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SITTING DAYS—2006

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- **GOSFORD**: 98.1 FM
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- **GOLD COAST**: 95.7 FM
- **MELBOURNE**: 1026 AM
- **ADELAIDE**: 972 AM
- **PERTH**: 585 AM
- **HOBART**: 747 AM
- **NORTHERN TASMANIA**: 92.5 FM
- **DARWIN**: 102.5 FM
FORTY-FIRST PARLIAMENT
FIRST SESSION—FIFTH PERIOD

Governor-General
His Excellency Major-General Michael Jeffery, Companion in the Order of Australia, Commander of the Royal Victorian Order, Military Cross

House of Representatives Officeholders
Speaker—The Hon. David Peter Maxwell Hawker MP
Deputy Speaker—The Hon. Ian Raymond Causley MP
Second Deputy Speaker—Mr Henry Alfred Jenkins MP

Members of the Speaker’s Panel—The Hon. Dick Godfrey Harry Adams, Mr Phillip Anthony Barresi, the Hon. Bronwyn Kathleen Bishop, Mr Michael John Hatton, Mr Peter John Lindsay, Mr Robert Francis McMullan, Mr Harry Vernon Quick, the Hon. Bruce Craig Scott, the Hon. Alexander Michael Somlyay, Mr Kim William Wilkie

Leader of the House—The Hon. Anthony John Abbott MP
Deputy Leader of the House—The Hon. Peter John McGauran MP
Manager of Opposition Business—Ms Julia Eileen Gillard MP
Deputy Manager of Opposition Business—Mr Anthony Norman Albanese MP

Party Leaders and Whips
Liberal Party of Australia
    Leader—The Hon. John Winston Howard MP
    Deputy Leader—The Hon. Peter Howard Costello MP
    Chief Government Whip—Mr Kerry Joseph Bartlett MP
Government Whips—Mrs Joanna Gash MP and Mr Fergus Stewart McArthur MP

The Nationals
    Leader—The Hon. Mark Anthony James Vaile MP
    Deputy Leader—The Hon. Warren Errol Truss MP
    Chief Whip—Mr John Alexander Forrest MP
    Whip—Mr Paul Christopher Neville MP

Australian Labor Party
    Leader—The Hon. Kim Christian Beazley MP
    Deputy Leader—Ms Jennifer Louise Macklin MP
Chief Opposition Whip—The Hon. Leo Roger Spurway Price MP
Opposition Whips—Mr Michael David Danby MP and Ms Jill Griffiths Hall MP

Printed by authority of the House of Representatives
### Members of the House of Representatives

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<td>Vasta, Ross Xavier</td>
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<td>Wakelin, Barry Hugh</td>
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<td>Washer, Malcolm James</td>
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<td>Wilkie, Kim William</td>
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<td>Windsor, Antony Harold Curties</td>
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**PARTY ABBREVIATIONS**

ALP—Australian Labor Party; LP—Liberal Party of Australia; Nats—The Nationals; 
Ind—Independent; CLP—Country Liberal Party; AG—Australian Greens

### Heads of Parliamentary Departments

- Clerk of the Senate—H Evans
- Clerk of the House of Representatives—I C Harris
- Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services—H R Penfold QC
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Prime Minister
The Hon. John Winston Howard MP

Minister for Trade and Deputy Prime Minister
The Hon. Mark Anthony James Vaile MP

Treasurer
The Hon. Peter Howard Costello MP

Minister for Transport and Regional Services
The Hon. Warren Errol Truss MP

Minister for Defence
The Hon. Dr Brendan John Nelson MP

Minister for Foreign Affairs
The Hon. Alexander John Gosse Downer MP

Minister for Health and Ageing and Leader of the House
The Hon. Anthony John Abbott MP

Attorney-General
The Hon. Philip Maxwell Ruddock MP

Minister for Finance and Administration, Leader of the Government in the Senate and Vice-President of the Executive Council
Senator the Hon. Nicholas Hugh Minchin

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Deputy Leader of the House
The Hon. Peter John McGauran MP

Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
Senator the Hon. Amanda Eloise Vanstone

