. Combine that structural collapse of education with the current lack of political analysis. You do not get analysis in this country. You occasionally get some from Gerard Henderson, occasionally some from Malcolm McGregor and Ross Gittins, and that is about it. There is no magazine like the Economist or the Spectator in this country to raise the level of thought and provoke some people into opposing thoughts. There is none of that. It is opinion, personality-based nonsense. There is a lack of political analysis. There is an increasing disengagement of citizens from the political process and it is no wonder that politics, politicians and the media are held in such low regard.
Compounding these factors, education is in a national crisis, with its failings ensuring the entrenchment of those negative attitudes to politics, politicians, the media, journalists and to all our futures. It can be turned around. A return to analysis in politics and political commentary would be a start. A return to the complete educational framework in our schools would be another. In conclusion, I seek leave to table the Sawford family formula of predicting elections, which I addressed in the first part of my address.

Leave granted.

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance and Administration) (4.20 p.m.)—It is, as it always is in this place, a pleasure for me to praise the outstanding achievements of a number of my constituents I have been able to recently recognise. Last year, I started the Fisher Community Australia Day Awards, and the inaugural awards ceremony was so successful that I decided to continue the awards this year. The awards have become a tangible way for me, as the federal representative, and the community to praise these people who quietly and without wanting recognition put countless hours into making our Sunshine Coast community the best place in Australia in which to live. This year I was pleased to welcome back the well-known Caloundra City councillor, Andrew Champion, as the Australia Day awards committee chairman. Rejoining the committee again this year were the Venerable Father Richard Gowty of the Anglican Church, Don Moffatt, Ros Hourigan and the well-known former National President of the Association of Independent Retirees, Mrs Maureen Kingston.

The role of this independent committee was to judge impartially the merits of each nomination for Australia Day awards. I would like to thank all committee members; in particular, Councillor Andrew Champion, for his leadership of this group. The Fisher Community Australia Day Awards have now become part of the annual Australia Day celebrations across the Sunshine Coast. The awards ceremony now draws other elected representatives from state and local government, as well as other community leaders.

Last year’s Australia Day address was given by Rugby League great Norm Provan. This year’s address was delivered by another great Australian, Jim Campbell. Jim Campbell is a living and breathing war legend. He is well known on the Sunshine Coast as the driving force behind the Sunshine Coast Helicopter Rescue Service, of which he is chief pilot and managing director. The helicopter rescue service—or the Energex chopper, as it is often referred to—is widely recognised as the visual face of emergency services on the Sunshine Coast, as it conducts its regular low-level flights along our pristine coastline, searching for those who may be struggling with the forces of mother nature. I would like to place on the record today my thanks to Jim and his support crew for the wonderful job they do in saving lives, and also to Energex for the great contribution it makes to keeping these helicopters in the sky.

Before joining the helicopter rescue service, Jim Campbell was an Army helicopter pilot. He was no ordinary pilot—the fact that the helicopter that he flew in Vietnam now has a permanent place in our national War Memorial is a testament to this fact. The reason that Jim Campbell’s chopper is not far from Parliament House at the War Memorial is that he risked his life by flying into a mine field, time and time again, to rescue stranded Australian soldiers. This act of bravery led to Jim Campbell being awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross, or DFC. The more than 400 people who squeezed into this year’s Fisher Community Australia Day Awards ceremony were indeed honoured to hear a living legend like Jim Campbell speak so proudly of his love for this country.

Sunshine Coast people who were acknowledged by the receipt of a Fisher Community Australia Day Award also deserve recognition in this place. I have chosen this speech as an appropriate opportunity to do this. The individuals and community groups awarded are all people and groups who contribute so much, yet ask for so little in return—people like Mervyn...
Allen, who is editor of the Vietnam Veterans Association Sunshine Coast branch magazine, *Ricochet*, which is distributed to over 350 local Vietnam War veterans and their families. Over the Christmas period Merv volunteered to have all incoming calls to the Vietnam Veterans Association office transferred to his private mobile phone, resulting in the timely intervention of welfare officers in potentially serious situations.

Andrew Ho and Bob James were also rewarded for their voluntary work for the Endeavour Foundation Caloundra, where they assist intellectually disabled members of the Caloundra community. Local well-known property developer Harry Reed is also somebody who has put a lot back into the community through fundraising efforts with the Sunshine Coast Children’s Therapy Centre. Mr Reed, who is Managing Director of the Reed Property Group, helped raise over $20,000, which was used to meet the financial obligations of the centre. Margaret Wilson has been treasurer of the Nambour and Maroochy District Band, or Sunshine Brass, for an amazing 35 years—in fact, since 1966. During this time, although suffering from a disability, she has devoted her life to doing the bookwork and financial statements for the band, as well as assisting younger players.

Zane Holmes from Kawana Waters Surf Club is, at 20 years of age, one of Australia’s top iron men, and has been a member of five Australian representative teams. Last year he was the Queensland Iron Man Champion, and he won the Kelloggs National Surf League Iron Man Series. He was also a member of the Australian team which competed at the Goodwill Games in Brisbane, where he won both of the iron man events held. Importantly, Zane is also an active lifesaver at Kawana Waters Surf Club, and regularly volunteers his time to perform beach duties. He is a wonderful role model for the younger members of the club. Philip Gejas, Peter Henssler and Geoffrey Sanders are pension and welfare officers with the Vietnam Veterans Association. They have assisted countless veterans, from World War II through Korea and Vietnam to East Timor, with claims for pensions and entitlements through the Department of Veterans’ Affairs.

Cameron Young is well known on the Sunshine Coast as an announcer and breakfast show host with ABC Coast FM, which is located next to my own electorate office. Cam is one of the driving forces behind the charity group Helping Children Smile, which has worked for many years to assist less fortunate children in the Philippines. Virgil Power first joined the St Vincent de Paul Society in the 1970s, and he has been active in the coast branch since 1985. He has worked in all areas associated with the charity centre, regularly giving one day a week of his time. Eric Condon has also become a pillar of strength at the St Vincent de Paul Society, which he first became involved with in 1966. Although, regrettably, his eyesight is now failing him, he still spends three days a week preparing and packaging food for the poor and needy.

Frans Tollenaar is somebody who gives his time to the older and frailer members of our community. He regularly visits older people in hospitals and nursing homes, and he also assists in palliative care for the dying in Caloundra. Edelwina Suede has been a leading member of the Sunshine Coast Filipino community and is currently president of the Multicultural Community of the Sunshine Coast. She has assisted migrants from different ethnic backgrounds on matters such as services available to migrants, housing, education, domestic violence, social justice, language barriers and much more. Donald James has been a key part of Nan Cullimore’s Meals on Wheels Caloundra, where he delivers and prepares meals as well as mows lawns and does general maintenance duties.

Leon Wort has been a volunteer crew member with the Sunshine Coast Helicopter Rescue Service since 1995 and has been crew captain since 1998. This voluntary weekend service that Leon gives to the helicopter rescue service is in addition to the duties he performs as a senior constable with the Queensland Police Service. Dawn Teichmann has made an out-
standing contribution to Kawana Waters Senior Citizens. She was a founding member 10 years ago, and she has held office and served on the committee for all of that time. Dawn was also the president of Kawana Senior Citizens for three years. Maureen Stevenson has been helping children with learning disabilities at Kawana Waters State High School for 13 years. She has also been an active member of the Lioness Club, and she organises and runs their stall at the local shopping centre. Maureen has been associated with so many other community projects that there are too many to name in the chamber today.

Alan Kelso is the welfare officer for the Kawana Waters RSL sub-branch. In this role he regularly visits handicapped veterans to assist them where he can. He is known as somebody who is especially good at assisting those widows who have just lost their veteran husbands. Alan gave distinguished service to Australia in the commandos in the Second World War and is still giving distinguished service to the veterans community at Kawana Waters on the Sunshine Coast.

Wallace Burmaster is an active member of the Kawana Waters community. He has been Kawana Waters RSL ceremonial officer for a long period of time and has conducted RSL services for departed comrades, ANZAC Day services and Remembrance Day services, and has visited local schools on behalf of the RSL. Wallace also volunteers his time as a justice of the peace at Kawana Library and teaches calligraphy courses at the University of the Third Age, or U3A.

I am also pleased to announce that the winner of the Des Scanlan Memorial Award is the Bloomhill Cancer Help Centre at Buderim. In praising the work of the cancer help centre in the chamber today, I would like to quote from the words of one man who nominated Bloomhill for this award:

My wife was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer 14 months ago. We were referred to Bloomhill when she had recovered from a mastectomy operation. The Bloomhill Team led by Margaret Gargan showed us that cancer is not necessarily a death sentence and can be managed. They taught us skills in nutrition, meditation and self confidence. We could best describe Bloomhill as an “Oasis of Hope” when confronting a life threatening disease.

It has been a pleasure for me to be able to recognise these people who have all made an invaluable contribution to our Sunshine Coast community and I look forward to another successful Australia Day awards ceremony next year.

Prior to the election, I outlined my 10-point plan for the electorate of Fisher. These points included continuing to push the state government to crack down on car hoons. I also supported plans to stop sewage from being pumped into the ocean. The points included working with the Department of Defence, the state government and Caloundra City Council to identify and remove unexploded ordnances in the Kawana Waters-Currimundi area; improving access to Caloundra from the Bruce Highway by pushing the state government to prioritise widening Caloundra Road to four lanes; seeking additional Commonwealth and state government funds to widen the Bruce Highway to six lanes along its entire length from the Sunshine Coast to Brisbane; continuing to push for state and Commonwealth financial assistance to construct the southern access link road in Maroochydore; supporting funding for the Sunshine Coast Arts and Exhibition Centre; supporting a feasibility study into the development of a multimodal transport and communications corridor on the Sunshine Coast; pushing to have even more Work for the Dole, Green Corps and Jobs Pathway programs allocated to Fisher to help young people into work and our local environment; and also, most importantly, pushing for the establishment of a Medicare office in Maroochydore while retaining the existing Medicare offices in Caloundra and Kawana Waters.

In part of the time available to me, I want to emphasise the ongoing problem of car hoons in the electorate of Fisher. This is a problem which is making many local residents angry and...
disappointed through the total lack of action by the state government. The local, very ineffective Labor member of parliament—who is full of talk, no action and who would undoubtedly be one of the most hopeless people ever to be elected to the Queensland parliament since separation in 1859—has mouthed rhetoric but seems either unwilling or unable to ensure that the state Labor government changes the law so that Queensland police officers have the power to stop these young hoons who disrupt the peace and quiet of local residents.

Today I read the Sunshine Coast Daily newspaper and I saw the latest action of these hoons who ripped up three junior rugby league fields in Maroochydore. Volunteers had to work around the clock over the weekend and will continue today to restore the fields to playing standard. These street hoons terrorise urban areas, cause horrendous noise disturbance and present real safety risks. The Queensland Labor government needs to give police the power to confiscate and impound the cars of hoons. I think a lot of people in the Sunshine Coast community, and I suspect more widely, would agree that hoons are a public nuisance who must be stopped.

Nearly every day I have residents and tourists telling me how annoyed they are with this problem. Recently, a couple from New Zealand holidaying on the Sunshine Coast told me they would stop holidaying on the Sunshine Coast, after visiting each year for the past decade, because of hoons. To put it simply, unless you take away their cars you are not taking away the problem, and the only way to ensure this happens is by giving the police the extra resources they need to do this job. I understand that this happens in New South Wales and is a more effective strategy. It is about time that Premier Beattie—who claims to be a media tart—started listening to the concerns of ordinary, decent law-abiding citizens and stopped trying to dodge the tough decisions needed to crack down on crime.

Today I am announcing that I will soon be hosting a public meeting to put further pressure on Chris Cummins and the state government to take some action. I will be inviting Mr Cummins, if he is prepared to come along to confront the community, and council representatives, as well as representatives from the Queensland Police Service and community action groups. I am taking this action because this issue goes beyond the jurisdiction of governments and adversely affects our peaceful Sunshine Coast lifestyle.

I have only a short time left to speak, but I want to say how much I admired the role performed by the Queensland Police Service, the Australian Federal Police and the other security organisations in Australia during the recent CHOGM meeting which took place on the Sunshine Coast. I had the opportunity of attending the opening and a number of other meetings, and also being one of the meeters and greeters of heads of government as they arrived at the Sunshine Coast airport both from Brisbane and from around the world. In fact, on the Friday of CHOGM, I think I greeted some 35 heads of government during a period from about 6.30 a.m. until Tony Blair’s arrival at 11 o’clock at night.

During all the CHOGM activities I was able to witness, the police and security presence was certainly there but it was unobtrusive and the police and security officers were unfailingly courteous. As a community we should collectively give thanks to the security services for making sure that Australia was able to play host to that important international meeting and to have so many world leaders come to the Sunshine Coast where they were able to see our many natural attractions, enjoy the very warm hospitality of the people, and hopefully go back safely to their own countries to be advocates and great ambassadors not only for the Sunshine Coast but for the state of Queensland and the nation more generally. It really is important that as a community we recognise the role carried out by the police and security services. These days, being a police officer is not always a very pleasant task. At times people who are simply carrying out their duties are subjected to very great abuse from people they have to confront who are not doing the right thing. In this very public forum I want to say thank you to those
people who helped to make the CHOGM meeting on the Sunshine Coast such an outstanding success.

Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney) (4.38 p.m.)—I speak today in this debate on the address-in-reply about an issue that is very close to my heart and has a very dramatic effect on the day-to-day lives of the people whom I represent in my electorate, and that is the obligations of the federal government in relation to the new social and community services award. Sydney may seem like a wealthy electorate, but we certainly have some of the highest concentrations of poverty, homelessness and drug and alcohol abuse of any part of this country. With those social problems we have many services that are designed to help those people. Those who work for community sector organisations, charities and not-for-profit organisations play a vital role in my community, as they do around the country. They fill the gaps that are increasingly left by a Commonwealth government which is withdrawing from the provision of social services. These workers work hard. They are underpaid and undervalued. They deserve this pay increase and, in my opinion, they deserve more. The New South Wales state government agrees but it seems that the federal government does not. Many in this chamber will be aware that there have been very long and somewhat tortuous negotiations about the SACS award over many years, but on 16 November last year the full bench of the New South Wales Industrial Relations Commission finally delivered its decision. Less than a week later, on 21 November, the New South Wales government pledged to meet its share of the additional wages bill—with an expectation that the federal government would do the same.

The commitment by the New South Wales Labor government is estimated to be worth between $30 million and $40 million, as it has agreed to pay its share of the wages bill for the services that it funds or part-funds. In November last year the New South Wales Treasurer wrote to the federal Treasurer to ask for a commitment that the federal government would, in turn, pay its share of the increased wages bill arising from this new award. Almost a month later, on 21 December, the federal Treasurer replied that there would be no increased payments in relation to the increased award, and that the indexation that the government has regularly paid would cover the increased wages bill. This is absolutely not the case; the regular indexation will not go anywhere near paying the increased wages bill arising from this award payment. The Australian Services Union, which won this increase for its members, has campaigned extensively for the recognition of changes in the breadth of its members’ skills base and in the range and diversity of community sector workers.

The pay scales have been significantly increased, and I have some examples of that. On the old scale, the lowest-paid workers, who are called social welfare assistants, received $21,109 per annum. Now the lowest wage will be paid to community sector workers grade 1, and they can expect to earn $22,700 per annum. Higher up the old scale you see social welfare worker category 3. In their third year they would have been paid $38,515. The new equivalent figure for a third year community services worker grade 4 is $40,600. Two new grades have been created: a new grade 5 and a new grade 6. Whereas the highest wage that could be paid to a community sector worker was slightly less than $35,000 per annum, the new maximum is $52,000 per annum, which is a recognition that managers and other people with a great deal of experience work in this area and have been undervalued up until now.

The first phase of the new pay rates will deliver rises of at least 11½ per cent on a 38-hour working week—the working week has also been reduced—starting from the first pay period after 28 November 2002. So that has already started. The second phase will pay overtime at time and a quarter, will include a number of other allowances such as on call allowance and will include leave without pay, time in lieu, redundancy provisions and so on. On 28 November 2002 there will be a further three per cent increase to all pay rates, and overtime rates will increase as well. As I have said, this comes after many years of lobbying on behalf of the in-
industry, and it comes from a very long campaign. Many members will remember that before 1991 the industry was largely unregulated—there was no award at that time. There were very high levels of disputation, very low wages and poor conditions. There was certainly no career path for workers in this area. Workers in the industry formed the Australian Social Welfare Union. It fought over very many years to get an award at all. Finally, in May 1991, the Social and Community Services Employees (State) Award was handed down. Of course, there is still a long way to go, even after this most recent award increase, in properly valuing the very important work that these workers do.

The New South Wales government immediately released what they called an ‘immediate action plan’, specifically to recognise the fact that community sector organisations needed the money for those pay increases straightaway. The state government prepaid six months worth of their share of the increased wages bill, and that takes us up to 30 June 2002. We certainly hope that by that time the federal government will have seen the importance of meeting their share of the commitment for new wages.

My friends at St Vincent de Paul received a cheque, for example, for $1.6 million, which funds the state government’s share of the increased wages bill that they have to pay to their staff. The handover was at the Matthew Talbot Hostel, which is just around the corner from where I live and which serves almost 400 homeless men every night. It gives them three meals a day and a bed for the night and helps them with finding long-term accommodation, with finding jobs and with any medical conditions they may have, including mental illness. This organisation does such an excellent job and yet, without the federal government’s share of their increased wages bill, they are seriously looking at reducing services.

Organisations such as St Vincent de Paul or Mission Australia or the Salvation Army, all of which I have spoken to about this very issue, have all told me that they are facing reducing some services. But for them the disaster is not quite so large as for much smaller organisations, which have absolutely no way of cross-subsidising programs. The smaller organisations do not have—none of the organisations have—any fat to cut. These organisations are run in such a lean way that there is no spare money floating around for them to increase payment to their workers. Every cent is accounted for in programs delivered to the people that need them.

The other issue that these organisations are facing is the massive increases in public liability insurance. So, at the same time they are facing increased wages bills, they are also facing massive increases in public liability insurance, which this government also seems incapable or unwilling to address. The federal government has to contribute to the cost of awards because it plays a substantial financial role in funding these services. It cannot expect the state government to pick up all of the slack. Some services indeed are 100 per cent funded by the Commonwealth. Certainly, in cases like that it is incredible to imagine that the federal government has completely abrogated its responsibility when it comes to paying these increased wages. I do not know where the Treasurer expects the money to come from. For other services, such as disability services, home and community care and supported accommodation, where there is state and Commonwealth joint funding, the state government has funded its share. In cases where the state government’s share might be 60 per cent, it has funded 60 per cent; where it is 80 per cent, it has funded 80 per cent.

The Council of Social Service of New South Wales was down here lobbying in the first week that parliament returned, and many members would have met with representatives from NCOS. Certainly, NCOS went to visit all of the relevant ministers’ offices about the increased wages bill, and they met with a very stony silence, basically. They had all of the government advisers, including the advisers to the ministers for health and ageing, explain to NCOS that the ministers unfortunately were bound by Treasury policy not to fund any award increases. This is despite the fact that the Treasurer’s office had written to NCOS on 1 Feb-
ruary to inform NCOSS that they should approach the relevant ministers, not the Treasurer, because it had nothing to do with the Treasurer at all. So there is not even any clarity about who the organisations should be approaching. The Treasurer says they should be funded out of portfolio budgets that they already have, and the relevant ministers are saying that they have been told that they are not to fund any increased wages bill.

The coalition’s rationale for such an unsympathetic response has been, as I said earlier, that this indexation that applies annually will cover any rise in the wages cost. But NCOSS, which is the peak body for welfare agencies in New South Wales, says that this is absolutely not the case, because the annual indexation that has been provided in the past—it is a tiny amount to start with—will not begin to cover costs, because the pay structures have changed so dramatically. Wages have been increasing since 1991 in small increments, because state awards often have flow-on effects from the federal Industrial Relations Commission’s safety-net increases. So any incremental increases from the government have already been eaten up by these existing small wage increases.

The new award is a whole new kettle of fish, because it changes the whole way in which these community sector workers’ skills are valued. So you have not only a substantial increase in each pay scale but also some people whose wages will increase quite dramatically. You also have a number of other factors that will affect the wages bill, such as the fact that the working week has been reduced to 38 hours. As soon as people have worked their 38 hours they are on to paid overtime. Anyone who has worked in the community sector will tell you how much unpaid overtime they have been working, forever, because most people who work in this area do it out of the goodness of their hearts and they do it because there is such a dramatic need for their services in the community. But they have been working a lot of unpaid overtime. If we start to pay people for the overtime that they work, then organisations are going to face much bigger wages bills. There will also be an on-call allowance and payment for call-backs to work, and we are looking at another three per cent increase in salaries from November 2002.

These improved conditions are not at all excessive. They are merely a long-awaited recognition of the skill of the workers involved and the high value of the work they do. Indeed, the full bench of the New South Wales Industrial Relations Commission said themselves that the improvement to overtime conditions was ‘consistent with general standards’. They said in relation to the new award classification:

... we are satisfied that the existing classification is limited and does not afford sufficient scope for recognition of changes in breadth of the skills base of employees within this industry in the past decade nor does it afford sufficient scope for increases in the range and diversity of services provided within the industry.