Minister for Education, Science and Training and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women’s Issues
The Hon. Julie Isabel Bishop MP

Minister for Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
The Hon. Malcolm Thomas Brough MP

Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs

Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources
The Hon. Ian Elgin Macfarlane MP

Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service
The Hon. Kevin James Andrews MP

Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate
Senator the Hon. Helen Lloyd Coonan

Minister for the Environment and Heritage
Senator the Hon. Ian Gordon Campbell

(The above ministers constitute the cabinet)
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Senator the Hon. Christopher Martin Ellison

Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation
Senator the Hon. Eric Abetz

Minister for the Arts and Sport
Senator the Hon. Charles Roderick Kemp

Minister for Human Services
The Hon. Joseph Benedict Hockey MP

Minister for Community Affairs
The Hon. John Kenneth Cobb MP

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The Hon. Peter Craig Dutton MP

Special Minister of State
The Hon. Gary Roy Nairn MP

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Parliamentary Secretary (Trade)
The Hon. De-Anne Margaret Kelly MP

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Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister
The Hon. Malcolm Bligh Turnbull MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer
The Hon. Christopher John Pearce MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage
The Hon. Gregory Andrew Hunt MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
The Hon. Sussan Penelope Ley MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education, Science and Training
The Hon. Patrick Francis Farmer MP

Parliamentary Secretary (Foreign Affairs)
The Hon. Teresa Gambaro MP
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Jennifer Louise Macklin MP

Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Shadow Minister for Family and Community Services
Senator Christopher Vaughan Evans

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Communications and Information Technology
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Shadow Treasurer
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Lindsay James Tanner MP

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Senator Penelope Ying Yen Wong

(The above are shadow cabinet ministers)
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Shadow Minister for Population Health and
Health Regulation
Laurie Donald Thomas Ferguson MP

Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries
Shadow Assistant Treasurer, Shadow Minister for
Revenue and Shadow Minister for Small
Business and Competition
Gavan Michael O’Connor MP
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Shadow Minister for Sport and Recreation
Shadow Minister for Homeland Security and
Shadow Minister for Aviation and Transport
Security
Senator Kerry Williams Kelso O’Brien
Senator Kate Alexandra Lundy
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Kirsten Fiona Livermore MP

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Jennie George MP

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Ann Kathleen Corcoran MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Treasury
Catherine Fiona King MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Science and
Water
Senator Ursula Mary Stephens

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Northern
Australia and Indigenous Affairs
The Hon. Warren Edward Snowdon MP
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Tuesday, 14 February 2006

The SPEAKER (Hon. David Hawker) took the chair at 2.00 pm and read prayers.

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Oil for Food Program

Mr BEAZLEY (2.01 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister. I refer to the minister’s reckless negligence in the administration of his portfolio and his turning of a blind eye to at least 13 warnings about AWB kickbacks, resulting in serious damage to the livelihoods of Australian wheat farmers. Will the Deputy Prime Minister now take responsibility for hurting our Aussie wheat farmers? Will he now apologise to these farmers and their families, who are paying the price for his incompetence?

The SPEAKER—Order! In calling the Deputy Prime Minister, I remind the Leader of the Opposition that that question contained arguments, epithets and a few other things going to standing order 100. Nonetheless, I will let the question stand, but I would ask future questioners to remember those points.

Mr VAILE—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question and absolutely reject any notion of recklessness or any other adjective you might like to apply to the way the government has conducted affairs on behalf of Australian wheat growers for the duration of its time in office. From the outset the government has been very diligent in ensuring that Australian wheat growers’ interests have been looked after every inch of the way as far as this issue is concerned. The current circumstances—and I presume the Leader of the Opposition is referring to a decision announced yesterday—are regrettable, and the government will make representations to the Iraqi government on the decision that was taken yesterday. As far as this whole process is concerned, every time there has been an allegation raised we have pursued it and resolved it. The UN from start to finish have certified every single contract, and this government has done everything it possibly can to look after the interests of Australia’s wheat growers.

Oil for Food Program

Mr FORREST (2.03 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. Has the Prime Minister’s attention been drawn to an apparent decision of the Iraqi Grains Board to suspend trading with AWB Ltd pending the outcome of the Cole inquiry? What information can the Prime Minister provide to the House and to the many wheat growers in Mallee on this matter?

Mr HOWARD—I thank the member for Forrest for the question. Yes, of course my attention has been drawn to the reported decision of the Iraqi Grains Board, and I share the concern expressed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade. I can inform the House of one or two quite important things. Earlier today I had a telephone conversation with the Chairman of AWB Ltd, Mr Brendan Stewart, regarding the current tender for wheat in Iraq. I naturally canvassed with him the reported decision of the Iraqi Grains Board and I also had the conversation against the background of the current provisions of the legislation governing the export of Australian wheat, which confer a monopoly on AWB Ltd. We have arranged to meet tomorrow in Canberra. He will be accompanied by the acting managing director of AWB Ltd, and the matter will be discussed.

I know the member for Forrest, who is a champion of the Australian wheat industry, as indeed are other members—

Government members interjecting—

Mr HOWARD—Did I say the member for Forrest? I apologise. I thought I was talking about the member for Lindsay, Mr Her-
bert! I apologise for that slip. I meant to say the member for Mallee, who is a great member for a great wheat-growing district of Australia and a passionate advocate for the interests of Australian wheat growers—as indeed are the member for Grey, the member for O’Connor, the member for Barker, my good friend the member for Gwydir, the member for Riverina, the member for Maranoa and so the list goes on. So too is the member for New England; they grow a bit of wheat there as well.

Let me return to the essential grain of the question that was asked by the member for Mallee. I think the House is aware of the provisions of the existing legislation, and that legislation provides effectively a monopoly unless consent is given by AWB Ltd. On AWB Ltd, I will discuss all aspects of this issue with Mr Stewart tomorrow and that discussion will take place against a very simple proposition: our primary concern is the interests of the Australian wheat growers. The Australian wheat growers’ best friends in this parliament are the Liberal and National parties. Let that be very clearly understood.

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order on relevance. With friends like them, do they need enemies?

The SPEAKER—Order! The Prime Minister is in order.

Mr Howard—I also take the opportunity of saying a couple of things. Inevitably, this issue has raised some debate in the Australian community about the question of a single desk in relation to the sale of Australian wheat. That is an issue which has attracted debate on both sides of the argument. Let me say that it remains the government’s policy to support the existing provisions. There would need to be a very strong national interest case in order to alter that. What we are considering now has to be looked at in isolation from the question of whether that remains an ongoing policy or not. I do not want anything that is said or done in the next little while to be seen to pre-empt a proper and careful consideration of that issue.

I also remind the House of virtually a throwaway line. I have listened to the remarks of the Leader of the Opposition and the member for Griffith. I recall, as many on this side of the House recall, back in 2002. Do you know what the advice of the member for Griffith was—that the government, when it came to Iraq and wheat, should get out of the way and leave it all to AWB.

Oil for Food Program

Mr Rudd (2.09 pm)—My question is directed to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade. I refer to his statement to parliament on 7 December last year when he said:

All the information that we had was provided to the Volcker inquiry.

Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that the Wheat Export Authority CEO, Mr Taylor, has just told a Senate estimates committee, ‘The Wheat Export Authority did not provide any information directly through DFAT to the Volcker inquiry.’ Deputy Prime Minister, is this a fact?

Mr Vaile—As to my comments back then, I will need to check those rather than just taking for granted what the member for Griffith alleges. I will check those comments. My comments would have been related to the official documents held by DFAT on this matter.

Mr Rudd—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order under the standing orders on relevance. The question was about whether—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member will resume his seat. The minister has completed his answer.
Drugs: Bali

Mrs MOYLAN (2.10 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Would the minister outline to the House representations the government has made regarding the nine Australians facing serious penalties for alleged drug offences in Bali this week.