The quantum leap in skills recognition and conditions recognised by the Industrial Relations Commission cannot be absorbed by the federal government’s wage indexation. An increase in salary costs will range between 6.5 per cent and 15 per cent, depending on the sorts of services offered by these charities and not-for-profit organisations. The reason the increases are so substantial in terms of the budgets of organisations is that about 80 to 90 per cent of the costs of most of these organisations are related to staff wages. They have very low overheads in other areas. Their main resource is the people that they employ. That means that when there is a wage increase their costs will, of course, increase dramatically.

If the federal government are not forthcoming with their share of the increased wages bill, the effect on organisations will be quite devastating. As I have said, I have spoken to a number of organisations in my electorate. Surrey Hills, one of the suburbs in my electorate, has the highest concentration of homeless services anywhere in the country. These organisations are telling me that they are facing closing their doors in some cases. Most organisations al-
ready operate with a bare minimum of the necessary staff—they do not have the money to waste as it is. When we are talking about them being unable to pay wage increases, the only options open to them are reducing their hours or turning people away.

I know that many members would have read the ACOSS survey, ‘Living on the edge’, which found that in the first six months of 2001 there was a six per cent increase in the number of people requiring community services and a four per cent increase in the number of people turned away—already a substantial number of people have been turned away. We all know the stories about people who are leaving their homes because of various crises—often women escaping domestic violence who are not able to access services. What we are looking at is a dramatic worsening of that situation.

ACROD—the National Industry Association for Disability Services—wrote to me to outline their concerns. They are saying that many disability organisations are also worried about turning people away. Mission Australia, St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army have all told me about these fears. It is not just a disaster, however, for those people who rely on the services of these organisations—the poor, the homeless and the drug and alcohol abusers. Of course, it is a disaster for those people. This is also going to have significant effects on the other constituents that I represent who are daily dealing with the effects in their communities of these problems of homelessness and drug addiction on their doorstep. There is no question that without these services the standard of living for everyone in the community that I represent will be dramatically affected.

The greatest disaster is perhaps for women seeking to escape domestic violence in their homes. Supported accommodation assistance programs have joint Commonwealth and state funding. The state government, as I have said, will fund their share, but without Commonwealth assistance it is very difficult to see how these programs can continue as they have. Members and senators are always being attacked for their pay and perks and so on. It would not be a strange thing for workers in the community sector to say that, when we were awarded a 13 per cent increase by the Remuneration Tribunal, there was no argument and no sophistry about indexation—the award automatically flows through.

I think it is wise to remember that this government spent $20 million a month on promoting itself in the lead-up to the election. It has wasted $1 billion on IT outsourcing and $500 million on consultants. We had $5 million granted to the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners—the doctors’ lobby group—by the then health minister, who is now a highly paid consultant to the same group. That is the sort of thing that in New South Wales would be referred to ICAC. This government has lost $4.5 billion gambling on foreign currency, but it does not have a few million dollars to fund pay rises for the most underpaid workers dealing with the nation’s most underprivileged people. I congratulate the New South Wales government on its vision in regard to the struggle of community workers, and I really hope against hope that the federal government will meet its part of the obligations.

Mr SECKER (Barker) (4.58 p.m.)—I would like to take this opportunity in the address-in-reply debate to inform the House of the many things that have happened over the last three years which I believe are important to my electorate of Barker. I want to talk about the many and varied benefits that the electorate of Barker have received as a direct result of the Howard government’s commitment to regional Australia. I also want to talk about the instability that my electorate and the rest of rural South Australia will now face as a result of the recent South Australian election, which has resulted in a shaky coalition between a so-called conservative Independent and the South Australian Labor caucus.

However, before I do that, I would like to record my personal thanks to a group of very special and dedicated people who helped me return to this House as the representative for the Barker constituency. I must say that I was personally very happy with the results of 10 No-
Not only was the coalition returned; it was returned with an increased mandate—something that is very rare for a third-term victory. In effect, it was the largest increase in mandate of any sitting government for 35 years.

In Barker, the Liberal Party—and I as their candidate—experienced a huge swing of just over seven per cent, which meant that we won 98 out of the 101 booths outright. This outstanding outcome was the result of months of hard work by a group of dedicated people who set aside huge amounts of time to work on our campaign. Ann Bell, my campaign manager, was a tower of strength to the entire team. Despite the size of my electorate, she managed to coordinate a very effective and organised campaign, which included organising public meetings, campaign advertising, corflute drops and polling booth captains. Her enthusiasm and commitment were endless. In fact, her dedication astounded me. Ann and her husband, Graham, live in Naracoorte, in the south-east of my electorate, and would drive four hours every weekend to be at Sunday morning campaign meetings. While I have personally thanked Ann previously, I would like to publicly thank her and acknowledge that, without her support and organisational skills, the campaign would not have run nearly as smoothly.

I would also like to thank a very special lady—my partner, Meredith—who put her life on hold for four weeks to campaign with me. Her ability to stay positive and to keep focused was vital to the campaign. Together with Norm and Margaret Paterson, we certainly had a very upbeat and focused campaign. I would also like to thank my staff—Phillipa, Ailis, Pat and Vanessa—who worked tirelessly. Our staff quietly work behind the scenes and, all too often, we do not get the chance to tell them just what a good job they are doing. I am taking this opportunity to tell them they did a great job and to say thank you, because I know that they too dedicated all their time to this campaign.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank all those countless volunteers who helped put up corflutes, organised polling booths and manned the booths on the day. Around 500 or 600 members and friends helped me. The importance of having representatives on polling booths is often overlooked, despite the fact that we know that many people make up their minds as they walk in the door. I am proud to say that, thanks to that dedicated team of supporters that I keep talking about, the Liberal Party was clearly represented at every booth—as I said, I have 101 in my electorate—on the day.

It was interesting that One Nation and an Independent candidate ran expensive campaigns on television, radio and in the newspapers, which cost much more than our campaign. Interestingly enough, the One Nation vote dropped from about 13½ per cent down to seven per cent. The Independent only got three per cent, which was about the same as the Greens. All in all, it was a very successful campaign. To those people from Mount Gambier to Murray Bridge, Kangaroo Island and the Fleurieu—and everywhere in between—I say a huge thank you. Many of you have said to me that you gave up only a couple of hours of your day, but those two or so hours made the difference. Without your dedication and commitment, polling day may not have been the success that it was. I also want to point out that three months later the same people were back on the trail doing the same thing for the state candidates. Their loyalty and willingness is amazing and deserves every bit of recognition.

As a result of the hard work and dedication of all of our supporters, the Howard government now returns to this House for its third term. Being elected for a third term is not an easy task. To have been elected so convincingly is testimony to our success at providing the Australian constituency with the things they most desire. For rural Australians, the benefits have been vast. It is to the benefits experienced by my own rural South Australian electorate of Barker that I now turn. Over the last six months alone, Barker has benefited from many of our government’s programs across all portfolios. The Howard government’s Regional Solutions Program has provided various organisations with funding throughout the electorate. It has...
provided $39,000 to help the south-east city of Mount Gambier host the inaugural rural fringe festival in 2002—a festival that will provide entertainment through theatre, dance, comedy and various other mediums—and over $100,000 to the Murraylands Regional Development Board and South Central Regional Network Area Consultative Committee to assist with the Murraylands export identity program, which is expected to bring huge benefits to the area in job creation.

Funding under the Regional Solutions Program has been provided to: Mount Gambier Regional Wine Growers for their region identification program, the Limestone Coast to attract larger and more significant events and conferences to the region and the Millicent Equine Interpretive Centre to assist with the expansion of the museum. It is apparent that this program has been of great benefit to Barker and it will continue. In all the time I have had the privilege to serve Barker, I think the Regional Solutions Program has been the most popular. People keep talking about it and they want to know how their particular grant application is coming along. The Regional Solutions Program is also responsible for providing over $80,000 to assist the primary industries on Kangaroo Island, the remotest part of my electorate. It is proof that every bit of Australia is benefiting from the Howard government’s commitment to rural areas.

The Natural Heritage Trust program has also been kind to Barker. There have been something like 360 projects in the time I have been the member, which is quite outstanding. Well over $20 million has come into my electorate through the Natural Heritage Trust program. So much for only looking after marginal seats. As recently as November last year, the Howard government initiated two projects within Barker—a total of over $327,000. They were very important projects. The Natural Heritage Trust program is a perfect example of the federal government devolving the power and the means to deal with local issues locally. By providing the capital, the Howard government is allowing local communities to resolve local problems at a local level. That is a very strong part of my philosophy. I believe that local people can far better tell us what they want and need than we can decide from Canberra.

For so many years prior to the election of the Howard government we witnessed a slow but definite centralisation of power and resources, so that the small communities were relying on someone often far removed from their community to resolve their problems for them. This is not what governing should be about. Our government realised a long time ago that local people know best how to deal with local issues.

The Howard government’s aged care policies and programs have also been of huge benefit to Barker. The provision of high care aged care beds in the electorate is an issue that I am very passionate about. Prior to our government’s strong focus on care for the elderly, rural Australians were particularly disadvantaged when it came to aged care. Many elderly people have had to move away, often from towns in which they have lived for the majority of their lives, from their family and friends in order to be cared for. In fact, on some occasions they have had to actually cross the border, which anyone who recognises the rivalry between South Australia and Victoria would realise is quite an unpleasant thing to do.

With its aged care funding program, the Howard government has gone a long way to helping this situation. By no means have we solved the problems; there is still a long way to go. However, unlike previous governments, we have taken the time to address this problem in the hope that we can find some sort of resolution to these sensitive situations. I know of many cases—again, in recent months—where funding for aged care has come to the electorate of Barker. Many of our hostels have been allocated those all too important high care aged care beds, and many more have been allocated low care beds. Many hostels have also received capital funding, funding for palliative care and aged care assessment teams.
Such is the situation in Barker that many a candidate ran the aged care platform during the federal election. I have pledged to fight for more high care aged care beds in Barker, a pledge that was recently rewarded. In January this year, the Barker electorate was fortunate enough to receive funding for an extra 44 high care aged care beds, 14 low care aged care beds and 32 community care places. In my home town of Keith we received an extra $200,000 for the hospital there, which will go a long way towards providing aged care facilities for the township of Keith. While this was great news that gave me great pleasure to announce—and while the successful providers were very excited and pleased at the prospect of receiving new places—as I have said before, we still need more.

My biggest concern is for those elderly who have to leave their homes, loved ones and friends to move to other towns or to the city, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away, to receive care. These people are members of our Barker community, and they have helped to make our region what it is today. I feel sad to think that some of these people must move away to get the care they require, and it is heart wrenching to watch as the family, friends and individuals involved have to make that decision. While I understand that there are some cases in which that will simply be unavoidable—for whatever reason—I would like to think that we can do better. Certainly, the situation has improved quite significantly in the three years that I have been the member for Barker. I see things on the drawing board now that I believe, by the time the next election is due, will have resolved many of the problems in the Barker electorate. This is an area in which I hope the coalition can maintain its momentum, and I will certainly be doing all I can for Barker’s aged care residents.

Another area in which the Howard government has specifically helped the electorate of Barker is through its Work for the Dole scheme. What started off as a controversial program has now become a program that has given many unemployed people a foot in the employment door. One of the key objectives of the Work for the Dole program is to improve and develop the skills and circumstances of the unemployed. The Howard government’s Work for the Dole scheme has also been instrumental in lifting the self-esteem of the unemployed and changing how the community views unemployment. These are vital steps in achieving our ultimate goal of getting people back to work. Studies have shown that referral to Work for the Dole has a significant motivational effect on job seekers to increase their search for paid work. My electorate of Barker has benefited vastly from the Work for the Dole program. It was only in February this year that Barker was allocated a further 141 places to assist our unemployed.

I believe that the Howard government has and is providing a well-rounded form of government. There are portfolio programs designed to assist everyone from the elderly to the unemployed, programs designed to maintain and restore our heritage and culture, programs designed to protect our environment and programs designed to assist those industries facing uncertain futures. These are just a few of the ways in which we are assisting Australians. We have been very careful to help those in need while not disadvantaging those who are doing okay. From our Dairy Regional Assistance Program—which has been of huge benefit to the Barker Electorate, which has something like 80 per cent of South Australia’s dairy industry and about five per cent of Australia’s dairy industry—to the indigenous small business grants, the Natural Heritage Trust fund, the black spot funding program and the Coastcare grants, amongst many others, I am proud to say that rural Australia, and particularly my rural electorate of Barker in South Australia, is on the move.

There is still a long way to go but, as a result of the Howard government’s commitment to rural Australia, we are certainly moving forward. However, we cannot be complacent. We must not take these achievements for granted; instead, we must continue to work towards further advancement. There are still many issues affecting rural Australians. Things that may seem insignificant to urban dwellers—things that may not even be thought about in the city—
are affecting our rural constituencies. In fact, only the other day I had such an issue raised with me. A crash repairer in my electorate has to rely on diesel to fuel heating in her spray booth. Unlike city businesses, they are unable to use gas, because there is no infrastructure there. The problem this particular crash repairer faces is that the diesel rebate no longer covers the use of diesel for this purpose. Prior to the amendments that were forced on us by the Democrats, they could claim a rebate for their diesel. While this has been raised with me by only one constituent in this particular area, other areas are affected in the same way.

There are many other rural businesses that are also affected by this sort of thing and it is these concerns that we need to consider. I am pleased to say that, while the outcome of my inquiries about this matter may not resolve the situation for this particular person, at least I know I am part of a government which will listen to my concerns and investigate options to assist my constituents. My concern now is the possibility of a government which is not so committed to rural Australia. That is a problem we currently face in South Australia. Mr Deputy Speaker, as you would know, an Independent conservative, formerly a member of the Liberal Party, has now gone against the wishes of his constituents to form a tenuous coalition with the Labor Party to allow them to govern. Under the guise of parliamentary reform, Mr Peter Lewis has sided with the Labor Party and has managed to secure for himself the position of Speaker of the House. Where is the benefit for his electorate in that? Mr Lewis claims to have negotiated various benefits for his electorate, including the eradication of branched broomrape which, I am told, will cost $55 million. That is $55 million that the government will not have. I might add that the method by which Mr Lewis is proposing to eradicate branched broomrape is not popular with the farmers involved, and stands to possibly devastate the entire environment treated, to the extent that the land will become unusable through the treatment and use of methyl bromide.

South Australia is facing a very uncertain time and I am scared that over the next four years we will see the state’s level of debt skyrocket. Over the past eight years the Liberal government had fought to reduce the State Bank debt left by the Bannon Labor government and move the state forward. In one fell swoop, one member of parliament, who only received 31.8 per cent of the primary vote—and I might add that the conservative parties in the electorate of Hammond combined received 77.1 per cent of the primary vote—was able to engineer such devastation for the state. Throughout the election, the South Australian Labor Party promised all sorts of things. Mr Wakelin—That’s democracy.

Mr SECKER—That’s right. Whilst their policies have been costed, at that stage they certainly had not taken into account any of Peter Lewis’s demands in return for helping them form government. Mr Rann, the South Australian caucus leader, is to this day still promising to honour his election promises, and so I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker: where will the money come from? He agreed to Peter Lewis’s branched broomrape eradication program and his budget blew out by $55 million. That is not even taking into account any of the other promises he made.

It is a scary time for South Australians, particularly rural South Australians. History tells us that the South Australian Labor Party have very little commitment to the rural areas of the state. I will be doing all I can to ensure that my rural electorate of Barker, which takes in the state electorate of Hammond, is looked after. I only hope that Mr Lewis’s conservative values do not desert him completely as he chases his own self-interested quest. I have said it before, and I will say it again: the only certain thing in South Australia at the moment is uncertainty.

Ms BURKE (Chisholm) (5.18 p.m.)—I am very pleased to have the opportunity to also speak on the address-in-reply today. I want to begin my contribution by again thanking the wonderful people of Chisholm for returning me as their representative in the federal parlia-
ment. It is a great honour to represent the community that I grew up in and a great honour to represent the area where I also live. I thank the voters in Chisholm for returning me with an increased majority. Like all members, I am cognisant of the responsibility of representing my community. It is a real trust that is placed in all of us. I trust that I will continue to return through working hard on issues that are important to the people in my electorate of Chisholm.

In winning election to this place, it is paramount to recognise the large number of people who have worked so hard on our campaigns locally to get us here. It is never a one-act show that gets you into parliament. Members of the Labor Party in Chisholm are fundamentally amazing. They are committed people who are always willing to be there to do all those really impressive jobs like stuffing envelopes, letter-boxing material or assisting me on many wind-swept rainy days at street stalls and train stations. For the effort that went into these and innumerable other tasks in the run-up to the election, I sincerely thank all members of the Labor Party in Chisholm, and indeed the very big supporter base of people who, whilst they will not join a party, always turn out during campaigns to help. The faith they have put in me, almost as their standard bearer, is indeed humbling. I mention people like Ann Davies who, whilst having to serve on a jury during a murder trial, managed to do the entire roster for the pre-poll booths and managed to turn up and fill several vacancies. Janet Chiron turned up most mornings at train stations as well as somehow getting her kids to and from school. That was pretty remarkable, especially as she hates mornings. Robert Dalby letter-boxed one entire suburb of my electorate each week. These are just some of the amazing people. I cannot mention them all; they were all fantastic efforts.

I thank my fantastic staff for their hard work and their genuine shared commitment to the people of Chisholm, which was terrific. I particularly thank Rachel Dapron, whom I have sadly lost to the Premier’s office. She was astounding during this campaign. Her talents, I hope, are now being recognised. Matthew Merry, Geoff Lake, Vicki May and Louise Roche, who are also on my staff, worked tirelessly during the campaign. To Louise, who worked up until the day she gave birth to her child, I would like to send my warm thanks and sincere gratitude.

The people in my life who have provided probably the most continual support are my family. During the last year we had a fairly difficult time; I lost my mother-in-law and then my grandmother. The family were there during the year when we needed them most, and they also managed to turn out during the campaign. My fantastic husband was there the whole time. Madeleine did not mind too much that she did not get to see me for about six weeks.

Many critical issues and significant changes came from the previous parliament which affected the Australian community. Whether it was the introduction of the GST that caused such disruption for the business community or the chaotic shortages of aged care beds in Chisholm, there are still many standout issues that desperately need to be addressed. Sadly, with the return of the Liberal government, we will not see that happen. The last three years, the second term of the current government, were ones of service contraction and, worse still, inaction in the areas of health, education and particularly aged care. In many areas of public policy there were stark differences between the approach of the government and the approach of the opposition. The opposition’s intent was always on developing policies that took into account the needs of all Australians, while the government was all too willing to intentionally segregate the community and reward one portion over another. This approach was starkly seen in the government’s approach to compensation relating to the GST.

The GST was introduced with particularly difficult changes for many small businesses. In my seat of Chisholm, we have the largest office and retail complex outside of the CBD of Melbourne. Numerous hundreds of small businesses are located in my electorate and numerous business organisations have constantly brought to me the crisis of small business, par-
particularly with the introduction of the GST. At a Christmas function, not last year but the year before, in an area where you would think people would not be pro-Labor, a question was asked by the host: what was the most difficult thing this year? Everyone said it was the introduction of the GST. I thought that was rather startling.

Businesses received a paltry $200 for the upgrade of computer systems to cope with the implementation and the ongoing administration of the new tax, and that was insulting. A tax claimed by this government to be a state tax is, according to the Auditor-General, in fact a federal tax. This government continues to claim that it is not a high taxing government, but it simply fails to recognise that the GST is actually a federal tax.

The GST has caused, and will continue to cause, pain in the community. People in my electorate constantly still come up to me at my mobile office and other places to talk about the pain and suffering of trying to make ends meet, particularly in the basic essentials of life like their gas and electricity bills. Now there is the impost of insurance, where GST is also a factor. Those on low and fixed incomes have been particularly hurt—and hurt in a way that one-off compensatory measures and clawbacks by the government will not ameliorate.

Labor’s approach to the GST in relation to business was simple: to make it easier for small business to administer and to make it fairer for everyone. To make it easier for small business to administer, Labor’s plan involved the calculation of a ratio for each business. That is then simply multiplied by the business turnover to determine the GST payable. This remains a good method for simplifying the GST. I am very pleased that this method of simplification is not dead. With Labor’s private member’s bill, I am hopeful that we will have an opportunity to support this proposal. It was widely supported by the business community. We got a lot of praise from many groups, particularly from the small business groups, for the way we have proposed to deal with this issue. If implemented, it will greatly reduce the time it takes small business to comply with this onerous tax. I ask the current government to look at this as a serious issue, because the matter has not gone away.

The other equally important component of Labor’s plan for the GST was to make it fairer for everyone. It is easy to understand the impact that removing the GST from essentials such as electricity, gas and women’s sanitary products would have on those who are on low and fixed incomes. Given my current circumstances, I cannot neglect to mention Labor’s policy for removing the GST from nappies. Anybody who has to buy as many as I do—with the second child on the way and having to buy more—would know what an impost that is.

I move on to another area. Recognising the desperate dental needs of thousands of Australians, Labor’s policy of reinstating a Commonwealth dental health scheme would have delivered great relief. And families would be feeling increased security had Labor’s plan for Medicare After Hours been implemented. Chisholm is an electorate that is fairly diverse in socio-economic make-up, but we have a lot of people who fundamentally cannot afford to go to a dentist or to a doctor who will not bulk-bill. Both of these things are slipping away. We often hear people talking about regional declines, but in the suburbs these things are also slipping away. I can tell you now that there are a lot of people in my neck of the woods who are constantly trying to somehow get their dental problems fixed. It is not uncommon to find someone in your office who has been waiting for three years to get a set of dentures fixed. This is not an issue that is going to go away, and something desperately needs to be done about it. Indeed, there were many truly innovative proposals put forward by Labor prior to the last election—proposals that demonstrated the thinking behind Labor’s approach of ensuring that all Australians are able to participate more fully in our society.

While recognising the policies and directions put forward by Labor at the last election, it is equally important to remember the basis of the coalition’s campaign. Regardless of how they want to now redefine and redirect, the coalition ran a fundamental campaign at the last elec-
tion to intentionally demonise people seeking asylum in Australia and to mislead the Australian public in regard to these asylum seekers. The Liberal Party played a deliberate race card. In electorates such as mine, which has over 35 per cent of individuals being either first or second generation from overseas, this was a terrible thing to see happen.

It is fairly demoralising to be asked what your view is about a certain ethic group of individuals. This was dividing Australians intentionally; it was to cause harm, fear and loathing for one group in our community. It is something that this government will never be forgiven for, because it has taken us backwards. You only need to look at our international standing and listen to the words of the Deputy Secretary General of Amnesty International, who was here recently, to see how we have been damaged in the world’s eyes. That cannot be forgotten; it cannot go away. Indeed, as an issue, it will continue to haunt us for many a day.

I thought it was highly entertaining on Australia Day this year to listen to speakers talking about Australia’s great multiculturalism—about what a harmonised society we are, what a tolerant society we are, and how we are a society where everyone gets a fair go. This was from Liberals in my neck of the woods. I thought ‘What absolute hypocrisy!’ Only a month or two ago, they were telling us to look at who came here and how. This was cant hypocrisy. It needs to be reviewed and we need to move forward, because, if we continue in the vein of this current government, Australia will never again be the tolerant, democratic, multicultural society that it was.

It is essential that we continue to look to the future and ensure that our energy in this place, no matter what the result of the previous election was—I am sorry about the result of the previous election, obviously—is in representing our community and determining the direction of our nation into the future. I was not surprised by the lack of agenda put forward by the government as outlined in the Governor-General’s speech. Fundamentally, the coalition did not run with a third term agenda during the election campaign. It is partly the result of a government that took no detailed program of reform or improvement to the Australian people before the election, and partly the result of a government that has simply run out of steam and is struggling to find its way. This is distressing when there are so many essential issues facing the Australian public—issues that will determine the shape of the Australia we live in, this year and into the future.

Unfortunately, many of the pressing issues that have come before the government over the last six years have simply been swept under the carpet. One such issue is aged care. I totally disagree with the previous speaker, the member for Barker. This government has done nothing in the area of aged care except make it more dangerously precarious. The Australian population is ageing. It is estimated that, by 2025, there will be more dis-savers in our society than savers—that is, more people over the age of 65 than under who can actually earn a wage to provide a taxation base for us. Currently the average age for a female is 86 and for a male it is 81. We are on this planet for a much longer time. This ageing has serious implications for many areas of public policy.

From aged care to the system of retirement incomes, Australia’s ageing is one of the most important factors that we need to take into account when formulating policy. It was fairly demoralising to hear the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs say recently that we did not need to have a debate about national population policy when I think it is one of the most serious issues facing us at this time. In my electorate of Chisholm, aged care is the area that is being impacted upon most. The simple reason for that is that, of all the Victorian electorates, the Australian Medical Association has found that Chisholm has the largest shortfall of beds. Regardless of what was said during the campaign by my Liberal opposition opponent, who said that it was not an issue, you need only stand in my office for one day to find out what an issue it really is.
We have had the recent round of aged care approvals and, being the electorate with the largest shortfall of beds, I thought that we might actually score something this time, and we did; we scored just an additional 44 low care beds and only 10 additional high care beds and that is regardless of the absolute crisis we face at the moment not only in my electorate but across Victoria. With an ageing population and a continual shortfall in aged care beds, particularly through phantom beds, aged care will be an issue of importance to Chisholm. It will not go away and this government is doing nothing to address it. It is an issue that I will continue to work tirelessly on.

The phenomenon of the ageing population also plays a great part in determining the policies and directions in an appropriate retirement incomes policy—again, something that this government has never really taken seriously. However, it is something that Labor has taken seriously. Labor has a proud tradition in respect of superannuation. In my electorate of Chisholm, with a significant number of people over the age of 65, and with many who are self-funded retirees, this is an issue in which I have shown a great deal of interest. Most people generally glaze over at the word ‘superannuation’ because it is way too complicated and scary, but it is something that we need to simplify because if we do not do that, we will not be able to support our ageing population into the future. It was interesting that the front page of the *Sun-Herald* made that very point.

Labor’s intention of a broad based superannuation system will be the fundamental basis for the retirement incomes of millions of Australians into the future and, through encouraging planning for retirement from an early age, and through, to some extent, making this planning compulsory, Labor has recognised the importance of this area of policy. The implementation of the superannuation guarantee, which was met by howls of resistance from the Liberal opposition at the time, has been a significant boost to the Australian economy and to Australian retirees. Indeed, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in conjunction with the Office of Older Australians in its 1990 document, *Older Australians at a glance* found:

As a result of these superannuation arrangements, it is expected that in the future most Australian workers will receive a higher income in retirement than age pension alone could provide.

As I said before, by 2025 we might not have a taxation base around to support people; they are going to need superannuation. However, there are massive challenges in this policy area and they need to be addressed in relation to retirement incomes. One of these challenges is to ensure that employers actually pay people their superannuation guarantee. The member for Wills has had a private member’s bill on the books for many years now which would ensure that employers pay this quarterly and not yearly. This is something that needs to be taken up as a matter of urgency. The taxation regime for superannuation and the provision of adequate incomes for those who will not be beneficiaries of superannuation are also large issues that require intensive investigation and policy formulation. I am pleased that the Labor Party has said that that is an area it is going to be reviewing as a matter of urgency during our three years in the wilderness.

I hold a strong view that Australia’s public deserve, and have a right to expect, integrity in the regulation of our financial systems. I know that this is not a very sexy area but, with recent corporate collapses in Australia and abroad, you only need to look at the Enron scandal and HIH to know that this area needs to be addressed as a matter of importance. The enormity of the HIH collapse, seemingly under the very nose of the regulator—the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority—will require investigation and this will come out during the royal commission inquiry. However, it took a long time for the government to jump on board and say that we did need to look into the collapse of HIH. It did not take them that long to decide that they were going to look into the building trade.
There are some glaring and obvious issues that need to be considered: where was APRA during this time? What sorts of reports were being provided by people like Andersen who were meant to be looking into these things? I hope to continue to look into these matters at an individual level during the life of this parliament because it has an appropriate impact on people’s day-to-day lives. People say, ‘Well, why would you be interested in these things?’ I can tell you that three or four people in my neck of the woods are building houses through a group called Avonwood, which went into liquidation. They then discovered that their insurance policy was with HIH and that it will now not be honoured. They are paying off mortgages on properties that they will never realise. They are the individuals we need to think about and, sadly, there are quite a few of them in my electorate.

I will briefly outline the other areas that continue to be of great importance to my electorate, one of which is education. Again, this government has fallen down on providing adequate subsidies to the schools sector and to the higher education sector. I have two major universities within my electorate. It is an atrocity that these institutions face a dearth of funding and that they must rely more and more on the corporate dollar and on getting back fees and charges for students. We need to look at education for education’s sake. In the last two minutes, I would like to refer back to the statement made by the Prime Minister on 25 August 1995:

... truth is absolute, truth is supreme, truth is never disposable in national political life. Unfortunately, it seems the truth was disposable during the last campaign, and the Prime Minister should stand condemned for using people and the asylum seeker issue in such a politically abhorrent way.

Mr WAKELIN (Grey) (5.38 p.m.)—Mr Deputy Speaker Lindsay, I congratulate you on your accession to the office of Deputy Speaker. The first thing I must do today in this address-in-reply debate, as previous speakers have done already, is to mention the wonderful support that I received at the last election. You do not do these things by yourself. For the hundreds of workers and helpers who were able to turn out, it was a pleasure yesterday in the community of Jamestown in the mid-north of South Australia to personally thank many of those people. The issue that I have is getting around 90 per cent of South Australia and thanking everybody personally, so I trust that those that I have not yet got to will forgive me. There has also been the matter of a state election campaign.

Seeing the seat of Grey move from minus two per cent—that is, a Labor seat—in 1993 to plus 10.5 per cent in 2001 gave immense satisfaction to my executive, my federal electorate committee, my staff and all those people who made it possible. I acknowledge the Speaker, the Hon. Neil Andrew—and the electorate of Wakefield—who contributed one per cent to that margin by, as he will tell me, my taking some of his good country. I am now known as ‘the marauder from the north’.

The issue of the economy is always part of our role in this place. Arguably, we have become one of the strongest economies on earth. That is not said in any complacent or boastful way, but it is, I suppose, an acknowledgment of a government that, since 1996, has been able to get the fundamentals pretty well right. To the executive, to the Prime Minister and to the Treasurer and to the team: I am grateful for that leadership. It is a privilege for me to be able to contribute to the effort that has been made to stabilise and strengthen our economy and to see the results that are achievable once we start getting the basics right.

The monthly economic and social indicators for March 2002 are overwhelming in a whole range of categories, whether it be the employment rate, the long-term unemployed rate, weekly earnings, interest rates, motor vehicle sales, turnover in retail establishments, dwelling approvals, business investment or bankruptcies. There was a bit of a skirmish on bankrupt-
cies, I seem to remember, during the federal election campaign and this saw one of the alleged leaders from the bankruptcy industry muttering about the rise in the level of bankruptcies. When you look at the figures post-GST, you actually see that they are significantly lower, certainly after the first 12 months. I admit that in the first six months there was a slight increase but, after 12 months, they were significantly lower than they were two years earlier. All I will offer there is that there are other significant factors which contribute to bankruptcy. You can go through all of those figures in the monthly economic and social indicators to find out why this government is ruling one of the strongest economies on earth.

There has never been more money spent on welfare, on families and on education—just to name three of the catch cries—and I could include health as well. To my amazement, we still hear about the GST and the contemplation of rollback. I find it quite amazing that we would still have that on the agenda coming up to two years after the introduction of the new tax system. We even hear the dental scheme being paraded, and that has been a state responsibility for 100 years. For a few votes the ALP think that they can offer a dental scheme to alleviate what is essentially a state responsibility.

We still have this issue—sadly, tragically—around the boat people and illegal immigration. I have two centres in my electorate: Woomera, and Baxter, which is due to be commissioned but probably will not be until June. My sympathy goes very much to those who are charged with the responsibility of running the detention centres. The media and many politicians spend too much time and effort on their concern for those who have come to this country illegally—whatever the tragedy, whatever the terrible circumstances that may have led to it. I think that, as Australians, we really should think a lot more about those people who are charged with the responsibility of caring for these people, for looking after and processing them, whether their claims are legitimate or not.

I would simply ask the Australian public—and I think most of them believe in a fair go: most Australians do—to think about the very difficult conditions that these people work under: the abuse, whether it be of the more trivial kind like spitting; the aggression; and the capitalising on the media and trying to get the little ticket that says ‘visa’. The pressure on these individuals is overwhelming and we really need to give them the maximum support. It is not their fault that they are placed in this position. They are simply trying to do a job. I agree with the Prime Minister, as noted in the last quote of the previous speaker, the member for Chisholm: truth is not disposable. There is no question in my mind but that the Prime Minister has set a standard in this country about truth and fairness that will be rarely matched.

Coming to specific regional issues, education in regional Australia is, for me, the big one. This government has achieved a lot—in rental assistance, changes to youth allowance and the assets test et cetera—but there remains much to be done. We have the benefit of education expenditure in the communities. And you would know, Mr Acting Deputy Speaker Lindsay, the advantages that the university in Townsville brings to your community—the economic benefit as well as the attraction to young people. But much of regional Australia does not enjoy that. Particularly the metropolitan areas have huge institutions, with billions of dollars spent in them every year.

There are two difficulties for regional people, particularly those who live distant from these institutions. The first—and it is not much talked about—is that the smaller communities, the regional communities, by and large do not get the benefit of that expenditure. I suppose you could say that is the luck of the draw, that if you have a military establishment or even a detention centre or whatever then that is your lucky break. But consistently throughout the history of this country, particularly over the last 20 or 30 years when education has become much more important, the big dollars—billions of dollars—spent in metropolitan areas is a benefit that most of us in regional Australia do not enjoy. The second is that we then have the double
insult of having to pay a huge amount, relative to urban people, to be able to have our young access this education.

As I said, this government has made more progress than any other, but there is still a very large inequity. Adjustment is eternal and education is very much the key to the changes that society will make. So there is an issue of fairness. We have not reached anywhere near the standard that I am going to be satisfied with, and it is an issue that I will unashamedly pursue whilst I remain in this place.

In relation to health, I am delighted with what this government was able to achieve in the clinical schools and in terms of the provision of GP services. But we should never lose sight of the fact—and the member for Wannon alerted me to this some years ago—that when you look at the MBS that is paid out—and I am sure most people in this room today are aware of this—in urban areas compared to regional areas you will see that the ratio can be as high as four to one. Compared to urban areas, regional areas are disadvantaged four and five to one. MBS that is paid out in regional areas is around $200 or $300 per person per annum; the MBS that is paid out in urban areas can get as high as $1,000 or higher per person per annum.

I am not saying that everybody sees it as a great advantage to be sick and to charge off to the doctor or to a health institution, but nevertheless it does highlight the inequity of it. There is one simple reason that the money is not used or not drawn down from the Commonwealth: the people are not there to give the service. This government is trying to do much to address that, but nevertheless we are still well short in regional Australia in expenditure from the public purse compared to that which is committed to urban Australia.

I will move on to transport. We have in this country a public transport system, mainly administered by the states, that is subsidised by at least $6 billion. That is an amount of money that is not available to regional Australia in most cases. There is some money at the edges in some of the larger regional centres but, generally speaking, you can make a fairly good case that we have a $6 billion-plus subsidy of urban transport. That is seen as a right—that those who live in the city should have that for a whole lot of reasons, economic, environmental et cetera—but that does not take away from the fact that in regional Australia that subsidy is generally not available.

This government has made very significant progress—the most progress that has ever been made in my adult life—in terms of fairer payment of the tax burden by regional people. Nevertheless, the inequity of the public transport subsidy to the metropolitan area is compounded by the higher fuel tax proportion paid by the regional communities compared to the metropolitan Australia. Much of this fuel tax goes to general revenue. Therefore, is it fair that regional Australia pays a higher percentage of tax to defence, to health, to education—anything else, anywhere else—than metropolitan Australia? That is a flaw in our tax system.

I want to make a few comments about our bureaucracy. Centrelink has done much good work and we have, in my part of the world, been blessed with very effective leadership and some very good managers. If you get a good Centrelink manager, certainly the whole thing runs a lot better, and I am grateful to those managers who try very hard to administer what is sometimes a very complex and difficult system. But I want to make one point about the financial information service officers—and it is a regional issue again and one would be forgiven for thinking that I am somewhat biased towards regional Australia, and I am because I represent 90 per cent of South Australia and probably something like 10 per cent of the land mass of Australia, which is only half as much as the member for Kalgoorlie. I will give you one statistic in relation to the financial information service: there are 14.5 officers and 1.5 of those are outside the metropolitan area; the remainder are in the metropolitan area. We have just had one transferred from Port Augusta and now the service operates out of Gawler. The reason for transferring from Port Augusta was that there was too much travelling involved. The reality is
that Gawler is 300 kilometres from Port Augusta, but the distance from Port Augusta to Whyalla is 77 kilometres. Those are very simple facts. If you are going to argue on the basis of distance, the issue seems to involve some peculiar mathematics.

I make the observation to the Public Service in Canberra generally that quite often it is too difficult to find the solution. I have argued with the system here for many years that, in a program like Jobs Pathway, either you have a system that satisfies the mechanisms to be able to deliver the service or you do not get anything at all. That is a real flaw and I think we need to do better there.

I want to make a few general observations about the issue of substance abuse. I had the privilege of being the chair of the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs in the last parliament and we put down an interim report. We carefully stayed to a very strong bipartisan line because the issue is so contentious, difficult and emotional and there is a whole range of very strong views held—and I think we did it very responsibly. I thank all the committee members—Labor Party, National Party and my own Liberal colleagues—for the work that went into it. But we have something like a $30 billion problem. For the luxury of enjoying the beer, the cigarettes and the freedom—and I am not suggesting that we change it in any way—many of us in this country do impose huge demands on our police system, our court system and our whole health system. There are no easy answers but there is no doubt in my mind that we can do a lot better, and one good place to start would be in our jail system which of course is a state responsibility. I just offer that for what it is worth.

People in my electorate have some little issues with there being no AFL football coverage, which causes great distress to my people—once again, it is a regional issue. The AFL assures us that there will be no diminution of service. We are assured by those in authority that the anti-syphoning and free-to-air should be maintained and yet there is no Wizard Cup on television in much of my area. It is amazing, isn’t it? I just wonder how legal that actually is, if we really get down to it.

The more serious issues that we look to in the future in my part of the world are water and sustainability. We are not putting anywhere near enough effort into the research needed. These are state matters as much as federal matters but we have a lot of work to do there. We are starting on an exciting development in the wind generation of power. My friend from Ausker Energy was in California a few weeks ago and he told me that they are generating a big set-up over there of megawatts. He said to me, ‘But I’ve got a lot more wind at Elliston.’ We have great resources in this country to be able to do that. ANZ have already committed something like $200 million; they will go forward. I am quite excited about a meeting in Melbourne on Friday with David Kemp to see what we can do to get the interconnectors right, work with the other corporations that are interested and get this wind power thing really going.

In conclusion, quite frankly if this government had not partially privatised Telstra there is no way that we would have had the infrastructure that we currently enjoy. We have hundreds of millions of dollars of infrastructure in this country which we would not have had without the partial sale of Telstra. In my electorate I have tens of millions of dollars of infrastructure which is being utilised more and more every day. The mobile phone system would have been just a joke—it would not have happened. I am grateful that this government was able to partially privatise Telstra and give us at least some basic equity in terms of basic communications infrastructure in this country.

Ms O’BYRNE (Bass) (5.58 p.m.)—We must always be prepared for change and, even more so, we must be very willing to accept it. My electorate, along with much of the rest of Tasmania, was once awash with apple orchards. Huge numbers of sheep grazed the paddocks, providing the wool for the big textile factories that dominated Launceston’s industrial base. Mines provided significant export wealth for the state to world markets which were hungry
for the substantial quantities of tin, copper, lead and zinc that they produced. The Hydro-Electric Commission undertook massive programs to provide electricity-generating capacity to maintain and attract industry to the state. The Hydro was itself a major employer, providing work for the many displaced persons and other migrants who came to Tasmania after World War II.

However, in those days Tasmania was in many ways a fortress for its inhabitants. A large proportion of the population rarely if ever ventured across Bass Strait. Despite apparent economic prosperity, travel costs were high and a bar to many families travelling away. Tasmania was then, and remains, a wonderfully secure place as much of the rest of the world experienced conflict—another reason to remain at home in a safe, familiar environment. The numbers of Tasmanians advancing to tertiary education were low, which reflected the successful agricultural and mining sectors and downstream secondary industries, which provided full employment. There was simply not the need to extend one’s education beyond intermediate or leaving. Women in particular did not remain at school. Life, it appears, was simple and uncomplicated.

Inbound tourism to the state was only a fraction of what it is now—Tasmania’s biggest employer and income generator. Tasmania was one of the world’s best-kept secrets and its population was, quite frankly, happy to keep it that way. Tasmanians were the contented masters and occupants of their beautiful domain and there was very little need to move outside the circle. But times change. Britain’s entry to the Common Market cut a swathe through the apple export business, the textile factories gradually closed in response to economic reform. The demand for many of our mineral deposits dissipated and the Hydro’s major project work was gradually completed.

In response, Tasmania’s population ceased growing to a point in recent years when it has actually been in slight decline. Tasmanians were faced then, as they are now, with great challenges. Whilst their realm continues to be among the safest and securest places in the world to live and raise families, opportunities for employment and wealth creation have needed massive reconsideration. Big companies have left the state. Many others have transferred their Tasmanian headquarter operations to the mainland, costing more jobs. There has been despair at times at these events, but it has never lasted long. It is not in the nature of Tasmanians to throw in the towel; to regroup and get on with life is much more a Tasmanian tradition.

The map of my electorate is now dotted with vineyards producing high quality wines which are becoming renowned throughout the world. Two high quality tertiary education establishments—the University of Tasmania Launceston campus, and the Australian Maritime College—have quickly become established in Launceston. They have provided really for the first time opportunities for young northern Tasmanians to pursue post secondary studies at home whilst at the same time attracting large numbers of interstate and overseas students to the region. In some ways, Launceston has become a student town with all the positives that hopeful young minds can bring to a community.