Mr DOWNER—First, I thank the honourable member for Pearce for her question and for her interest. In answering her question, let me begin by saying that the government has over and over made it clear that drug trafficking within Australia is an extremely serious offence; drug trafficking overseas, though, can bring even more severe penalties than in Australia, including life sentences and, in some cases, as we know from the tragic case of Van Nguyen in Singapore, death sentences.

Yesterday the Denpasar District Court sentenced Renae Lawrence and Scott Rush to life in prison. We expect that another four Australians will hear their verdicts today and I understand that we will hear the remaining three verdicts tomorrow. Following the verdicts at the District Court in Denpasar, defendants can appeal. They can appeal to the Bali High Court and, if they are not satisfied with that appeal, they can subsequently appeal to the Indonesian Supreme Court.

While a life sentence in Bali means just that, it does not in all cases mean imprisonment for the duration of a person’s natural life. After five years of a life sentence, a prisoner who has shown good behaviour can apply for the sentence to be changed to a fixed term sentence. If that is granted, the longest term the prisoner can be required to serve is a further 15 years. Honourable members will be interested to know that.

On 18 December last year, I wrote to the Indonesian Attorney-General, reminding him that the Australian government was opposed to the death sentence and that, in the context of the Bali nine, we did not want to see any of the Australians sentenced to death. I noted, of course, that we fully respected Indonesia’s courts, the independence of those courts and the sovereign right of Indonesia to impose strong penalties against drug traffickers. And, of course, in broad principle, we agree that there should be tough penalties on drug trafficking. But, at the same time, the Australian government has a longstanding policy of opposition to the death penalty and the Australian government will always endeavour to ensure that Australians, when they are abroad, do not suffer the death penalty.

Our embassy in Jakarta has also made representations, along similar lines, to the foreign minister and the Deputy Attorney-General. I understand that our Attorney-General and his colleague the Minister for Justice and Customs wrote to the Indonesian Attorney-General on two occasions, and certainly as late as January. We will always make representations on behalf of Australian citizens who are given the death penalty. We will always seek clemency on their behalf. It is important that the House understands that.

Finally, let me say this, because I know that a lot of members will be interested in it. We have been discussing with the Indonesian authorities a prisoner exchange agreement. These discussions are in an early stage. Let me remind the House that similar negotiations with Thailand took five years. With Indonesia I hope that the negotiations will take nothing like five years, but they could take time. Of course, we as a government should continue to do our best to make sure we can negotiate a satisfactory agreement. What implications such an agreement would have for people currently in jail in Indonesia we do not know yet, because those negotiations are still under way.
These cases are tragic, but they are a very stark, very harsh reminder to people that trafficking in drugs is a very serious offence, and in Asia it brings extremely severe penalties, sometimes including the death penalty. Our consular officers will do all they can to continue to visit the prisoners regularly and provide support for as long as it is needed.

**Oil for Food Program**

Mr BEAZLEY (2.14 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister and follows the one asked earlier by the honourable member for Griffith. Does the Deputy Prime Minister recollect saying in this place these words: The investigation of the Volcker inquiry was assisted to the fullest extent by the Australian government. The information that was required was provided. All the information that we had was provided to the Volcker inquiry.

Does he now understand that the WEA chief executive, Mr Taylor, has told the Senate estimates committee this morning that WEA did not provide any information directly through DFAT to the Volcker inquiry? Given that the WEA had numerous matters related to the AWB before them, firstly, is what the Chief Executive Officer of the WEA said a fact and, if it was, how does it comply with what you have said you have done to the Australian parliament along with your other ministers?

The SPEAKER—In calling the Deputy Prime Minister can I remind the Leader of the Opposition that he should address all remarks through the chair.

Mr VAILE—I have not seen that evidence given by the Chief Executive Officer of WEA. With regard to my comments can I make it very clear to the Leader of the Opposition that when the Volcker investigators came to Australia my recollection is that they spent almost two weeks with DFAT officials going through the list of electronic files and getting the hard copies of what they required. Two weeks they spent down at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade going through those files. That is how we have cooperated fully with the Volcker inquiry, and that was recognised. The cooperation of the Australian government was recognised by Volcker himself.