Niche industries and agriculture are sprouting, responding to the challenges presented by the world at the beginning of the 21st century. Lavender, wasabi, berries and poppies have taken the place of more traditional crops, although there remains a viable place for many of the latter. It can easily be said that the poppy industry typifies perfectly the role that Tasmania can play in the world economy. Tasmania is considered safe and sufficiently isolated, but at the same time efficient and well-connected enough via transport routes, to be the ideal location to grow, harvest and process alkaloid crops for pharmaceuticals. Such developments have also given added purpose, self-esteem and productivity to the rural centres in which the farms and factories are located.
Wind power generation schemes, the Duke Energy pipeline and, hopefully, the Basslink proposal all demonstrate Tasmania’s readiness to be an active player in the future world. Tasmanians have accepted that there must be change for both a meaningful and a productive future. Some of this has been achieved with the support of government, both state and federal, but mostly it is due to the unrelenting and steely resolve of Tasmanians to be masters of their own destinies and to ensure that their kingdom retains its rightful role in national and world affairs. We are a resilient and resourceful bunch. We have provided more than our fair share of prominent Australians in the arts, science, sport and industry.

Being tucked away geographically has never held us back, yet the task is not easy. Our world is undergoing massive change and is constantly under pressure to accept even more. Tariff protections, which ensured industries like the textile factories of northern Tasmania flourished, have been removed in pursuit of the ideal of a global economy. Something which provided huge job security for the workers of Launceston and the farmers of its hinterland was said to be expendable for the greater good. These realities are hard to accept, but when they occur we must work together to look for alternatives and solutions.

Many express concern about the youth and brain drain from Tasmania. It is a fact that many young people in my electorate and other parts of Tasmania feel that they must leave the state for both further education and employment opportunities. On the face of it this appears to be a sad reality, but there is also a silver lining to this cloud. There is much to be learned and experienced by our young people while spending time early in their adult lives in other parts of Australia and overseas. They should do this if they believe that it is the best path for them to follow. Equally, they should be encouraged to do it with a view to bringing back what they learn to their own home community to otherwise enhance its reputation and skill base.

Young people are a tremendous resource, and they are now prepared to stand up and be counted like never before. They have drive and confidence that the younger generations of the past may have only dreamed of. I never cease to be amazed when I visit schools in my electorate—I see students running school assemblies themselves, with the teaching staff just providing a support role, and Year 7 students with the talent and confidence to sing, dance and present reports not only to their class peers but to the whole school. It was not so long ago that the student creed at any high school in Tasmania was that the new kids were to be seen as infrequently as possible, and most definitely not heard by the older students.

I could give many examples of great things being achieved by the students within all school communities within the Bass electorate, such as the initiative by those at Prospect High School—they have developed programs to teach computer skills to older people. At the same school, nine boys set themselves a target of pursuing their dream to make the national schools knockout final in track and field, even though the school did not actually have a specialist athletic program like the majority of schools throughout Australia that traditionally participate in this competition. With the full encouragement of their school, but mostly as a result of their own drive and determination, they fulfilled their dream, making it through the regional and state qualifying competitions to the final. In the end, amazingly, they had the chance of winning, but a misunderstanding about a changeover in a relay event put paid to their dreams. Beyond everybody’s expectations, they took home the bronze medal for a well-earned third place and, importantly, won the admiration of officials and organisers by accepting their relay fate without recourse to a fruitless protest procedure often pursued by others in similar circumstances. They did not even complain when the local media gave greater credit to a school which had gained a silver medal in a lower division of the competition.

The determination of our young people is certainly not limited to the current school-age generation. Only last month, two young local women did what nobody would have expected even a year ago: Janie Dickenson, at 26, and after less than three years on its council, was
elected by the people of Launceston as their mayor; and Jodie Campbell, just a few years older, became an alderman from a field of 13, where the others were all male. Janie has made her mark through a fearless approach to local government affairs—tackling issues such as tendering processes and recycling, which have long been in the ‘too hard basket’ for Launceston’s civic leaders. Jodie gained instant esteem in the community by relentlessly pursuing the cause of her fellow workers at the Ansett call centre—at its instigation, one of the bright hopes for new and long-term employment in northern Tasmania.

Sadly, their election and elevation to civic life has not been universally welcomed—but it should be, because it represents the very essence of the reinvigoration and hope that must pervade if regional communities in Australia are to survive and flourish. Fortunately, though, it seems that the voters are certainly on their side. Only a few years ago the Launceston City Council was the preserve of grey-suited businessmen. Few women, and even fewer young people, were ever elected to it. It has been said that Launceston is conservative in many ways, and not easily accepting of change—but the times are obviously ‘a changing’.

There is one sad side to the election of these two fine young women, in that it is consequent upon the death whilst in office of one of Launceston’s finest mayors, John Lees. Despite Launceston’s long history—since 1805—John was its first popularly elected mayor. He brought wonderful drive, leadership and enthusiasm to the local government body which, over recent years, has been expanded from a small central business district council to one which encompasses most of Launceston’s suburbs, and about a third of the rural part of my electorate. John was an orchardist from the new part of the expanded local government area, and he won the respect of the community for his successful and relentless efforts to make the changed arrangements work for the benefit of both city and country folk.

It was particularly sad that he fell ill at the time of the opening of the Inveresk Railyards Development, a project which he had adopted and pursued with much fervour, and which represented the greater benefits of mutual cooperation by all levels of government. The precinct is rapidly becoming a centre of much interest, hosting many activities including the Launceston Show, one of Australia’s oldest agricultural expositions. The railyards centrepieces are the magnificently redeveloped York Park and the Launceston Museum and Art Gallery. The area also houses courses and facilities managed by the University of Tasmania. The new York Park epitomises all that is good about our willingness to find alternative solutions to problems which are dear to Tasmanians. It also demonstrates our preparedness to take well-considered risks—something which is essential for future growth and prosperity.

Tasmania has long provided some of the great stars of Australian football. When the Victorian Football League became the Australian Football League, Tasmanians could hardly withhold their enthusiasm to have a team as part of it. But the harsh realities of meeting the cost of maintaining a team in one of the country’s greatest sporting competitions meant that, at best, the dreams had to go on hold. As Tasmania has few big companies headquartered locally, it is hard to attract big sponsorship for sporting teams and events. The ‘never say die’ approach of Tasmanians caused them to think of an alternative. This was manifested in a plan to bring the AFL to Tasmania. The refurbished York Park now hosts Hawthorn home games in both the AFL pre-season and main competitions. The Melbourne Knights Soccer Club recently successfully trialed the same concept. I doubt that we will actually ever give up on the dream of having our own team in the AFL, but the temporary solution that has been found does represent the modern willingness of the local community to think outside the circle.

Just down the North Esk River, local businessman Errol Stewart is leading the drive to revitalise the river banks of our city. Launceston’s location—at the confluence of the North Esk and South Esk rivers with the tidal reaches of the Tamar as it begins its 40-kilometre journey to the sea—provides much of its charm. But in the past it has also exposed the rivers to high

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levels of industrial and sewerage pollution. It has been a long-held dream of the citizens of Launceston to restore the river to its former beauty and at the same time to provide riverside recreational areas such as those which have enhanced many other Australian cities and towns.

In painting this picture of a hopeful and enterprising community, I proceed with more than a hint of caution because I know that there is still much to be done and that the recent actions and initiatives have to be maintained and expanded even further. My electorate includes not only the city of Launceston but the larger towns of George Town, Scottsdale, Bridport and Lilydale, and smaller centres like Derby, Winnaleah, Ringarooma, Pioneer and Branxholm, which represent both the historical past of a region built on mining and agriculture and the enterprising hope of a future through tourist based enterprises. And finally, but far from least, we have the beautiful islands of the Furneaux group.

Challenges face all parts of my electorate. The population and economy of Flinders Island are heavily dependent upon reliable air and shipping services but, because the size of the community is relatively small, it is difficult to attract commercial providers of these services. George Town must come to grips with the loss of the Devil Cat services but continues to have the advantages provided by the location of secondary industries nearby. As with similar communities throughout Australia, the challenges for the smaller towns in Bass are substantial.

At last week’s Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics Outlook Conference, a leading rural academic, Margaret Alston, warned that small country towns would die and that immediate action was needed to save those which could have a viable future. She pointed to the particular problem of the dwindling number of suitable jobs for young women, especially those who take the opportunity to further their education elsewhere but who have little hope of finding a role in the home town when they wish to return. Professor Alston said that there can be a future for rural towns but that it is dependent upon the support of governments, attention to rural people and their communities, careful regional planning and development, the provision of advanced infrastructure support, and the skills, energy and enthusiasm of regional people. She also referred to the qualities of many country centres—qualities such as strong volunteer and community organisations—which set them apart from city communities but noted that these suffered as populations declined.

There is no doubt that Professor Alston is right. The picture she paints is certainly a fair representation of the small communities in rural Tasmania. Whilst our smaller towns have some relative advantages in that they are close to a big centre such as Launceston—certainly closer than many small communities in other parts of Australia—the same cannot be said for Flinders Island, which must always be treated as a special case. I believe that the rural communities of my electorate are in the category of potential survivors in the long term. But the essence to that survival will be a partnership between the communities themselves and all tiers of government.

The Governor-General’s address outlining the government’s legislative plan for its current term does not contain enough initiatives for regional and rural communities. Services to these areas must at least be maintained at current levels, and in some cases restored to previous standards. The government must consider relocating some activities and services to regional areas for a whole variety of reasons, perhaps most importantly to provide opportunities for employment for the young people of these regions—to provide incentive for them to reinvest in their community once they have completed their education at either secondary or tertiary level.

I was saddened by the last speech in the other place by Senator Gibson when he moved that the address-in-reply be agreed to. After lauding the Howard government as being a great government for Australia, he then devoted half his speech to a sad description of Tasmania’s troubles and its economy. Senator Gibson quoted various statistics in describing Tasmania’s
decline and, in particular, findings from a report done by ACIL written by Jeffrey Rae and entitled *The Tasmanian experience: lessons to New Zealand*. The picture he painted was pretty dismal and there are two things I would like to mention about the senator’s observations.

Firstly, in relation to solutions, he really seemed to offer only one. He suggested that Tasmania’s proportional electoral system was the problem. If I follow his line correctly, I think he was actually suggesting that we get rid of it. But, even under this system, Tasmania does currently enjoy a majority government, which looks likely to have another four years in government. So business can have confidence in what the state government is doing and will continue to do into the foreseeable future. It behoves the federal government to do the same and to work with the Tasmanian government to address the issues which are confronting the state, particularly population decline and opportunities for young Tasmanians to remain in Tasmania without having to forgo the chances given to their mainland contemporaries. It is too easy to suggest Tasmania’s electoral system as being the root cause of the problems that we do have.

Secondly, Senator Gibson seemed to paint a very gloomy picture. Whilst this in itself reflects poorly on the federal government of which he has been part for the last five years, it fails to portray the really positive aspects of Tasmanian life and its prospects. Senator Gibson’s portrayal seemed to be that of a bit of a basket case hardly worth saving. This is far from the true picture as I see it. I see a vibrant and renewing community eager for others to join in taking a most marvellous part of the world into the future. Tasmania displays the finest qualities of regional Australia referred to by Professor Alston in her address. It is steeped in volunteerism and the strength of community organisations and their spirit.

The Liberal Party prides itself on one of its great tenets: help those who are prepared to help themselves. Well, it should practise what it preaches. Fortunately, not many of my constituents are as depressed about Tasmania’s economy and future as the now-retired senator appears to be. They are ready and raring to go. We are a very long way from the welfare-dependent basket case that some would like to depict us as. Tasmanians are the epitome of self-helpers. For example, let me tell the story of a sporting body in my electorate. It is not that much different from the way that many other voluntary organisations conduct themselves in order to flourish and provide a wonderful community service, but it does display the resourcefulness of Tasmanians and their self-help philosophies.

The Northern Tasmanian Hockey Association has 1,000 members participating in winter and summer rosters. It has developed its business plan and facility in such a way that in full season its centre is used not only for its own rosters from Friday to Monday inclusive but on every other day for either club, state and elite training for its growing band of players reaching state and national squad levels, primary school Minkey hockey or secondary and independent school matches or carnivals. With strong, including financial, support from a suitably impressed Launceston City Council, the association presented its plan to move in 1993 from a series of grass fields with high maintenance costs to share facilities with the existing athletics centre at St Leonards. The dual-purpose facility has become a model of sports working together. The association was ambitious but realistic. Its now well-accomplished plan was for two synthetic pitches—the envy of many much larger centres throughout the country. It has contributed more than $1 million of its own funds into the centre’s development. It has met every loan repayment. An association member supplied the necessary personal guarantee. In addition, the players and supporters have supplied more than $200,000 in voluntary labour and donated materials.

The centre is also environmentally conscious, using only 25 per cent of the water required to maintain the old grass complex. Not one cent of federal money has gone into the Northern Hockey Centre. The association now needs to replace the surface of one of its pitches which
has succumbed to constant use over the last eight years. The cost, along with some other maintenance to the centre, is about $400,000. The association will again invest from its own resources more than $50,000. Launceston City Council and the state government seem likely to assist, but there is not even a federal government program under which this fine self-help organisation can apply for help from Canberra. Like the hockey association, the people of Bass and the rest of Tasmania are prepared to help themselves, to embrace change and to innovate for a healthy and successful future, but they cannot do it alone. Government policies and initiatives must be mindful at all times of the need to maintain population and activity in non-metropolitan centres. We are constantly reminded that the big cities of Sydney and Melbourne will not be able to properly service their citizens and visitors if they continue to grow at recent rates. There is a solution to both problems: the revitalisation of regional and rural Australia. A manifestation by the government that it too believes in such a plan is sorely needed.

Mrs DRAPER (Makin) (6.18 p.m.)—Before contributing to the debate on the address-in-reply I wish to congratulate the Hon. Neil Andrew, the Hon. Ian Causley and Mr Harry Jenkins on their appointments as Speaker, Deputy Speaker and Second Deputy Speaker respectively—and, of course, Mr Deputy Speaker Lindsay, I congratulate you on your acting deputy speakership. I take great pride in the fact that our Speaker is a fellow South Australian. As I have stated before in this place, history will show the member for Wakefield, the Hon. Neil Andrew, to be one of the finest Speakers ever to sit in this great place.

It has been correctly stated in this place that the people of Australia had endorsed a wide-ranging program of continued reform, disciplined fiscal management and the implementation of policies underpinned by the characteristic values of the Australian nation by re-electing the Howard coalition government on 10 November last year. Saturday, 2 March marked the sixth anniversary of the election of the Howard government. On that day in 1996 the Australian people set this nation on a new course and ended years of economic decline, overburdening debt, crushing home mortgage rates, lengthening dole queues, and the most arrogant and unaccountable government in Australian history. Not only was the cupboard left bare; the Labor Party left a $10 billion debt after going to the Australian people saying that the books were balanced. In my maiden speech, or first speech, I also remarked on the fact that the Labor Party seemed to treat the front benches as a retirement home for former ACTU leaders, and I stated back then in 1996 that on current form Jennie George would soon be on her way here. I was right: Jennie has joined the federal parliament to represent the seat of Throsby. I welcome the honourable member and former leader of the ACTU and look forward to her contributions and views on social justice for workers and families. It will be interesting.

The coalition government has worked with the Australian people to achieve an outstanding economic recovery which has been the most robust not only in our region but in the entire world. In our six years in office this government and the Australian people have more than halved home loan interest rates—which had reached a record high of 17 per cent under Labor—saving Australian families more than $700 a month on an average $100,000 home loan. We have more than halved the average rate of inflation that existed under Labor, and grown real wages by an average of two per cent, which is six times faster than under Labor. We have created more than 800,000 new jobs and reduced Labor’s high unemployment legacy. We have also totally eliminated Labor’s $10.3 billion budget deficit. The Prime Minister was fully justified in praising the state of our economy in the wake of the latest national account figures, which show that the Australian economy grew by 1.3 per cent in the December quarter and by an exceptional 4.1 per cent through the year to December 2001. This result, in the face of a major global slowdown and the terror and uncertainty created by the events of September
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11, is a remarkable achievement and one of which all Australians can be proud. I agree with the words stated earlier in the other place:

There are few nations on earth which can enter the early years of this new century with the same sense of optimism, opportunity and quiet confidence that the Australian people are entitled to feel. The one black cloud on our horizon, and one we share with all civilised nations, is the threat and prospect of continued acts of terrorism. The events of September 11 left us all shaken. I know that I speak for the people of Makin when I say that we wish our soldiers in Afghanistan every success and a safe return when their vital mission has been successfully accomplished. Our thoughts and prayers are with them, as they are with all our serving men and women in East Timor and in peacekeeping roles throughout the world.

I am particularly pleased with the government’s stated intention to honour its election commitment and introduce the first child tax refund, a measure which I totally support because it will be of assistance to thousands of Australian families. As the mother of three boys, I appreciate the challenges that confront the working mums and dads in my Makin electorate and throughout Australia. I have seen my young boys grow to be teenagers but, due to commitments I made to my electors and by honouring my parliamentary responsibilities, I have, sadly, missed some of the special moments in their lives. I note with a touch of sadness that these commitments have meant that in the past six years I have not been able to share their birthdays with them, other than over a telephone. I recognise that I am not alone in this respect. There are many parents in Makin who, through economic necessity, have been forced to take on additional employment in order to make ends meet. In doing so they have not always been able to provide the necessary time with their children that they would have liked. Angela Shanahan, in the most recent edition of Quadrant, well illustrates this point when she says:

… I was married, poor and expecting my first child. I needed the money. After I had the baby and returned to work full-time, I was literally sick on the footpath outside when I left him. This is an experience I have shared with many other young mothers. Two-thirds of Australian women, according to Angela Shanahan, stay at home for at least the first year of a baby’s life. I for one support any measures which provide a mother or father with a real opportunity to choose to be a full-time parent and provide that much needed nurturing and loving experience that all too often is forgotten in today’s ever busy world.

In my electorate of Makin I have seen, all too often, children who have, for whatever reason, fallen prey to the evil of drugs. I wish to praise the work of Ann Bressington of Shay Louise House and the outstanding contribution she is making to fight the war on drugs. Ann tragically lost her daughter to drugs and is now working with the community to prevent others from suffering this fate. She has also offered her assistance through a commitment to working in Makin with our young people, and I thank her for that. Prime Minister John Howard has appointed Ann to the Australian National Council on Drugs in recognition of her knowledge and dedication in this field. The Howard government’s Tough on Drugs strategy is the only way to fight this insidious evil and save our children from a life of torment and crime and, too often, a painful early death. In schools throughout Makin, I am hoping to continue our work with the Tough on Drugs program, and I am pleased to see the very positive response from both teachers and students to this program.

Last Friday I was pleased to welcome the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Hon. Larry Anthony, to my electorate and to the Salvation Army centre in Ingle Farm to meet with local workers from the Salisbury Reconnect service and the local JPET program. Salisbury Reconnect has helped vulnerable young people to maintain links with their families, education and communities. The service employs two full-time workers and receives more than $160,000 a year in government funding. I am pleased to say this funding has recently been extended for another three years. As well as working directly with clients, the service
has sought to increase the awareness of an early intervention approach and for community organisations to work collaboratively to support young people and their families.

The Job Placement, Employment and Training Program focuses on young people between 15 and 21 years who are at risk of becoming homeless. JPET helps them to overcome barriers preventing them from getting stable accommodation, and focuses on education, vocational training or work. The Ingle Farm JPET is contracted to the Salvation Army and has strong links to the community. It has helped 71 of our young people since July 2001, and nearly half of them had been in trouble with the law. Such practical early intervention programs have the strong support of local communities because their aim is to strengthen families because families are the mainstay of our society. The government has outlined an intensive program, in a range of areas, that will serve to protect families, improve educational opportunities and outcomes, conserve and protect our environment and continue to encourage small business growth and innovation.

In a world full of trouble, it is comforting to know that Australia is in safe hands. Unfortunately for my home state of South Australia, the political instability resulting from the recent state election is set to continue, with the minority Lewis Labor government taking the reins of office without the support of the majority of the South Australian people. There can be no greater claim for illegitimacy than that which now rests on the government of South Australia. The actions by the member for Hammond in denying the will of the people who elected him will go down in history as one of the more infamous events in the political life of South Australia. Thankfully, we South Australians do have an honest and credible alternative in the Hon. Rob Kerin and his experienced team, who are ready to resume the task of rebuilding our state at the first opportunity, hopefully before Labor is able to cause another financial disaster of State Bank proportions.

I wish to pay due credit to the Liberal candidates who stood in the state seats within my Makin electorate at the recent election. Firstly, I congratulate the Hon. Dorothy Kotz MP, the member for Newland, an accomplished state minister, on her re-election. I also wish to acknowledge the efforts made by Ron Watts in Elizabeth, Mark Osterstock in Wright, Lyn Petrie in Florey, and Tom Javor in Playford. They are all good people who fought the good fight and will continue to battle on to victory, which must surely come sooner rather than later. Justice will be done. The illegitimate Lewis Labor government will not stand.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge and thank the many members and supporters who assisted me last November in my campaign for re-election, and the people of Makin for granting me that honour once again. To the Hon. John Dawkins MLC and Senator Grant Chapman, as well as Senator Nick Minchin, I offer my thanks for your continued support and advice. To my electorate committee chairman, Mr Bob Day, and to all the members of the Liberal branches in Makin, I offer my thanks and a further commitment to them, to my staff and my family, to serve at all times in the best interests of the people of Makin and for the greater good of all the Australian people, because that is surely why we are elected in the first place.

Sitting suspended from 6.28 p.m. to 8.00 p.m.

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (8.00 p.m.)—Since the election we have had the extraordinary claim made at the National Press Club by the Federal Director of the Liberal Party, Mr Lynton Crosby, that the 2001 federal election was all about economics and the public’s belief that the coalition was a superior economic manager. It is my contention that the entire program of government is based on a false premise and that the Prime Minister’s view of honesty at the last election is entirely wrong. Over the years the Prime Minister has often characterised himself as ‘honest John’. He revelled in that description. In August 1995, the Prime Minister, the member for Bennelong said:
... truth is absolute, truth is supreme, truth is never disposable in national political life.

Indeed, he told the Menzies Research Centre that one of the problems with politics is:
... honesty is being swamped by cynical election campaigns based on fear, the big scare, the massive lie.

This is particularly ironic in terms of what I view as the central theme of the government’s re-election campaign, for its campaign was based on the big scare and the big lie. My colleague the member for Sydney has already pointed this out, but I believe the campaign is so reprehensible that some of the events that took place in some of the marginal seats during the election ought to be recounted.

During the election campaign, the member for Richmond put out a pamphlet in his electorate—a marginal seat that some suspected Labor might win—which said:

Will your vote bring illegal immigrants to the Tweed? Keep Australia in safe hands. Only the Liberals and Nationals are serious about illegal immigration.

In Dobell, 1,000 posters went up a couple of nights before the election which showed the Prime Minister holding onto a lectern and saying, ‘We decide who comes into this country and under what circumstances.’ A postcard sent out to the electorate of Dobell from Senator Heffernan warned that illegal immigrants were about to flood the electorate. As we know, the government won the marginal seat of Dobell. In the Queensland Liberal Party campaign, workers were using the slogan, ‘Vote Labor; get a Taliban for your neighbour.’ In the seat of Dickson the Liberal Party issued to electors what I can only describe as a sleazy leaflet, claiming ‘Labor supports illegal immigration.’ In my view, Australia has not experienced outrageous claims like this since the thirties or forties. It is to our country’s great misfortune that they have been reintroduced into Australia.

One of the contentions that I have noticed the government making in their defence during the ‘children overboard’ allegations of the last few weeks is that they did not raise this matter between the time there were initial doubts raised about it, on 10 October, and 26 October. Contrast this with the recollections of the member for Hotham, the Leader of the Opposition, which have been too little noticed. In one of his censure motions he detailed that the Prime Minister raised these allegations on radio 4BC in Brisbane on 11 October. The Prime Minister again talked about that on the same day on the same radio station. The then Minister for Defence, the then member for Flinders, talked about it on 14 October and again on 19 October on talkback radio. The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs focused on that issue in his talkback session on Adelaide radio on 16 October, and the Treasurer talked about it again on Adelaide radio on 22 October.

As the Leader of the Opposition observed, ‘Were these people Marcel Marceaus?’ No; what they did was to take the underlying fears of at least part of the electorate and focus on those fears, and to focus them by raising the completely false allegations about ‘these kinds of people’ throwing their children overboard. In Australia we are the country of the fair go and the country that claims to have—and, in my view, did—run the friendliest Olympics ever. This kind of election campaigning does not portray Australia in a very flattering light.

The election campaign, of course, was also dominated by terrorism and the war in Afghanistan. Two weeks after the federal election, Kabul fell and there was an entirely different attitude in this country—quite understandably, because people’s fear of war was so much lessened. But this appeal to fear of the unknown by the government goes back further than just the last six months—further than just the Tampa affair and further than just the focus by the government on ‘these dreadful people’, ‘these asylum seekers who throw their children overboard’. The government had a history, in my view, over the last parliament of demonising refugees and asylum seekers.
I had my staff and the Parliamentary Library look up the number of times between November 1998, when I came to this House, and August 2001 that government MPs asked questions of the minister for immigration. During the Tampa crisis, nine questions were asked as doro-thy dixers by government members. The number of questions is perhaps not as significant as the way in which these questions were framed and the negative language used. For example, on 25 November 1999, the member for Groom asked the immigration minister whether ‘people who overstay their visas in Australia also pose a major threat to the integrity of our borders’. On 28 August 2000, the member for Menzies asked the minister for immigration whether, in terms of the outbreak of violence at Woomera, he would ‘inform the House of the latest developments in relation to this disturbance’.

When I came to this House as a very new and green member, I went to a very interesting session—which only became more interesting as a couple of years went by—called by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to highlight a video about illegal travel that was produced by the Australian government, with $3 million of taxpayers’ money, which was called ‘It’s not worth the risk’. The member for Berowra’s video should really be shown on Backberner. I call it ‘A production of the Australian antitourism bureau’. The cover of the video portrays Australia as a place full of slums. The video itself is funny; if one steps back and looks at it, one can see that it portrays Australia as a place where sharks and crocodiles will eat you on arrival and, if you survive, you will be burned alive by bushfires. Indeed, I was so astounded at this video produced with taxpayers’ money that I asked officials at that meeting very early on in the parliament what was going to be done with this particular production. Taxpayers’ money was spent on the idea that this would be shown on Iraqi or Afghani—that part of the world—television. Of course, there are not many productions on television in Iraq, apart from Saddam Hussein. That $3 million of Australian taxpayers’ money was, in my view, wasted in this way in order to deter refugees with a negative and false picture of Australia says something about the continuing theme of this government.

Returning to the ‘children overboard’ affair, on 7 October last year there was a meeting of the government people-smuggling task force. It remains unclear who made the announcement but, at this meeting, it was announced that a report had been phoned in from Defence that morning that the asylum seekers had thrown children overboard as HMAS Adelaide was trying to turn the boat back towards Indonesia. In the midst of an election campaign this was indeed sensational information, and the government wasted little time in refocusing on this antirefugee, anti-immigration theme that it had been following all the way through the election. The Prime Minister repeatedly used this episode to enhance his reputation as being tough on refugees and to reinforce his campaign message that only a coalition government would be tough on illegal entrants. By 11.30 a.m. on the same day, the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, with indecent haste, spread these false stories to the rest of Australia. Unlike some of my colleagues, I have some regard for the minister for immigration. I think he takes his job very seriously and I do not underestimate its difficulty. I know that he considers many cases individually that a person who is less diligent might not. But to immediately go out during an election period with allegations that you had not substantiated, particularly allegations of such a serious nature, was not something befitting ministerial responsibility. On the very morning that they got the allegations, Mr Ruddock said in his announcement:

A number of people have jumped overboard and have had to be rescued. More disturbingly, a number of children have been thrown overboard. Again, with the intention of putting us under duress.

He also said:
I regard these as some of the most disturbing practices that I have come across in the time that I have been involved in public life.

This was ‘clearly planned and premeditated’. The only problem is that we all now know, thanks to the crew of the Adelaide, our servicepeople, Air Marshal Houston and his Exocet missile—an Exocet that will probably come back and hit ‘HMAS Bennelong’—and now even Admiral Barrie—this event never happened. Mr Howard was asked to comment on the incident—and I remember that this was a leading item in the news. He talked about an ‘attempt to morally blackmail Australia’ and the Prime Minister said, ‘I can’t comprehend how genuine refugees would throw their children overboard.’ Quite frankly, the Prime Minister said:

I don’t want in Australia people who would throw their own children into the sea.

This was incredibly focused when the Prime Minister of the country made such serious allegations. Now the government come to the electorate and say that it really had no influence on the election. They say, ‘We hardly mentioned it; we didn’t issue any below the radar screen leaflets; we didn’t mention it on talkback radio.’

Mr Schultz interjecting—

Mr DANBY—Of course they did! Let’s be honest about it. It is true that it was not the only factor in the election. Yes, the current state of the Australian economy influenced people too and, of course, the opposition had to have policies that were not just focused on the asylum seekers or mandatory detention. But to claim, as the government does now, that this did not influence the election is simply not believable on any analysis.

On 9 October Mr Reith’s office became aware of the existence of photographs that showed people in the water. These photographs were quickly released to the press. The captions and descriptions of these photographs were, as we now know, bodgied. ‘Bodgied’ is a great Australian word. The government originally claimed that these photos indicated that children were thrown overboard, and they were on the front page of every newspaper. Many journalists and editors around Australia are angry about this incident because they feel they were part of a bodgie government propaganda ploy in the middle of the election to get the coalition over the line.

As we now know, these photos were taken from a corner of the whole photo that sailors on the Adelaide had taken. In fact, they showed the boat sinking, and they were taken the day after the ‘children overboard’ event was said to have happened. There was also video footage of the incident which, according to the government, would prove their claims. As we now know, the former Minister for Defence was told in Darwin by Brigadier Silverstone—and witnessed, very wisely, by Brigadier Bornholt—that the video did not show children in the water. The then Minister for Defence replied—and I think this will be his epitaph—‘Well, we’d better not see the video.’ He has probably seen the antitourism bureau video that the minister for immigration has been trying to get it on Iraqi television, but he did not want to see the other video. By noon on 10 October, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet had advised that ‘there is no indication that children were thrown overboard’.

Also on 10 October the commanding officer of HMAS Adelaide reported to the commanders of both Northern Command and Maritime Command that no children had been thrown overboard. The person who was at the scene said that it did not happen, yet this government did not make any attempt to correct the falsehood. The Prime Minister uses a very careful formulation of words, which I think will be exposed at the hearings of the Senate committee investigation. He says he was never advised verbally or in writing that these initial allegations were not true. Many of us in this parliament have watched episodes of Yes, Prime Minister. One of the favourite ploys of Yes, Prime Minister was also described in that very funny cartoon by Pryor in the Canberra Times where various people in the Prime Minister’s department
and office play a game of charades with him to get him to understand that he should not ask any more questions about this.

During the recent inquiry into this incident at Senate estimates, the secretary to the Prime Minister’s department, Mr Max Moore-Wilton, made the assertion, ‘Nobody has proved to me that the children weren’t thrown overboard,’ as if the electorate and the senators had to prove that they were not thrown overboard. Mr Moore-Wilton said:

... children could have been thrown overboard on the other side of the vessel. To my knowledge that has never, ever been conclusively refuted ...

There is a great scene in the 1953 Army McCarthy hearings where the famous lawyer from Philadelphia reproaches Senator McCarthy, ‘Have you no sense of shame?’ That is what I say to Mr Moore-Wilton. Talk about an elastic imagination that stretches to meet the constraints of your political masters!

Finally, on 13 February 2002—four months later—the government released the Bryant and Powell reports, revealing that children were never thrown overboard. It took this government four months to admit that it had not been honest with Australians. The Prime Minister has used this episode to enhance his reputation about being tough on refugees. I think the government has had a very longstanding campaign on this and it used the ‘children overboard’ incident as the final twist in its political strategy.

The real tragedy in all these events is that some of the ruthless people who now run the Liberal Party did not have to go to these lengths to destroy a consensus on immigration and refugees that we have previously had in this country. An editorial in the Melbourne Age on 15 February summed this up succinctly. It said:

Mr Howard maintained that he had shown true leadership on the issue, but we believed that the opposite was the case. He had broken a longstanding tacit agreement between the major parties not to pander to xenophobia on immigration and refugee issues, and in doing so had unleashed forces that would continue to be potent well beyond the election. We said that the Prime Minister had failed to defend the spirit of tolerance and diversity nurtured by a century of stable democracy in Australia, and that for this reason his government did not deserve a third term.

One of the opinion polls that came out after the election that was identified by Mr Mackerras showed that One Nation’s vote went down from 8.4 per cent in the 1998 election to 4.2 per cent. If we look at where that 4.2 per cent vote went, as the members sitting opposite know, it went to the government. Therefore, the issues that the government campaigned on—the dog whistling, the illegal travel videos that they tried to get shown on Iraqi and Afghan television, the hilarious antitourism bureau video of the minister for immigration, the ‘Tampa’ incident, the ‘children overboard’ incident, the fake pictures and the focus on talkback radio by the Prime Minister and other ministers on this issue—all had their effect. If you are studying Machiavelli’s The Prince, you would say that by the criteria of machiavellian politics the government was very successful. That is not criteria by which I think you should judge the future of this country. In my view, the government appealed to the most base elements prevalent in some parts of the community—fear, ignorance and paranoia.

Mr Pyne interjecting—

Mr DANBY—The member for Sturt is getting upset because he feels very uncomfortable with some of the things the government did. Perhaps he has to interject because he is getting agitated about the event. Perhaps there are decent people in the Liberal Party who are very, very upset about how all of this went and who regret what happened. But interjections will not help them now.

In the process, the Prime Minister and other senior ministers treated fellow human beings with contempt, accusing them of throwing children into the sea. If Australia wants to maintain
Monday, 11 March 2002

REPRESENTATIVES

Mr SCHULTZ (Hume) (8.19 p.m.)—Can I say at the outset that it is a pleasure for me to speak on the address in reply. Before I do, I make the observation that the Australian Labor Party has learned absolutely nothing of the feeling of the mainstream community with regard to illegal immigrants coming into this country and the types of activity they were involved in which led to people being in the water, regardless of whether they had been thrown overboard or that they had destroyed the vessel, forcing them to go into the water.

I am pleased to say, like many members on the government side of the House, that I had a significant number of Labor Party people vote for me in the election and they voted for me because, in their words, Howard showed the courage, the strength and the leadership that has not been seen in Labor Party leaders for many, many years now. I was very thankful to take their votes because, as the candidate for the electorate of Hume, I was conscious of the fact that not one of the opposing candidates gave their preferences to me.

Having said that, I am also mindful of the fact that I am privileged to be standing here today as the federal member for Hume, and it is due to the generosity of the electors of Hume and the Australian people who have, over a significant number of years now, honoured me with the privilege of serving at three levels of government. I thank each one of those people who voted for me for the opportunity to represent them in the most democratic system in the world. I would particularly like to pay my respects and gratitude to my campaign manager, John Crawford, who is a very busy individual in his own right and who, once again, led my campaign. I might add that I ran probably one of the cheapest campaigns in New South Wales, which is a significant indication of the respect which the general community had for the Howard coalition government and, more importantly, an indication of their belief in what I was doing as their local member.

A significant number of people worked for me during the campaign. It was difficult early in the piece because there was some controversy about me as the member and what I should do for other people. I made a decision that I would not move aside. That created a concern for me in terms of whether I would be able to man some of my booths in the northern part of the new electoral boundaries, but people came forward and I did not have any problems. There were people like Merl Kelly and Gladys Hurkett from the northern end; Derek and Mary Barnes; Roger Warner; Peter Jenkins; Lorna McCauley, a lady who worked with the Liberal Party, who came from Sydney to work in the campaign office; my friend, a staunch supporter and longstanding member of the Liberal Party, Pam Mitchell, and people like her. My wife, of course, has been an absolute pillar of strength to me over the years and is very supportive of me. She gets a little bit nervous sometimes because of the type of politics that I practice and worries about what I have to say from time to time, but she was there supporting me as usual, as were my family. I wanted to make those points, for what they are worth.

The people did vote for the government on the basis of the leadership of the Prime Minister and the strength of the coalition, as far as the country was concerned. They are still expressing that support, despite what some spin doctors might be trying to put on some of the comments made by the left-wing element within the national press, which tried to beat up a story on it and use the deep disappointment and resentment of the Labor Party for losing the election to try and make something positive out of it. Having said that, there are some issues centred around my electorate that I have some concerns about.

I am always grateful for the government of the day and what it does for my constituency. I sometimes get a little bit disappointed that perhaps my constituency did not get as much as-
stance as it should have received. I am also a great believer, regardless of the political persuasion of the day, that government funds should be extended to projects on the basis of need, not on political persuasion or anything like that. If there is something that needs to be addressed in the community, regardless of where that community is situated, taxpayers’ funds should be expended equally, fairly and equitably across those areas. I do not make any apologies for saying that. I have said it publicly before and I will continue to say it.

There is a particular health issue that I am concerned about and it relates to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. I would like to walk the House through the process for approval to list a drug on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme before I mention the particular drug that is of concern to me. In Australia, all pharmaceuticals must be evaluated and recommended by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee—commonly referred to as the PBAC—before they are listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. A pharmaceutical must be approved or be on the verge of approval for sale in Australia by the Therapeutic Goods Administration before an application may be submitted to the PBAC. Applications for PBS listings are submitted at least three months before they will be discussed by the PBAC. This allows applications to be considered by the pharmaceutical evaluation section of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and the economic subcommittee to the PBAC. Both provide advice to the PBAC on the merits of the applications before them. If the PBAC recommends listing for a drug, it is then considered for pricing by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Pricing Authority. In total, it usually takes at least eight months from the time an application is submitted by a company until the pharmaceutical is listed on the PBS.

Let me talk now about the drug that I have concerns about. I am talking about the drug Gleevec. Gleevec is related to the treatment of leukemia sufferers. I am concerned about it because years ago I lost a nephew through leukemia. Six weeks ago my best friend’s wife was diagnosed as having leukemia. He wrote to me, as did a number of other constituents—whose letters I will read out later—about his concern about the fact that Gleevec has been approved under the PBS, but only for people who are in the blast stage—the final stages—of leukemia. In my view, to coin an old adage, that is shutting the gate, performing the process, after the horse has bolted.

Gleevec was fast-tracked by the US Food and Drug Administration in just 10 weeks, making the fastest ever approved cancer drug in the US. The TGA also accorded Gleevec priority review and it was registered in just five months—one of the fastest ever drug approvals in Australia. Novartis, the company that developed and manufacture this drug, submitted its application for PBS listing of Gleevec—for the treatment of patients with chronic myeloid leukemia in accelerated phase, blast phase and chronic phase after interferon-alpha treatment has failed—to the PBAC in June 2001, while it was still being considered by the TGA. TGA approval was granted in August 2001. Interferon is the first line of treatment for the disease. The application was considered by the PBAC at its meeting of 5 to 7 September 2001. In late September, Novartis was formally advised that the PBAC had recommended listing of Gleevec for the treatment of patients with CML in accelerated and blast phase, but not for the patients in the chronic phase for whom interferon-alpha treatment has failed. Accelerated and blast phase are the end stages of the disease—I want to emphasise that: they are the end stages of the disease.

Gleevec became available on the PBS on 1 December 2001 for the treatment of patients with CML in accelerated and blast phases. The chronic phase after interferon-alpha has failed is a very critical issue. Principally, Gleevec was rejected for listing to treat patients in the chronic phase for whom interferon-alpha treatment has failed because the PBAC was not convinced by the estimated survival advantage of Gleevec for these patients. It was concerned that it would be used to treat patients for whom interferon-alpha therapy has not failed.
In late 2001, Novartis had two meetings with the secretariat of the PBAC and the PES to better understand the reasons for the rejection and the best way forward. As a result of these meetings, Novartis is confident that it has addressed the concerns of the PBAC by incorporating some of the suggestions made by the PBAC in its evaluation, including updated data on the use of Gleevec and a more detailed discussion of the approaches taken and methods used. A reapplication was submitted to the PBAC on 14 December 2001. The submission will be discussed by the PBAC at its meeting on 7 and 8 March 2002—and that has now long gone.

If listing is recommended by the PBAC, it will result in further pricing negotiations with the PBPA with a view to Gleevec becoming available on 1 August this year for patients with CML in the chronic phase for whom interferon-alpha therapy has failed. Novartis cannot seek reimbursement for Gleevec for the treatment of patients with CML in the chronic phase who are either newly diagnosed or for whom interferon-alpha has not failed until such time as it is TGA approved for that use. Novartis will be submitting for TGA approval for that use when results of the pivotal trial become available. This is expected at the earliest to be in mid to late 2002. It is therefore unlikely that Gleevec will be listed on the PBS for the treatment of patients with CML in the chronic phase who are either newly diagnosed, or for whom interferon-alpha has not failed, within the next two years and, like I said earlier, it is like shutting the gate after the horse has bolted.

Let me now read to you some of the comments from my constituents and, more specifically, start off with a comment from my very good friend who lives in Bathurst. He was referring to some work that my wife did on his behalf and in his letter he said in part:

Gloria I really appreciate your help. This treatment is so very important to Geraldine. The disease for her now is in the chronic stage and it is best, in terms of outcomes, for a bone marrow transplant to be undertaken within the first year after diagnosis. The best donors are matched related donors (i.e. immediate family) and unfortunately none of her brothers or sister is a match. The perils associated with an unrelated donor are significant. The mortality associated with matched donors is some 20 to 30% of cases and increases with donors that are not related.

So the story is that Gleevec may produce a remission for Geraldine or buy sufficient time for a donor to be found or may obviate the need to take the gamble on a transplant.

If I was able I would pay for the drug but the reality is that I could not find $45,000 per year to fund it. So there in the great Australian tradition, I am looking to the ever suffering taxpayer to help us out. And quite rightly so. Let me now read to you from some brief letters from other constituents:

Dear Sir

I am writing to you again to draw your attention to Glivec, the new leukemia drug, and its urgent listing on the PBS for CML as I believe the PBAC meet in March.