**Oil for Food Program**

Mr CADMAN (2.16 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Would the minister inform the House what action other countries have taken to address the issues raised by the Volcker report?

Mr DOWNER—I thank the honourable member for Mitchell for his question and his interest. He is a good member and he asks good questions. The Volcker inquiry, which honourable members may have already noticed, examined allegations of corruption of the United Nations oil for food program. It was completed in October 2005. Overall the Volcker report found evidence that illicit payments in relation to humanitarian sales had been made by 2,200 companies in 66 different countries. Honourable members may be interested in what has happened in other countries. For example, there were 14 British companies identified, 15 Swedish companies, over 50 German companies, 21 Danish companies, over 50 Swiss companies, four Canadian companies and two New Zealand companies.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations said that he hoped that national authorities would take action against companies falling within their jurisdictions. Within 14 days of the Volcker report being handed down, the Australian government established the Cole inquiry, with the powers of a royal commission. I think that was a very strong and a very principled response, and I am sure
that is very much appreciated by the United Nations.

Of the 65 other countries named, many of them took no action at all. Of those that have taken action, and I include countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Sweden—countries that I think on the whole we would regard as somewhat comparable with Australia—they have simply referred the Volcker allegations to police or prosecutors for investigation. That has certainly been the approach of the British government of Tony Blair. He has not chosen to establish an independent inquiry of the kind that has been established here in Australia.

Only two countries, as far as I am aware, have set up inquiries. One of them is a behind-closed-doors inquiry that was established by India. The other is an inquiry that has just very recently been established in South Africa. Neither of these inquiries have so far conducted forensic and open hearings of the kind we have seen conducted by the Cole inquiry. I do not think this is a contestable proposition. No other country—and there are 66 countries involved here; not just Australia—

*Opposition members interjecting—

**Mr DOWNER**—The opposition wants to bag Australia. I think Australia is a great country and I am on Australia’s side. They bag Australia, which is of course the approach of the opposition to foreign policy—bag Australia; the little Australia, small country mentality. We stick up for Australia on this side of the House. Proudly we say that, of the 66 countries who had companies identified in the Volcker commission, this is the only country that has set up a fully transparent inquiry with royal commission powers, as we call it—in our case, in the form of the Cole commission.

*Ms King interjecting—

The **SPEAKER**—Order! The member for Ballarat is warned!

**Mr DOWNER**—Quite contrary to the phoney arguments being made by the opposition, this country stands tall as the one country that has been transparent and up-front in addressing this issue.

**Mr Beazley**—Wrap yourself in the flag—it’s the last defence of the knave!

The **SPEAKER**—The Leader of the Opposition has not got the call.

*Government members interjecting—

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

**Mr Downer**—Great windbag of a loser!

**Mr Beazley**—Coming from you!

The **SPEAKER**—The Leader of the Opposition will get to his question!

**Mr Beazley** (2.21 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister. Deputy Prime Minister, it is in continuation of the questioning that we are running on what was identified as the worst offender in this episode.

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

**Mr Beazley**—I refer the Deputy Prime Minister to Senator Heffernan’s comments on 8 February that the AWB had been meeting him in his office since the middle of 2003, and, concerning Iraq, that:

I kept saying to them we hear that you blokes are on the take as it were or giving kickbacks.

Over that 2½-year period, did Senator Heffernan raise any such concerns with the minister, his office or his department?

**Mr VAILÉ**—No.

**Mr Beazley** (2.22 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Would the
Treasurer outline to the House information released today on business expectations and new lending? What does this data indicate about the need for careful economic management?

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call the Treasurer, the members on my left are making far too much noise—

Ms Gillard interjecting—

The SPEAKER—including the Manager of Opposition Business.

Mr COSTELLO—I thank the honourable member for Grey for his question. I can inform him that the NAB released its business survey in January 2006. It showed a significant moderation, with trading conditions losing most of the gain that they had in December. Capacity utilisation fell significantly and forward orders weakened. However, the business confidence index—an indication of business activity in the month ahead—improved slightly, by 10 points, and confidence levels remain above the 2005 average and the long-term average. ABS lending finance data was also released today and shows that commercial finance fell in December, although there was a very large increase in the month of November. Personal finance increased by 1.9 per cent, but, despite that, it was 3.3 per cent lower throughout the year.