As I wrote in a previous letter, our son Jonathan was diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia in January 1998 aged 33, and given a life expectancy of 2-3 years. This treatment was a daily injection of interferon, which had no effect on his illness, but had significant side effects. He cannot go back to this. He was fortunate to be chosen to go on the trials at Royal North Shore Hospital in November 2000 for the new drug, now know as Glivec, and showing immediate improvement. By the time the 12 month trial ended, the results were quite amazing. It seemed to us like a miracle had happened and all our prayers were answered. His last bone marrow test showed 95% normal cells. He feels well and he looks so much better.

We believe this drug could well be a cure for myeloid leukemia not only for Jan but all leukemia sufferers.

I will not read any more of the letter; I think that says enough. Let me now read extracts from another letter. I do this because I want to illustrate to the House just how important this drug is to chronic sufferers of leukemia.
Dear Sir

I am writing to voice my concern regarding the cost of the leukemia treatment called Glivec which is now having miraculous success as a trial cure under Dr Arthur at Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney.

I have a nephew, whose parents live in Goulburn, who was diagnosed leukemia some 3½ years ago and given only 2 to 3 years left to live. Since being on the American Glivec trial his condition has improved and stabilised and remission seems a real possibility.

When the trial is completed for him in about 3 months the treatment will only be available at approximately $46,000 a year which is obviously a cost too high for him to meet.

Therefore we, his family are asking for real consideration to be given to the treatment being subsidised through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme so that people who are relying on this treatment can continue to use it with a hope of a longer and healthier life.

I will read just one more letter to illustrate the point:

Dear Alby Schultz

I am a resident of your electorate within the town of Harden-Murrumburrah. I am writing to you as my member of Parliament to ask for help.

My name is Pamela ... and I suffer from Chronic Myeloid Leukemia. For many months I have been waiting for the arrival of a new drug called ‘Glivec’ which treats and cures (90%) of Leukemia patients. Finally it arrived in Australia on November 2001. To my horror I am unable to use the drug because of the strict criteria placed on its distribution. I am unable to tolerate the only other drug available to treat my disease. This is called ‘Interferon’. As a result I have no other choice but to remain on the drug ‘Hydrea’. Hydrea does not treat my condition but only masks some symptoms of the disease. As a result I suffer many side effects and ill feeling. This restricts my activities and my lifestyle.

Because my disease has not yet progressed to a point where it is critical and life threatening, I do not qualify to enjoy the advantages of the new drug called Glivec.

The advantages include, I would feel well again, at present I lack energy to walk and finish small tasks. I would not suffer the many gastro intestinal problems that stop me leading a normal life.

I believe the criteria given to the doctors which only allow a very small group of people to access the drug is designed to save money for the government. As a result myself and many others suffer unnecessarily until our health is critical and miserable.

I raise those issues as a member of parliament because I get emotionally upset about the priorities that we put on some of the funding that we send out. I appeal to the minister for health in this government, and to my parliamentary colleagues on all sides of the House, to consider what is being said by these individuals. The pleas that I have quoted in correspondence to me are being made all over Australia. We are talking about making a drug available that does wondrous things for people suffering from leukaemia, but we are issuing it on the PBS only when those people are in the final stages of their illness. That is wrong; that is absolutely morally wrong. We should be giving those people a chance for a good quality of life by giving it to them when they are diagnosed as being in the chronic stage of the disease leukaemia.

I cannot emphasise that enough and I make no apologies for raising it in the House today.

On behalf of not only my constituents but all people suffering from this dreadful disease—and in fact any other disease—I think it is incumbent on those of us in the decision making process who have access to new drugs in the world to make those drugs available to these people. As responsible human beings, we have a responsibility to make those drugs available to people in the early stages of disease so that they have a chance of a normal lifestyle. I say this because many years ago my wife embarked on an exercise to put mobile mammography breast screening units into rural communities in New South Wales so that rural women could have access to early detection of breast cancer. Had we not done that—had we not taken the decision to embark upon that public campaign—those mobile mammography units that are
Mr ZAHRA (McMillan) (8.40 p.m.)—I welcome the opportunity to finally speak on the address-in-reply. Firstly, I say thank you to all of those people who contributed to my re-election in the seat of McMillan. The result in the seat of McMillan was different from the result which the Labor Party had generally in the federal election. We received a lot of support and I am very thankful for that support. Many people put in an enormous amount of work to achieve that result and many people showed a lot of goodwill towards me. They put their faith in me, they were prepared to vote for me and they believed in what I was trying to do for our district. I thank those people. I particularly thank all those people who campaigned for me and who enthusiastically supported my re-election campaign.

I also want to place on record my appreciation of the leadership of Kim Beazley. He lost the election but, in my view, he conducted himself with a great deal of integrity and honour. Since standing down as leader, he has been gracious and dignified. He was my first leader in the caucus, and also the first leader of the member for Melbourne Ports. He was yours as well, Mr Deputy Speaker Wilkie. I am sure that both of you will agree with me that we could never have asked for a more decent man to have had as a leader of our party, nor a more compassionate and understanding man. He was very understanding, in particular, of our needs as new backbench members of parliament.

I am thrilled to have as our new leader Simon Crean, the member for Hotham, someone whom I have known for nine or 10 years. He is someone I have always looked up to and someone who has always had a bit of time for me. He was prepared to support me in the early days and in difficult battles as I went through those various stages of life in the Australian Labor Party in Victoria. I am thrilled that he is our leader. I know that he will not only be a great leader of the Australian Labor Party but a great Australian Prime Minister.

I am very pleased as well for the chance that he has given me to serve within his team as the parliamentary secretary to the shadow minister for communication. I do this with a great deal of relish and I look forward to the task that I have been given in relation to the communications portfolio. It is a very important public policy area—a new, emerging and in many ways difficult public policy area. I look forward to making a contribution and to making sure that we do not end up with those people who are able to benefit from the opportunities that new technology brings being left behind. In particular, I am keen to make sure that those people who do not have a great deal of money do not get left behind. I do not think that that is our way in this country and it should not be our way in this important public policy area.

We had an historic occasion in our district last month when the shadow cabinet met in my electorate. They met in my home town of Traralgon. We had a well-received and important community function in Traralgon at Liddiard Road Primary School, just around the corner from where I live. We have had 100 years of federal parliaments in this country—100 years of national government and 100 years of cabinets and shadow cabinets—and this was the first time in all of those years that either a cabinet or a shadow cabinet had met in the Gippsland region.

This was an important occasion for us. I was absolutely thrilled to have been the member for McMillan at that time. I was particularly thrilled that the shadow cabinet met in my home town of Traralgon and had that community function at Liddiard Road Primary School, which is a school very close to my heart. It is very much my neighbourhood school, being just around the corner from where I live. It is a wonderful public school, turning out those kids really well. We do not have a lot of millionaires in our neighbourhood, but that school is producing some outstanding young leaders. I am very proud of that school and very pleased that we could have that important occasion there.
We saw in the course of the election campaign a number of commitments made by the Labor Party in relation to our district. I want to spend a little bit of time today pointing out what those things were. The Labor Party, if it won the election, committed itself to putting $100 million into the Pakenham bypass—a very important road and infrastructure issue, not just for Pakenham but for all of the Gippsland region and for the south-eastern growth corridor of Melbourne more generally. That $100 million represented the full federal commitment for that project. This was a big deal, a big project and something which people knew was desperately needed—and we committed to it in full.

The Labor Party also committed to a $30 million jobs and industry package for the Latrobe Valley, to get industry to the Latrobe Valley and to create new job opportunities for people. Latrobe Valley has a high rate of unemployment relative to the rest of the state and the rest of the country, and we were prepared to tackle that and to do something about it. So that was a very specific commitment we made. We also made a commitment to making the Latrobe Valley an education priority zone. That would have meant an extra $11 million for education in the Latrobe Valley, an area which has seen a fall-off in retention rates in terms of year 12 completion for the last six years. We are only now starting to see that retention rate heading in the right direction, after enjoying some very savage cutbacks in Victoria during the period of the Kennett administration. So we made that specific commitment as well.

The final commitment the Labor Party made in relation to the McMillan electorate was a specific one for 25 high care, aged care beds for Trafalgar. Trafalgar has been recognised by both the Commonwealth and state government departments as the most underbedded town, in terms of high care beds, in the most underbedded region, which is Gippsland, in the most underbedded state, which is Victoria. We have had this identified need now for some years, and the state government recognised this need and promised to commit the capital funds required to build that aged care facility. I am talking about millions of dollars—maybe $2 or $3 million—and the state government committed to funding all of the capital associated with that. But for two years in a row, the federal government have not funded those 25 high care beds which are desperately needed by that town.

I call again on the minister to review his decision and to find a way to fund those 25 high care beds, because this is now an issue which has seen the people of Trafalgar miss out for too long. People are suffering as a result of that and are having to go to other towns as they graduate through the various levels of care. It is not good enough, it is unnecessary and the money is there—and the skills and expertise to properly run an aged care facility are obviously there as well. The West Gippsland Health Care Group, which would run the facility, have a lot of experience in running aged care facilities and are seen as one of the most professional health care groups in Victoria. So we are very lucky to have them and very lucky to have them interested in this project and prepared to run and manage this facility. So we made some specific commitments in the course of the election campaign which would have made a great deal of difference to the lives of people in the McMillan electorate.

It is disappointing that we did not win, but I point out to the government that they played a role in the course of the election campaign in trying to convince the people of Trafalgar that, if they were re-elected, they would do something in relation to the Trafalgar nursing home situation. I remember very well Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, the member for Mackellar, when she was Minister for Aged Care, coming to Trafalgar during the election campaign and committing herself to looking favourably upon the application by the West Gippsland Health Care Group for those beds. That is what she said, what the government said, before the election. After the election, when the decision came down, the West Gippsland Health Care Group missed out again on those beds. It is something which the people of Trafalgar are very angry and frustrated about, because they feel that they were dudged and misled. I call again on the
The federal government needs to do more in relation to the McMillan electoral district. We do have a very high level of unemployment in the Latrobe Valley, in particular, in my electorate, and more needs to be done to break the back of that unemployment rate so that we can get past the disadvantage which we have suffered from for the past five or six years and move on to taking advantage of some of the opportunities which are available to those communities which have the employment, the technology, the educational attainment and which are being created in so many other parts of the country. We want a stake in that opportunity and we want to be a part of it, but we will not be able to compete if we have a situation in which our unemployment is two or three times the state and national averages. We need the federal government’s help and we need the federal government’s resources to do something about that.

I think the state government are doing a great deal in relation to the Latrobe Valley, and I was pleased to have played a role in the establishment of the Latrobe Valley Ministerial Task Force—which was set up by the state government to put together a package to try to break the back of the disadvantage we have in the Latrobe Valley right now. That package included a combination of public policy initiatives which led to around $105½ million of state government money being committed to revitalise the Latrobe Valley—a very significant achievement, a very significant package and a real commitment made to the future of our district. I want to congratulate the Premier, Steve Bracks, a good friend of mine and a good friend to the people of the Latrobe Valley, for his confidence in us and for believing in us enough to be prepared to put his government’s resources behind our region. I also want to pay tribute to the Victorian Treasurer and Minister for State and Regional Development, Mr John Brumby, who was the chairman of the Latrobe Valley Ministerial Task Force, which brought down those initiatives.

Some of those initiatives include $12 million to purchase back a privatised hospital for the Latrobe Valley, $5 million to build a new police station in Moe, $20 million to build a new civic and judicial precinct in Morwell, $22 million for an urban renewal project in the Latrobe Valley to be linked to jobs and training opportunities for people living in our district, and a commitment to put in place a substantial educational initiative in the Latrobe Valley—which we have come to refer to as the education precinct—to be based at the Monash University Gippsland Campus in Churchill. These are just some of the initiatives contained within the Latrobe Valley Ministerial Task Force package which have meant that a great deal of confidence has been injected into the Latrobe Valley.

I want to see a similar commitment made by the federal government and a matching of those funds so that we can bring all of the combined resources of the Commonwealth and the state government to this pressing task, so that people will not have to endure for too much longer the disadvantage that we still have to endure in the Latrobe Valley right now. It is not too unrealistic to imagine that the Commonwealth could make a matching commitment, if not in cash terms then in terms of the resources that it brings to bear and the in kind support that it lends to those initiatives which the Commonwealth can support simply by backing what the state government is doing—for example, in terms of the judicial precinct, by making sure that a Family Court service is provided there; or by making sure that the public housing initiative is linked to training and opportunities for people to develop new skills and be able to conduct their business in a different way and perhaps to become more IT literate than they have been in the past. There are so many things that the Commonwealth government could be doing, if only there was the political will to do them.

We have seen an announcement made by the state government just a month or two before the election campaign which announced $12 million for the Sustainable Regions Program to
go into the Gippsland region generally—$4 million per year for three years. This is nowhere near enough for a region which has been identified as being in the top three most disadvantaged regions in the country. This has been identified by the Productivity Commission in their report into the impact of national competition policy on rural and regional Australia. This has been identified by the Jesuit Social Services, by the Australian Local Government Association and by so many reports which have clearly identified our region as having substantial need.

This is not the Gippsland region generally but the Latrobe Valley specifically. This is a very important point to make because the sustainable regions’ money has been granted for providing support for the entire Gippsland region. The entire Gippsland region is a pretty big place. About 256,000 people and many disparate communities exist within that broad Gippsland region. The hump in terms of the highest levels of unemployment exists in the Latrobe Valley. I do not think that $4 million per year for three years would do much in terms of unemployment in the Gippsland region. But I do think that, if targeted properly, those resources could make a difference if they are targeted physically at the Latrobe Valley, which has 70,000 people and an unemployment rate of 12 or 13 per cent, vis-a-vis Gippsland, which has about 260,000 people and an average unemployment rate which is if not half then probably close to half of that on average.

We should allocate the most resources that we have at our disposal to targeting those areas which are most in need. The area that is most in need in terms of Gippsland right now is the Latrobe Valley. We should target the most resources there because when we fix unemployment in the Latrobe Valley, we fix unemployment in Gippsland. When we are doing well in the Latrobe Valley, the rest of Gippsland does well because people in the Latrobe Valley can spend their money in the coastal towns to the south and to the east, go and spend some money at the lakes in the east, and enjoy the gourmet deli trail in the west or what have you. This has been an experience which we have seen before in our region: when the Latrobe Valley does well in Gippsland, the rest of Gippsland does well and benefits from that prosperity. We need to allocate those resources to those areas which are most in need, and the area which is unquestionably most in need in terms of Gippsland is the Latrobe Valley, so I would like to see those resources allocated there.

We have a lot to look forward to in terms of our region and I feel very positive about the future of my electorate and the Latrobe Valley in particular. We are a fantastic community. We have toughed out difficult circumstances, we have stuck together, we have fought hard to make sure that people knew just what we were going through and understood that we expected that people would give us the type of attention and respect that we deserve as an important region which has made an important contribution to the state of Victoria and to this country more generally.

Victoria has benefited unquestionably from the massive assets which were built in the Latrobe Valley, the massive power generating assets which have provided a cheap, high-quality energy supply which has made it possible for Victoria to be the hub of manufacturing in this country. People have benefited from the prosperity that we have provided to them, and I am very proud of the way that people in the Latrobe Valley have said that they want recognition that they have done a lot for our state and our country and that now, when they need some help and support, people do not abandon them.

That is what I am calling on the Prime Minister to do: to not abandon the people of the Latrobe Valley, to not just give us these small amounts of support which will not make any difference in general terms but allocate the resources to where the most need is. The most need is in the Latrobe Valley and that is why the Commonwealth should target those resources there. The $12 million which they have announced is nowhere near enough and more needs to be done for the Latrobe Valley. If only we had a Commonwealth government that was as pre-
pared to help the Latrobe Valley as our state government is, we would see a lot more in terms of opportunity created for people in the Latrobe Valley, not in five or 10 years but much sooner. I know that I speak for everybody in the Latrobe Valley when I say that that is what we want to see. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources) (9.00 p.m.)—I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this address-in-reply. I am certainly proud to stand here as a member of the Howard government—

Fran Bailey—The third government.

Mr ENTSCH—yes, the third Howard government—and, of course, as the federal member for Leichhardt for a third time. And, can I say, what a term this will be. The Australian public has certainly given this government a clear mandate to continue our policies which are bolstering the economic health of this nation. The fruits of our past efforts are making themselves plain to the Australian public in the form of sound and very solid economic growth. The proof of the pudding is certainly in the eating, and people all over this country are savouring the economic climate of record low interest rates and low inflation rates—very much thanks to the current coalition government.

Many of these decisions have been difficult. I do not think we could ever be accused of being a populist type of government. We have always taken on some very difficult decisions and we have focused on what is in the best interests of the nation. Of this, there is nothing more evident than the decision in 1998 to stand up and acknowledge the need for tax reform—the need to make that hard decision, irrespective of what the political outcome was, because it was in the best interests of this country. We won on that occasion. In the most recent election last year we went out again on the platform of more reform that was needed and on other issues such as border security, on which we have taken a very hard stand—one that needed to happen. We needed to get out there and make that stand. The people again spoke unequivocally in total support.

The reality of this government’s success so far in the pursuit of prosperity was made blatantly evident with the release last week of those exceptionally strong GDP figures. During 2001, Australia’s economy grew faster than that of any other industrialised nation—an outstanding 4.1 per cent.

Fran Bailey—An incredible result.

Mr ENTSCH—It is an incredible result when compared to the OECD average of 0.5 per cent. This country has achieved these heights despite the economic crisis faced by global leaders and economic juggernauts such as the United States. We may recall the Asian meltdown of a few years ago—that was another economic crisis. Japan has been struggling for a long time, and Japan is one of our major trading partners. There have been problems in Europe. Then, of course, we had the events of September 11, which certainly had a negative effect in places like the United States. But in Australia, because we had made those hard economic decisions, we were able to withstand those pressures and continue to spiral upward.

As I said earlier, success like this does not just happen by accident. It is brought about through the dedication and determination of our government. We are moving into our third term of outstanding economic growth. We started in 1996 with a $10 billion deficit that the Labor Party claimed did not exist and, of course, a $96 billion Labor Party debt. This debt has now been reduced by over $60 billion since we have been in government. You do not have to be an economic Einstein to appreciate the savings in interest alone to the taxpayers of this country. Those savings can go into other programs—like health, education, national and regional infrastructure and communications, which is happening right now, and which is very important.
The other side do not agree with this. I was listening, just before I made this contribution, to the member for Melbourne Ports. He spent almost his entire contribution suggesting that the only reason we won the election was because of the illegal immigrant issue. I think it is wonderful that they continue to focus on that sort of view because it will guarantee them at least another three terms in the political wilderness! That will be of huge benefit to Australia as a nation—we will certainly have plenty of money for them to spend after that period of time. Because we are making these decisions the Australian public continues to support us, and support us very strongly.

I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank the overwhelmingly large number of constituents in my electorate that came out and supported me at the last election. It is heartening to appreciate that if you do roll up your sleeves and get out there and do the job in the electorate, people are prepared to show that support through the ballot box. I think that could be said right across the whole spectrum, because every single one of our members got back in at the last election. It just shows what a hard-working government we really are, right down to each and every individual local member.

Fran Bailey—that is right. We roll our sleeves up.

Mr ENTSCH—we all roll our sleeves up, and we get out there and do the job. While I could go right across a whole spectrum of successes that I had during the election campaign and the support that I had from so many people, it would be unfair to single out any individual person. However, there is one community that I would like to single out and to say a very special thank you to—that is, the remote Aboriginal community of Pormpuraaw, in the west Cape York area. For the first time ever, a Liberal member has actually won a remote Aboriginal booth in the seat of Leichhardt on primary votes. It shows that remote Aboriginal communities like Pormpuraaw are now refusing to be spoon-fed Labor Party propaganda.

Communities like Pormpuraaw are thinking for themselves. They are considering what they feel is in their best interests rather than what the Labor Party says is their best interests. It is a great thing because at last we are going to see these remote communities putting out a message like Pormpuraaw that, ‘No political party is going to be able to take advantage of us anymore. If you want to get out there and get our support you are going to have to earn it.’ So I congratulate Pormpuraaw and its entire community. I feel very humbled by that very special support that I enjoyed.

The other thing that I was very pleased about with the last election is that it gives you an opportunity to bring to finality some of those projects that you have worked on for a long time and to focus on them to try to get some outcomes. Many members would have heard me speak in this House about the Peninsula Development Road. It was, in fact, in my maiden speech and I talked about the need for it to become a road of national importance. It is a vital lifeline to Cape York and it is shut for about five or six months of the year because it is always flooded and wet. We announced during the campaign that the Peninsula Development Road is now a road of national importance. Not only is it a road of national importance but we have put the first $5 million into the worst 16-kilometre section of the road to be sealed from Split Rock to Laura—and the Cape York residents will know where that is—and that money is available immediately. I see that as a major outcome.

The other success was the $9 million for the Cairns Esplanade redevelopment. That is another very special project that was desperately needed for the Cairns CBD business community, residents and the community generally. It is to put in a large boardwalk along the foreshore to enhance that area and it is a project that we have been looking at for a long time. We have come up with the $9 million to put that in and I have to congratulate Mayor Kevin Byrne and the council team on their very strong support in assisting me in getting that one across the line.
Another success that I was fortunate in being able to secure, and which was very important, was the $11 million for the six-laning for the southern access into Cairns, which takes additional six-laning from Sheehy Road down to Foster Road and helps to ease that congestion for peak hour traffic. It is going to be a hell of a relief for residents to the south of Cairns. Another major success was the extension of the Diesel Fuel Rebate Scheme—a major initiative in our area. First of all, it allows the community of Weipa to suddenly become a normal town instead of a mining town because they can now claim the rebate as a normal town. It also extended to small businesses like the Archer River Roadhouse and, one that has been particularly affected, the Cow Bay Hotel which has to rely on diesel for generation of power. It has cost them over $100,000 a year in extra costs to be able to run the generators and it made the business almost not viable. Sadly, they had actually tendered for that property from the Labor state government which had promised them mains power. They had to build within a certain timeframe and the state government insisted that they build and then they put in legislation that prohibited the extension of mains power, which guaranteed to send them broke. At least that $100,000 is now going to keep Denis Verri and the Cow Bay Hotel operating, so it has been a major benefit to them.

The other thing that I would like to mention in relation to our border security is the $12.8 million of additional funding to set up high frequency surface wave radar technology in the Torres Strait region. It is like over-the-horizon radar. They suggest on the other side that we are somewhat paranoid about illegal entry into this country but I can tell you that, when you get a boat full of illegals running up on your beach in the middle of your city—like at Holloways Beach in Cairns—and suddenly spreading all over the country dressed in suits, you have to suggest you have some real concerns about it. I know the people in my electorate do not want to see that happen and appreciate this type of additional security. It makes them sleep a bit more comfortably. They are not going to come into the middle of Melbourne, Adelaide or Sydney; they are likely to land in remote areas like the North Queensland coast and across that northern area. It is not just a matter of the people either. These people tend to carry food-stuffs which are not checked, and a whole lot of other things, and this is a serious threat to not only our national security but also our quarantine. It puts our own residents very much at serious risk with regard to health issues. Our agricultural industries are very much at risk as well. And, of course, there are the drugs which tend to come into those areas if we are not watching very carefully.

All in all, it was a very successful election campaign for me. I certainly appreciate the very strong support I got from the government in achieving those outcomes. But, when you put some of these issues to bed, there are always many other issues that rise up that you know you have to deal with. One of the most rewarding things I saw in the first week that the parliament sat was the reintroduction of unfair dismissal legislation. Some constituents in my electorate had two employees working in their establishment. They caught them out selling drugs, intimidating the other staff and doing a whole range of things like using drugs on the premises et cetera. They dismissed them and they are now locked in a battle over unfair dismissal. These individuals have cost them thousands and thousands of dollars that they have no hope of recovering. And they have discovered that this is the thing that these particular individuals do; it is not the first time. They have done it time and time again.

If ever there was a need for a change, it had to be on unfair dismissal laws. It will be interesting to see what happens in the Senate. I notice the legislation was objected to in the House, but we had the numbers. The socialist left Labor senator in my area, Senator McLucas, has been talking to this particular group and saying she is going to fix it. I challenge her to support the government on this because it will fix it. It will be interesting to see and we will be
watching very closely how she votes on that particular issue. I look forward to it with great anticipation.

Other issues that I would like to raise while I have the opportunity relate to superannuation. As we look forward to this term we see that there is still a lot of work we need to do on superannuation. We need to start to create incentives for people to contribute to their superannuation policies. We are an ageing population and we desperately need people to be putting more and more away themselves. We cannot expect private enterprise to continue to lift the ante, so we need to create incentives so that people can start to do it now. That is absolutely vital. The other thing that concerns me regarding superannuation is the amount of money that is floating around at the moment. Very little has been drawn so far, but in 10 or 15 years people will start drawing their pay cheques, and we have to make sure it is there. There are issues that we need to look at very closely.

Another issue that I have particular concerns about is the provision of dialysis facilities throughout Cape York. Believe it or not, some four years ago I had the opportunity to convince the then health minister, Michael Wooldridge, that we needed dialysis units in places like Weipa, and he committed $1 million to a unit at Weipa. To this day that money is still sitting there because Queensland Health refused to spend it, and Weipa has missed out. Twelve or 18 months ago we agreed to split the money and put half of it into Weipa and half into Bamiga. Neither of them has it yet—it is still sitting there. I urge the state minister to appreciate the need in that community and get that money into Weipa and Bamiga. In the meantime I will be working very closely with the new health minister to see whether I can source some money to put into Cooktown Hospital, so that we can do the whole dialysis unit, and into Torres Strait as well. That covers the whole York Peninsula region with regard to servicing dialysis needs. I know that the Hope Vale community has been working very hard to acquire a dialysis unit. It would mean that these people, who have a very high level of renal failure through diabetes problems, would not have to go to Cairns, which is their closest area for treatment, and in effect be locked out of their communities. The only way they come back to their communities is in a wooden box; they never come back until they die. By putting these facilities into the communities at least they would have a quality of life within their own communities. I would be interested to see how many people have died in Cairns and been taken back to their communities in boxes because they were unable to access the dialysis units for which money has been available for the last four years but has not been spent.

Finally, another of my community concerns is mental health. We cannot say that it is a state or community issue. It is a whole-of-country issue. Accommodation issues with regard to people with mental health problems are still very poorly addressed. Institutions were no longer seen as acceptable and such people were poured out into the community with no support accommodation. We have seen some of the most appalling situations in my electorate. I have some statistics: 18 per cent of adults in our community have experienced a mental health disorder, and unfortunately 25 per cent of young Australians between the ages of 18 and 24 experience at least one mental health disorder. Sadly, that leads into youth suicide, and we have appalling statistics in our area that need to be looked at very seriously. It is very frightening. In fact, recently the clergy and the police decided to get together because they realised that the statistics were not good, because of the number of people that they were burying. We are talking about people as young as 13 in our community who are being buried through suicide. Naomi Wilson and Deirdre Ford have done a wonderful job with the Yellow Ribbon program, which is working well in the area, but a hell of a lot more needs to be done in that area. We have to stop our young children killing themselves. Unfortunately, in my electorate very large numbers of children are dying unnecessarily. (Time expired)
Ms LIVERMORE (Capricornia) (9.20 p.m.)—I start this evening by saying thank you to the people of my electorate in Central Queensland and central western Queensland for returning me to be your representative in federal parliament for the next three-year term. It has been a great honour to be the representative of Capricornia for the last three years. It is a special place and a great electorate to represent, covering huge parts of Queensland through the Bowen Basin, the outback of central western Queensland and, of course, Rockhampton and the Capricorn Coast. It has been an honour to represent those people and I am looking forward to taking up the challenge of representing them again in this term. I would also like to thank the people who supported me so well through the last term of the parliament and throughout the very difficult and demanding campaign period: my husband, my wonderful staff and the many volunteers from the ALP and throughout the community who gave so much time and effort for the cause that Labor was putting forward in the last campaign. I appreciate the support that they gave to me personally. My job over the next three years is to continue the work of putting forward to the government and to the decision makers here in Canberra what is going on in Central Queensland and to tell them about our needs and concerns and the opportunities that we have to make a better future for everyone in Central Queensland. I hope that the government can work with us to realise those opportunities.

During the election I raised the issues that had been brought to me by the people of Capricornia throughout the previous three years. Some of the main ones that I focused on, as a result of the awareness that I had been given over the three years of the importance of those issues, included the high price of fuel in our region and, even more than the high price of the fuel, the discrepancy that existed between prices in Central Queensland and other seemingly comparable provincial centres. Another issue was the need for more aged care places, particularly on the very fast growing Capricorn Coast. Something that we were not really expecting but which became a huge issue at the time of the election was the impact of the loss of our second airline, Kendell, as a result of the collapse of Ansett. There was also the future of the international beef expo in Rockhampton, and what needed to be done for the city and the region to build even greater returns from this very successful event, now entering its 15th year, I believe.

Through the election, as for much of the last term, I was looking for an indication that the government understands Central Queensland and was about to reverse the neglect of our area that it has shown over its last two terms of office. The first big test of the government in the election was the issue of the beef expo site. Really, the fact that this was still an issue at the time of the election meant that the government had already failed that test. It showed that it had missed the point about how important this event is for Central Queensland.

I raised this issue in the House in June last year. I spoke about the importance of the beef expo to Rockhampton. It is a triennial event, and the last expo, held in 2000, attracted 44,000 visitors, including 1,700 international guests from 29 different countries. It is a very significant event, and not only for the particular period of time that it is on. It is an important showcase of the beef industry and of Rockhampton’s status as the beef capital of Australia. It is also a chance to showcase the research and technology strengths that we have in our region. The beef expo is really about Rockhampton staking its claim in the national and international arena.

I said all that in June and I also made mention of the fact that the state government had just the day before, on 19 June, pledged $8 million to the redevelopment of the showground site in Rockhampton and the Gracemere saleyards nearby to make sure that we had world-class facilities for the beef expo coming up in the year 2003. The state government had pledged that money because they understood the importance of having those world-class facilities. It was
clear to all involved in Beef 2000 that, if we were to continue to grow the beef expo, if it was to truly take on that international status, we needed to have top-class facilities.

I put it on the government at that time to match the state government in its funding, which was exactly what the Rockhampton City Council and the state government were asking the government to do. The government let the whole thing drag on until the election and, as I said at the start, that really was a failure. The event is happening in April 2003, so to have this dragging on until the end of 2001 was quite unacceptable and is putting great pressure on the organisers of the event and the state government and the council, who have to make this redevelopment happen.

The government dragged it out. In the meantime, my senior colleagues—people like Martin Ferguson and Gavan O’Connor—had held many meetings with representatives of the Beef 2000 committee and the council to make sure that we understood exactly what the project meant for Central Queensland and what was needed to ensure the success of the beef expo into the future. We announced very early in the campaign that we would fund the total $8 million that the Rockhampton City Council and the state government had requested in order to complete a world-class redevelopment of both the Rockhampton showgrounds and the Gracemere saleyards.

I think that the announcement by the ALP had more significance than just that particular project for Rockhampton or Central Queensland. It was an example of our approach to regional development and of what is missing in so much of what the government comes up with as its answer to regional development. It was an indication of Labor’s strategic approach to regional development: really getting in there, working with the local community and its leaders to identify their priorities, based on the region’s traditional strengths, and looking ahead to new opportunities that could be built on those traditional strengths. It also showed the importance that the ALP placed on working in partnership with other levels of government. This would have been a great example of all three levels of government identifying priorities for our region and really delivering on those with that funding.

As I said, Labor announced that, if we were successful in winning government, we would put in $8 million to allow the full project to proceed. The federal government followed Labor’s commitment a few days later with its own, smaller, funding announcement. The Minister for Transport and Regional Services promised $3.5 million for the redevelopment of the Gracemere saleyards. That goes some way to meeting the needs of the upcoming Beef 2000, but the failure to commit the full $8 million requested for the comprehensive redevelopment represents a missed opportunity for our region. It was all pretty simple: the leaders of Central Queensland told the federal government in clear terms what they wanted, what they had spent two years putting together, and when it came to the crunch the government refused to do its part. Not only that, it kept us waiting for almost a year to even get that far with it. We have lost a year in our organisation, and those delays have been compounded by the fact that the government has come forward with less money than was requested. So there are delays now in working out what we can do with the money that we have got, and what stays in the plan and what has to be discarded. Time is ticking away. We are talking about the end of the April 2003 for this to be completed.

The other part of John Anderson’s announcement in the election involved $2.2 million to the organisers of next year’s expo for the costs of staging the event. That assistance is very welcome—I know for a fact that the organising committee are very grateful for that money. But the big question now is where is it? The latest word we have is that when the announcement was made it must have somehow been earmarked somewhere in the Department of Transport and Regional Services and that it has now been shuffled into Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry’s responsibilities.

REPRESENTATIVES
MAIN COMMITTEE
Monday, 11 March 2002
I understand from the organising committee that the $2.2 million is going before the Expenditure Review Committee as part of AFFA’s submission in the next couple of weeks. My submission tonight, on behalf of Central Queensland and the beef industry, is: please do not break your promise. That $2.2 million is desperately needed by the organisers of this event. They are trying to organise an international event to guarantee the future of Beef Expo for Queensland and for Central Queensland particularly. There is no point coming up with this money in three months time or, as happened last time, I think, a few days before conference. If we are going to make this thing a worthwhile event for showcasing the beef industry and Central Queensland, that money needs to be guaranteed in the next couple of weeks. So I urge the minister, Warren Truss, who is taking that matter into the ERC, to do a good job on behalf of my electorate.

The other big issue, of course, which none of us really wanted to see was the collapse of Ansett. The collapse of Ansett has hit Rockhampton and Central Queensland very hard. We are now the only provincial centre on the Queensland coast without a second airline. You can ask anyone in Rockhampton or Central Queensland—businesspeople, government departments or just families wanting to seek medical treatment or to keep in touch with special family events—how crippling the cost of flights is between Rockhampton and our next major centre, Brisbane.

There seemed to be some hope for us when the government announced the Rapid Route Recovery Scheme, which was designed to help airlines restore services to regional and rural centres. I heard about the scheme and how, for example, Kendell had been given $750,000 to restore flights to centres in Victoria and New South Wales and I took the opportunity to write to John Anderson, the Minister for Transport and Regional Services, on 8 October last year to let him know what was happening in Rockhampton and the impact that was having on businesspeople and families—not to mention the employees of Kendell and associated industries.

I got a response to that letter on 5 November which said: ‘That is just all too bad. We know we have given $750,000 dollars to Kendell to restore services in other states, but Rockhampton is not going to get anything.’ That was bad enough, but on the same day the minister was in Gladstone—one hour south of Rockhampton, in the electorate of Hinkler—making an announcement that Gladstone would indeed be getting money from the Rapid Route Recovery Scheme to make sure that it had a second airline servicing its centre. We now have a situation where Rockhampton, a city of 60,000 people, servicing a population of 80,000 people, has one airline—Qantas—and where Gladstone, a town of 15,000 people, got that special deal so that it now has Qantas flying in as well as Flight West. It has got two airlines and Rocky, the major centre of the region, is struggling along with one and the crippling costs of flights that go with that.

On behalf of my electorate—and I let them know about it pretty loudly and clearly—I regard that as a complete insult to Rockhampton as a major provincial centre in Queensland, the centre for some pretty significant new industrial development and also the home of Central Queensland University. It was a complete insult to our city to go without that assistance to get in a second airline when, an hour away, Gladstone—which is one-quarter the size of Rockhampton—was able to secure that assistance. You have got the crazy situation where people from Rockhampton are now driving to Gladstone so that they can catch flights to Brisbane. So I urge the government to understand that aviation infrastructure and services are just as important as other forms of transport infrastructure and that the comment by Wilson Tuckey just the other day that all this should be left to market forces is not a good enough answer to the people of the Central Queensland region and my electorate.

It was a bit of a mixed bag coming out of the election—they were some of things that I was pretty unhappy about, on behalf of my electorate. One thing where we have managed to have
some success has been in the allocation of aged care places. Over the last three years—and I believe my predecessor, Paul Marek, was even lobbying before my time—I have joined with the community of the Capricorn Coast in lobbying very hard to get adequate aged care places in Yeppoon. It is a really fast growing area, particularly for people wishing to retire. There have been terrible stories, which I have told the parliament before, of couples being separated—a couple living in Yeppoon had to separate when one of them needed to get a higher level of care which was only available in Rockhampton, 40 to 45 kilometres away. That is a terrible sentence to impose on an elderly couple who are trying to enjoy their time together.

So we had some success and 50 beds were allocated to the Livingstone Shire, the local authority on the Capricorn Coast, which will go some way to meeting the needs of elderly people in that area. But I am not going to be happy with that. As I said, this is a very fast growing and popular retirement area and there is still a great need for more aged care services, specifically dementia services, on the Capricorn Coast and also in Rockhampton.

In conclusion, I would like to again let the government know that there is still plenty of work to be done in Central Queensland. As I said, we are moving into a new phase of development, but that just increases the need for infrastructure and services, particularly educational services. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

HIGHER EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL (No. 1) 2002
Second Reading

Debate resumed from 14 February, on motion by Dr Nelson:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (9.38 p.m.)—I am speaking tonight in support of the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002. This bill will bring into effect a 2001-02 budget measure to create a HECS—Higher Education Contribution Scheme—style interest-free loan scheme for overseas trained professionals. As we know, many overseas professionals need to undertake a course of study in order to meet formal recognition requirements for their professions here in Australia. Under the proposed scheme, loans will be available for non-award courses of no more than one year’s full-time study, and courses must be accredited.

Participants will repay their loan through the tax system, once their income reaches the minimum threshold for compulsory repayment. The thresholds and repayment rates are the same as those applying to HECS and to the new Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme, otherwise known as PELS. In this way, the Bridging for Overseas Trained Professionals—and I do not know how we are going to pronounce the acronym for this; BOTPLS—Loan Scheme provides the same financial assistance to overseas trained professionals as is now available to domestic postgraduate students. Loans will be available to people seeking to practise in either regulated or self-regulated professions. In both cases, responsibility for assessing the applicants’ qualifications and identifying the education and training requirements for entry into the profession will rest with the assessing authority. The legislation requires the relevant assessing bodies to provide an assessment statement indicating that the person has an overseas qualification that is comparable to that required by the profession in Australia. It also must indicate the occupation related gaps that preclude the person from practising and demonstrate that the amount of education and training required to fill these gaps does not exceed the equivalent of one year of full-time university study.

It is certainly the case that, if Australia is to address existing skills shortages and evolve into a much more knowledge based economy, we do need to make sure that overseas trained professionals are able to access bridging training and qualify to practise in either the regulated...
or self-regulated professions. For that reason, we certainly support this legislation. It is currently the case that a number of professionals are unable to enrol in bridging courses because of restrictions on government funded places. Other professionals may be dissuaded from updating their skills because they are unable to meet course costs at the time of enrolment.

The current program has provided funding for approximately 500 people a year, but it is argued that the demand for bridging courses has exceeded the supply because the number of places has been limited by the budgeted funds available. We have been advised by the department that some course providers have restricted their offerings, in line with the availability of government places, while a number of overseas professionals have been precluded from undertaking bridging courses because they are unable to afford the full fees. I have no doubt that this loan scheme will go some way to alleviating those pressures. The minister’s second reading speech indicated that the loans provided under the proposed scheme would amount to $12 million over the next five years and would assist an estimated 3,000 participants to enter their professions in Australia. I have no doubt that this assistance will be welcomed by those people. It is important to note that Australian permanent residents who hold a Centrelink concession card will still have access to the Assessment Fee Subsidy for Overseas Trained Australian Residents program, which will not be, as I understand it, affected by the bill.

In my concluding remarks, I would note that this loan scheme seeks to address facilitating access to education and skills development, which is certainly urgently needed in our post-compulsory education and training system. I would also make a few remarks in relation to the very significant unmet demand for places for Australian students, both at universities and in technical and further education. As I understand it, the unmet demand for university places last year numbered over 40,000, and we understand it will be even higher this year. It is, of course, of grave concern to all of us that, at a time when we have so many existing skills shortages, we face this level of unmet student demand.

I bring the attention of the chamber to one case in point, which is teaching. We have large numbers of teachers who are approaching retirement age, and in many states we face a chronic shortage of trained teachers. That will only get worse over the next decade. Unfortunately, our universities are being forced to turn away applicants for teacher training because of a lack of available places. By way of example, RMIT in Melbourne received 1,730 applications, over 400 of which were first preference applications for just 99 places in their four-year bachelor of education degree, so there is a major outstripping of demand over the supply of places. There are many other examples where we have significant shortages of trained professionals and insufficient places, whether it be apprenticeships, technical and further education or university professional courses. In a significant number of courses the demand is far outstripping the supply of places.

The loans scheme which we are considering is a welcome initiative but I would say to the government that, if we are to address the demand from Australian students, both for university and TAFE places—and if we are to meet the skills shortages that we have in this country, rather than looking at cutting education in the forthcoming budget—as we aspire to being a high-wage, high-skill, knowledge based economy, we cannot afford to be turning away eligible and eager students from our educational institutions. I am pleased to support the bill.

Mr GEORGIOU (Kooyong) (9.46 p.m.)—The Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002 implements measures to strengthen the consistency and accessibility of the Australian tertiary education system. I am very pleased that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition has indicated that the opposition welcomes the measure. As part of the 2000-01 budget, the government announced that it would establish a scheme to provide loans for overseas trained professionals who require bridging courses to enter their profession in Australia. The loans scheme will replace the grants program entitled Bridging Courses for Overseas Profes-
professionally Trained which has been funded through the Department of Education, Science and Training in its various forms since 1989. Under this program, study by overseas trained professionals was funded entirely by the government. The overseas trained have, for some years, been treated in a rather more generous way than those who were trained in Australia who, since 1984, have been required to contribute to their own education through the HECS and the PELS schemes. The bill removes this inconsistency and establishes a HECS style loans scheme to fund bridging courses for the overseas trained. By offering a HECS style loan, the bill extends the principle that, whilst students should contribute to the cost of their tertiary education, there should not be financial barriers preventing Australian students from undertaking tertiary education.