Also adding to confidence and economic prospects in the economy was the Australian Unity wellbeing index, the happiness index, which was released yesterday. I just want to say a big congratulation to the member for Wide Bay, the happiest kingdom in Australia. Of course, I visited that electorate last year—

Mr Truss—Yes, you did.

Mr COSTELLO—shortly before the index was taken, I think. Not that there is any connection, but if anybody else would like to get their way up the index, I am available. I did notice that in the bottom 11 of the happiness index was the seat of Hotham. There is a lot of unhappiness in Hotham at the moment. I do not know where the member for Hotham is, but I did read in the paper that he is knocking on the doors of branch members in the electorate of Hotham—wouldn’t that give you a shock?—trying to save his preselection, while the Leader of the Opposition presides over the exit from parliament of his one-time deputy and one-time leader. It is not enough to depose him; he now wants him out of the parliament. One Labor member in Glenn Milne’s column yesterday—

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Treasurer will resume his seat. There is far too much noise.

Mr Kerr interjecting—

The SPEAKER—the member for Denison is warned!

Mr COSTELLO—One Labor member in Glenn Milne’s column yesterday described this unloading of the member for Hotham by the Leader of the Opposition as ‘a gutless hitbag’.

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Apart from the fact that it is completely wrong, it is a case of pure projection. It is what the Treasurer is trying to do to the member for Bennelong.

The SPEAKER—the member will resume his seat. There is no point of order. The Treasurer will resume his seat; he does not have the call.

Mr Price—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. How do preselections come under the purview of the Treasurer in an answer to a question?

The SPEAKER—the Chief Opposition Whip will be well aware that questions to the Speaker will come after question time, and
they will be relevant to the responsibilities of the Speaker.

Mr Price—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order of relevance. There is one standing order governing answers, Mr Speaker, and I am raising it; it is relevance.

The SPEAKER—The Chief Opposition Whip has now made clear what his point of order really was. I will call the Treasurer; he is still in order.

Mr Costello—Mr Speaker, I am talking about confidence and happiness and the unhappiness in the electorate of Hotham over the Leader of the Opposition unloading their much beloved member. The Leader of the Opposition has just come to the dispatch box and said it is not true, but he could issue one statement—

Mr Bowen—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. If this is relevant, surely the foreign minister’s attack on the member for Koo- yong is relevant.

The SPEAKER—The member will resume his seat. There is no point of order.

Mr Costello—Described in the Glenn Milne column yesterday as ‘a gutless hitbag’—

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker—

Government members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Grayndler has the call.

Mr Albanese—I rise on a point of order on relevance. I have paid close attention to this happiness survey, this discredited happiness survey—

The SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler will resume his seat.

Mr Albanese—and the Treasurer’s answer—

The SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler will not debate the point of order.

Mr Albanese—has nothing to do with the question.

The SPEAKER—The member will resume his seat! I will rule on his point of order. I call the Treasurer, and in calling the Treasurer I ask him to come back to the question.

Mr Costello—Mr Speaker, one of the ways that confidence could be promoted in the electorate of Hotham is by the Leader of the Opposition unloading their much beloved member. The Leader of the Opposition has just come to the dispatch box and said it is not true, but he could issue one statement—

Mr Bowen—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. If this is relevant, surely the foreign minister’s attack on the member for Koo- yong is relevant.

The SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler will resume his seat.

Mr Costello—One of the ways that confidence could be promoted in the electorate of Hotham is by the Leader of the Opposition, far from being pathetic, getting behind the member for Hotham and telling the faceless men to lay off him!

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, to be described as politically gutless by the Treasurer is really pretty rich!

The SPEAKER—The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. If the Leader of the Opposition wishes to ask a question, he will get straight to his question.