The new scheme will enable the Commonwealth to pay the tuition fees of overseas trained professionals who undertake additional training in order to meet the formal recognition requirements of their profession in Australia. These professionals will subsequently be required to repay the loan interest-free through the taxation system once their income exceeds a specified level. It will ensure that tuition fees, due at the time of enrolment, do not deter overseas trained professionals from undertaking additional training.

I am advised that replacing the grants scheme with the loans scheme will remove the cap on the number of people who can participate in bridging courses by ending the limitation previously imposed by the program’s budget. I am also advised that the current program benefits approximately 500 people per year, that the demand for bridging courses has outstripped the number of places available, that people who wish to participate in courses are precluded from participating in them because of cost, and that places are limited because course providers have restricted their offerings in line with the availability of government funded places. The new loans scheme will remove this restriction without increasing the burden on the taxpayer.

Australia attracts many overseas trained professionals who, having taken up Australian permanent residency or citizenship, wish to continue to work in their field. These people do make a great contribution to Australian professional life and to Australian society generally. They bring knowledge and professional experience. They often bring a different perspective and new approaches that contribute to the development of Australian professionals. The government recognises this important contribution and is committed to expanding opportunities for overseas trained professionals to utilise their skills in our country.

To be eligible for the scheme, an overseas trained professional must be an Australian citizen or a permanent resident. They must hold qualifications that are at degree level or above. These qualifications must entitle them to work overseas in an occupation that is self-regulated or statutorily regulated in Australia. Their occupation must be listed by the minister as one that is approvable for bridging training. Their qualifications must be assessed by the relevant assessing authority for their occupation. The assessment must be in writing and they must produce a statement to the effect that, if the applicant were successful in one or more examinations, or successfully undertook tuition or a training program, they would meet the requirements and be able to practise their professions in Australia.

The ability of overseas trained people to practise their profession in Australia has always been subject to the decision of professional bodies. Under both the existing program and the proposed new scheme, an applicant must independently seek the recognition by the relevant professional body of their qualifications. For example, a veterinary surgeon trained in Canada and wishing to practise in Australia must be assessed by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council Inc. and may first be required to complete the national veterinary examination.

Under the Bridging Courses for Overseas Professionally Trained program, the government did not interfere with these sorts of professional bodies in any way. They performed their
regulatory functions whilst the government merely funded the additional program training they prescribed. Under the new loans scheme this process is placed on a legislative footing and, as a result of the drafting, occupations must be specified by the minister and professional bodies gazetted for the purposes of the bill. The regime operates in such a way that the minister may determine that a specified occupation is a listed occupation and that a specified person or body is a relevant assessing body for a particular occupation. The minister is also granted a discretion to determine that a specified part of a profession is a profession in its own right. In effect, organisations that represent a subset of a profession may be gazetted for the purposes of this bill.

According to the explanatory memorandum, this means that in occupations where there are postgraduate specialities, such as in medicine, each specialist branch may be considered to constitute a profession in its own right. Under the current program, assistance can only be provided to overseas trained professionals who are seeking to obtain basic entry requirements. With these new provisions, people who work in specialist fields, such as surgeons, may become eligible to access the scheme. I am advised by the Department of Education, Science and Training that at this stage there are no plans to introduce bridging courses for specialist professionals and that this is an issue that will be addressed in the future.

Australia has benefited greatly from the contribution of those who, having qualified overseas, choose to work in Australia. Some are people who come here as skilled migrants, who have chosen to make Australia their home. Others are Australian citizens by birth who obtained qualifications while overseas. It is important that as a nation we recognise and benefit from their skills and achievements. The establishment of a HECS style loan scheme is a demonstration of this government’s commitment to maintaining the accessibility of bridging courses. The new measures will ensure that the funding of bridging courses is consistent with undergraduate and postgraduate study within Australia. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (9.54 p.m.)—The Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002 amends the Higher Education Funding Act 1998, which made provisions for grants of financial assistance to higher education institutions and other bodies for higher education purposes. The bill specifically seeks to amend the Higher Education Funding Act 1998 to create a HECS style interest-free loan scheme—called the Bridging for Overseas Trained Professionals Loan Scheme—for overseas trained professionals to undertake a course of study to enable them to meet formal recognition requirements for their professions in Australia. Participants repay their loan through the taxation system once their income reaches the minimum threshold for compulsory repayment. The explanatory memorandum says:

To be eligible for the new scheme, applicants will require an assessment statement from the relevant gazetted assessing authority—quite rightly so—and this will specify the nature of the additional training that is required.

The memorandum goes on to say:

It is the government’s intention that the new bridging loan scheme will commence on 1 July 2002. The bill allows for transition arrangements for participants who started their bridging course in the first semester of 2002.

In effect, we have a loan scheme to finance bridging courses—a responsibility taken over by the Commonwealth in the early 1990s. We are led to believe that approximately 500 people per year have benefited from the previous scheme, but demand exceeded supply and a good deal of this supply was restricted by government funded places available. As the second reading speech clearly pointed out, courses will hopefully now be more accessible. I am
thinking of some overseas trained professionals—particularly in medicine—in my own state, who will hopefully benefit from this arrangement.

As mentioned earlier, to be eligible for a loan the applicant must hold professional qualifications that have been awarded in another country. In effect, this means applicants will be postgraduate students and will be able to access the same sort of financial assistance that is available to undergraduates who defer their education costs through HECS. In effect, this is similar to the Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme, which we dealt with—if my memory serves me correctly—some time late last year.

The estimate is that the loans provided under the proposed scheme will amount to some $12 million over the next five years and it is predicted to assist around 3,000 people to enter their profession. Hopefully, that will be eagerly taken up and will provide some assistance to those people to fill the gaps through these bridging courses so that they will go on to be fully qualified—hopefully quickly so that they will be able to repay the loans and that they are in the work force making their contributions to our community. As the shadow minister mentioned a moment ago, we are quite happy to support this legislation.

I would like to take the opportunity, whilst I have the time, to make mention of other issues affecting finances and higher education. Without going into too much detail—I hope to be able to do that at a later time—I think it is appropriate that we bear in mind the fact that higher education, although very much an investment in our future by the Commonwealth, the states and our communities, is also an investment by the people who are participating in higher education. It is probably the most important investment that we make in our community, along with the overall education of our young people and the training of our citizens. I think we have to point out and remember that it is becoming more and more expensive, not only to be educated but to be the person who is undergoing that education.

It was rather disturbing recently to read of a Newspoll survey of 1,200 Australian adults which found that 84 per cent of parents and grandparents want their children to undertake postgraduate education. That is not disturbing at all—that is great news. Only 34 per cent said they were saving for their child’s or grandchild’s tertiary study. Ten per cent thought that it would cost less than $5,000, about 17 per cent thought it would cost $10,000 to $15,000 and 13 per cent thought $15,000 to $20,000. Only 17 per cent of parents and grandparents—so it is reported—expected a higher education to cost more than $20,000.

If there is a message there, it is that the majority of Australians who are eagerly anticipating and supporting their young people to go on and further their education and training—wherever that may be, but particularly in higher education—really do not have an appreciation of the cost of that investment. It is very important that we educate people about the realities of that and that we take every opportunity to assist those people, just as the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002 tonight is seeking to assist those people to fill the gaps and to bridge the gaps in their education. Unfortunately, in terms of higher education, the reality is very different from what people expect. Based on a survey of 30 institutions by the Australian Scholarship Group, course costs were something like $18,000 per year. If you look at the full minimum cost of a three-year arts degree, you are looking at $55,000 and you are looking at $130,000 for a six-year medical degree.

I know people are willing to invest in their education or in the education of their children and the Newspoll of 1,200 Australian adults—parents and grandparents—demonstrated that. However, there comes a point when they need assistance to finance that education. Report after report, and most recently from the Australian vice-chancellors group or from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education and the work of Professor Craig McInnis, substantiate the fact that most students and their families are in financial trouble when it comes to financing their education and that they go into debt.
A lot of people in this room who may have been fortunate enough to have a higher education went through effectively without paying a cent. We had Commonwealth scholarships and teaching scholarships. We did not have full payment recoveries from the universities at that stage. I am not saying open slather; I am saying that I do not think that we fully appreciate the difficulties now of paying for, and studying in, higher education. Most of the reports clearly indicate that students have to have part-time work in order to survive—not to provide the grog money, the party money, the entertainment expenses and the little luxuries we used to have, or to run the mini van and drink the port on a Wednesday night. We are talking about necessities, not the luxuries. More and more of them have to work longer hours part time to finance themselves. Many of those students have said, particularly in the first year surveys, that they want to go full time but cannot and that some are either leaving their courses or are very close to it.

That means that we have a situation where they, and their parents, need support. I will take that a little further and I do not mind arguing this on and on. We have youth allowance and Austudy in terms of supporting students. We also have accommodation and living away from home allowances for those who are eligible. Of course, that is benchmarked on a very low-income threshold. Realistically, it is a low-income threshold. I believe that that threshold needs to be looked at and reviewed if we are talking about assisting people in order to advance and continue their education.

I also look at the whole question of the age of independence. That has fluctuated over time. It was unheard of when we were younger that you would still be dependent on your parents at the age of 24 or 25, but less so of course if you are unemployed. There is an anomaly for a start. It is an anomaly not in terms of payments but in terms of age and independence. That whole question needs to be reviewed because it is pertinent to what I regard as the whole social psychology of independence. That is very important indeed.

I ask you to consider another area of concern in terms of supporting people financially to go on and further their education at TAFE or higher education, because I believe that it particularly affects rural and regional Australia. That area relates to those families, whose children or young people are dependent on them until the age of 24 or 25 because of that income threshold, who proudly receive no benefits whatsoever through the social system. However, when those people have to leave their regions in order to study their courses, a discriminatory differential arises based on geography. Purely and simply, if I live in my magnificent home town of Devonport—or just out of Devonport—and I have to do most tertiary studies beyond one year, I have to go to Hobart or Launceston, or if I must be forced to the mainland—forced to leave paradise and to go to the mainland—to do my courses, not only do I pay what everyone else is paying if they do not receive any financial assistance at all, but on top of that I am up for $10,000 or $12,000 a year. I reckon that is unfair; I really do.

How do we support those families? They get no other support. The differential is the geography: they must go and study—you can verify that by the university entrance—and they have to be accommodated elsewhere. How can we assist them? We assist people to do bridging courses because they will contribute to our community. We have the lowest retention rates in rural and regional Australia. How do we assist them? Do not give me the isolated and rural accommodation allowance; I am talking about assistance much closer to home. We do not mind non-means tested assistance. But what are we going to do about supporting those people?

We talk about aspirational Australians, and some say, ‘If you’re doing that, you’re giving them a free leg up. You are not. All I am talking about is the inequity between where they live and the fact that they must study elsewhere—and you can verify it through the taxation system. How can we assist them? Why can’t we look at supporting them with some form of tax concession on their accommodation receipts? I would ask you to take it up. I realise that I
am bordering on irrelevance here—heads are nodding and you are thinking, ‘What’s he talking about?’—but I really wanted to raise this issue. I do not care whether we are Liberal, Labor or whatever: it is an issue and I do not think enough people have even mentioned it, quite frankly.

I am glad to support and help people bridge their educational needs, particularly to get overseas trained professionals working in our communities. We desperately need them, and we fully support that. But I would say to you that we have other financial needs. I am trying to prioritise some of those. The age of independence, and certainly the income threshold for youth allowance and Austudy, I believe we need to look at again. Also, why do we limit the earning capacity of people on those allowances, when we can tax it under any normal arrangement once it reaches a certain level? I think we have to look at those issues. I wish any student well in our system, but we must invest and we must support our families.

Mr WAKELIN (Grey) (10.09 p.m.)—I am delighted that the member for Braddon touched on those subjects, whatever the context, but I will go to Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002 first. The amendment of the Higher Education Funding Act 1998, well covered by previous speakers, is about bridging for overseas trained professionals and, as the member for Jagajaga has said, the BOTP Loans Scheme. The bill contains a whole range of definitions for the following: occupations, qualifications, relevant assessing bodies, the requirements for entry to listed professional occupations, semester, student, student load and student period. It goes through a lot of definitional issues, leading to the intention to have a scheme for providing loans to overseas trained professional people who require bridging courses to enter their professions in Australia because the current system is overtaxed. The Minister for Education, Science and Training has brought to the table an alternative to that process, which we all support.

The member for Braddon, in relation to the issues of rural and regional Australia, is absolutely right. It is unfair. We have low retention rates. We have to do it better. For the honourable member’s information, only about two hours ago I was saying the same thing in this place. I think it is totally discriminatory. I was also making the point that the urban areas and some significant regional areas actually get the benefit of billions of dollars of expenditure and that brings strength to those regional and metropolitan economies. But we in the regions do not even get the benefit of that. Many will say that that is the luck of the draw, but nevertheless the fact that rural and regional Australia does not have equitable access to education compared to metropolitan Australia is a blight on the way we offer university education and, in some cases, secondary education in Australia. I certainly will do all that I can to constantly bring this issue before the parliament and the executive, regardless of the colour of the government of the day. But I do wish speedy passage of the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002.

Mr HATTON (Blaxland) (10.12 p.m.)—The Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002 deals with a significant problem that is felt not only in my electorate of Blaxland but Australia-wide. I come from an electorate where there is a multitude of people who have come from all corners of the world—people with professional qualifications in accountancy, in law, in medicine, in nursing and in engineering—with qualifications, whilst they are recognised overseas, that are not immediately recognised in Australia. This bill attempts to deal with this situation and provide some remedy. It is replacing a subset of an existing bill, the Bridging Courses for the Overseas Trained Program. In the explanatory memorandum it is argued that this bill will in fact save $2.1 million in the course of the next financial year, 2002-03.

The core of the problem that people face when they have a full life, a full education and full training overseas usually consists of two significant factors. One factor is the problem of
If someone comes from South America, where the dominant language is Spanish, and they are well trained in Spanish, well trained in Spanish law or well trained in accountancy within the country that they come from in South America, on coming to Australia they hit two significant hurdles. One of course is the language problem. In terms of how this problem is addressed, we note one significant problem to start with: since coming to government in 1996, this government poleaxed the AMES program. At least 40 per cent of that was gutted in 1996.

This affects those people in my electorate who are at the bottom of the pile—those people with the fewest skills, the least ability to deal with the situation and the least ability in English—whose lives in Australia are circumscribed by the fact that if they do not have English language capacity then they cannot earn properly, they cannot be productive enough and they cannot add what they wish to add as new Australian residents and citizens, because the English language skills, which are the key to success, the key to productivity and the key to providing a full and rich life in Australia for them and for their children, have been proscribed.

The government on coming to power determined that, for people who spoke a foreign language when they came to Australia, the appropriate provision of foreign language training would be cut away from them. They attempted to privatise that, and they cut back the scope of it.

That affects not only the people at the bottom of the pile with the fewest skills but also the people that the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002 attempts to address: those with a higher level of skills. We note that one of the provisions indicated in the explanatory memorandum is that a person coming to Australia with an equivalent diploma or TAFE education level is not provided for under this bill; they are expected to operate in a different way. This bill provides specifically for people who have reached bachelor level of university education in a country overseas, and that means that we are dealing with people who have had invested in them—that is, had applied the social and educational capital of their originating country—an enormous amount of money, an enormous amount of effort, an enormous amount of time and an enormous amount of skilling.

What is their situation in Australia, particularly since 1996 when the coalition came to power? The first hurdle they face is that a lot of the English language training, which is the sine qua non, the prime precondition for success in this country, has been ripped away. The second is that, if they rock up to the AMA or other professional associations and apply to have their overseas qualifications recognised, as doctor after doctor after doctor has done—the Minister for Education, Science and Training at the table would know—the answer is no, no and no. They have to go through a long period of training at their own expense.

It needs to be rigorous because we are dealing with the health of Australian individuals and with the Australian health system. Overseas trained nurses, doctors and assistants need to be sure that they can communicate effectively with other health professionals. But under this government they are given no real help to establish fundamental English language capacity, and they are provided with a series of hurdles, either by the government or by the professional associations, to actually restrict their capacity to enter the Australian work force as skilled professionals.

In my electorate of Blaxland there are doctors, nurses, teachers and engineers who are prohibited from taking the social and educational capital that they have built up in countries overseas and providing that to the Australian community at a very small charge. That happens because there is a lack of foresight in regard to this, and this bill only partly addresses that. The reason it only partly addresses it is that there is a lack of appreciation of the fact that, as a direct part of our immigration program, we are bringing in skilled people from overseas—skilled, yes, in other jurisdictions—who are lacking in a lot of cases the capacity in terms of...
English language ability and also lacking a knowledge and understanding of (1) the legislative framework within which they work, (2) the professional codes that operate within Australia and (3) the general cultural milieu in which they are expected to work.

A smart nation, a clever nation, a nation that wanted to use the immigration program and what it offered us would go a lot further than we have gone in the past, and particularly since 1996, in picking up those skilled people and saying that we want them not just out of the business migration program but transferred into the Australian system as fully productive members of the community. It is not much use having a doctor trained overseas—not at our expense but at the expense of Brazil, Argentina, Spain or England—come into Australia and not be able to work within Australia. Similarly, in Blaxland, one of my local branch members is an accountant who spent a number of years going through the full university retraining exercise in order to be able to practise in Australia, when the skill base that he had from the country from which he originated was extremely strong to start off with. The country itself has been losing out because we have not converted the overseas skills into Australian based skills quickly enough.

The minister at the table has introduced this bill as a mechanism to try to provide some means for some of these people to enter bridging courses and, in those bridging courses, to find a way into exercising their skills in Australia. We note that it is a HECS based approach—and we cannot completely knock the HECS based approach, because we introduced it for undergraduate courses. But I would argue, Minister, that this is a second-best approach. I note that in this bill you are saving $2.1 million on the 2002-03 program. I also note that there is a vast river of people who, since 1996, we have lost out on by not converting their skills, demanding of them that instead of acting as engineers, accountants or doctors, because we have not progressed their transition fast enough, they continue to work as taxi drivers and shop cleaners and in other relatively low paid occupations and, on top of that, take the bridging courses to make that transition. It is a pretty tough life for them.

They have been willing to come to Australia. They want to exercise their skills, they want to do what a lot of Australian individuals in the 1950s and 1960s were deprived of doing—that is, use their high level of education from overseas to the benefit of themselves, their families and Australia. While I commend the fact that this bill seeks to address through the bridging courses people getting in and getting the education which could provide that transition, it does not go far enough to redress the immense problem we have in that we have not utilised effectively enough the capacity that has come into Australia.

Dr NELSON (Bradfield—Minister for Education, Science and Training) (10.22 p.m.)—in reply—In summing up the debate on the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2002, I would like to thank all of those who spoke to the bill. I would like to thank the opposition for agreeing to support the passage of the bill and also pay tribute not only to all of the speakers but to the member for Kooyong, who had obviously put an enormous amount of research and effort into understanding the bill and providing a basis for its support.

The eligibility for entry into professions of overseas trained professionals is determined through an assessment of their qualifications—it was not precisely the way in which it was outlined by the member for Blaxland, but it was something like that. Following such an assessment, many authorities recommend bridging courses either as preparation for an entry examination or to make up knowledge gaps that have been identified through the assessment process. We have heard much in the debate about dentists, medical practitioners and other professionals being required to undertake a clinical bridging course to prepare for an exam. In recognition of the importance of assisting overseas trained professionals to gain recognition for entry into their professions, the Commonwealth government began funding the current bridging program in the early 1990s. While the current program has benefited about 500 peo-
ple per year, the demand for bridging courses has clearly exceeded supply. For example, the Australian Medical Council in Queensland has indicated that it had 160 applicants for 20 funded places in 2001 and the dentistry bridging course in Victoria had 50 applications for 16 funded places in 2002. Clearly, that level of unmet demand is totally unacceptable.

The new Bridging for Overseas Trained Professionals Loan Scheme will make it possible for more people to take advantage of bridging courses, and the purpose of the bill is to expand the opportunities for overseas trained professionals to undertake these courses without increasing the burden on Australian taxpayers. To be eligible for a loan under the new scheme, the applicant must have professional qualifications that have been awarded in another country. Therefore, they are already graduates. In line with current trends in higher education funding, they will pay full fees for postgraduate courses, as do other Australian graduates, and this new program will operate in the same way as the Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme, or PELS. Repayments will be linked to income and they will be paid through the taxation system.

Eligibility is limited to non-award courses of no more than one year’s full-time study, so these participants are likely to enter the work force and begin repaying their loans quickly. Australian permanent residents who hold a Centrelink concession card will still have access to the Assessment Fee Subsidy for Overseas Trained Australian Residents program, which will not be affected by this bill. It is the government’s intention that the new bridging loan scheme will commence on 1 July 2002. The bill allows for transition arrangements for participants who started their bridging course in the first semester of 2002. It should be pointed out also that there is very strong support from professional bodies, including the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee, for the new scheme, which will benefit migrants who are overseas trained professionals. The scheme will also benefit all Australians, as it contributes to an essential strengthening of our skills base. I commend this bill to the committee and again thank all of those who spoke to the bill—although I did not always agree with all of the comments and contributions made by opposition members.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Message from the Governor-General recommending appropriation announced.

Ordered that the bill be reported to the House without amendment.

Main Committee adjourned at 10.27 p.m.