Oil for Food Program

Mr Beazley (2.29 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade. I refer to his statement yesterday that the US Defense report was addressed by the Wheat Export Authority in 2004. Is he aware of evidence to the Senate estimates committee this morning that neither the Chief Executive Officer nor the chair of the WEA saw a copy of that report? How could the WEA address the issues raised in that report if it had never been sent it?

Mr Vaile—Just so the Leader of the Opposition is aware, the WEA report that he has been asking questions about is a confidential report to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and legislation precludes its public release. The Leader of the Opposition has been offered the opportunity to have a look at this.

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order on relevance. The report I am referring to is the US Defense report that was
tabled here today. It was addressed by the Wheat Export Authority—that is what he said—

**The SPEAKER**—The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. The minister has only just begun his answer.

**Mr VAILE**—No, it is not. If the Leader of the Opposition waits and listens, he will find out. The WEA report that is referred to in the Leader of the Opposition’s question is a confidential report to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and legislation precludes its public release. Last week, it was offered to the Leader of the Opposition to have a look at that report. In that report, he will find reference to the other report that he has mentioned in his question.

**Mr Beazley interjecting**—

**Mr VAILE**—But you have been offered the opportunity to have a look at a confidential document.

**Trade: Exports**

**Mr HAASE** (2.31 pm)—My question is addressed to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade. Would the Deputy Prime Minister update the House on recent favourable developments for Australian exporters? How is the government working with Australian exporters to create jobs and boost our economic performance?

**Mr VAILE**—I thank the member for Kalgoorlie for his question. I recognise that he represents the largest electorate in Australia and also the majority of our large resource exploration areas in Australia, and he is doing a very good job in that vast part of Western Australia. He asks about Australia’s resource exports. Australia’s resource exports have again hit record levels in 2005. I know that the member for Kalgoorlie is excited about that, because that means jobs right throughout his electorate of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia.

Our reputation as a safe, reliable and competitively priced supplier is helping our exporters win big on the international market. We are currently in the middle of a global resources boom. It is one of Australia’s competitive advantages that we are incredibly well endowed with resources across the country, across a number of sectors, and our companies are taking advantage of that. I will give just some examples. One is our biggest ever export deal with Mexico. Two Australian suppliers will supply $688 million worth of coal to Mexico in the next 18 months. I acknowledge that the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources has been heavily involved in helping to put that deal together. In Western Australia, the LNG industry—and I was recently up in Karratha, in the member’s electorate, having a look at the operation there—is also on the cusp of a new era. The first shipments of a $25 billion China contract start this year. The Bayu-Undan LNG field recently started shipments to Japan, and two new projects at Gorgon and Pluto look set to develop after a series of multibillion-dollar preliminary deals with Japanese buyers late last year.

So we can see that the resources sector is booming. There is a global resources boom under way at the moment and, importantly, our industries in Australia are taking advantage of that, because these resources and the reserves in Australia are the competitive advantage that we have. It is important to recognise the job that particularly the private sector is doing in maintaining investment in ports and infrastructure to make sure that there are no bottlenecks in getting those bulk products out of those ports and down those rail links. Billions of dollars are being spent in those ports and rail links, particularly in the north-west of Western Australia. That is in stark comparison to what a lot of the state owned enterprises are doing—or not doing—on the eastern seaboard, where we have been
experiencing bottlenecks, particularly as far as our coal exports are concerned. As a nation we should get behind and support these major Australian companies exporting these resources out of Australia which have delivered another export record in 2005 for resource exports.

**Oil for Food Program**

Mr BEAZLEY (2.35 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade. I refer to his statement yesterday that the WEA had investigated AWB contracts with Iraq and found there was nothing untoward about the operations of AWB in the oil for food program. Is he aware of evidence this morning from the chair of the WEA about how that investigation was conducted, in which he stated: ‘We looked them in the eye. They came back, looked us in the eye and said, “Look, we’ve done nothing wrong”’? Does the minister find this standard of investigation into allegations of a $300 million kickback to the Saddam Hussein regime acceptable?

Mr VAILE—If I know the individuals involved on the WEA, the experts we have on that particular authority, there would have been a much more forensic investigation than that. They would have investigated all the documentation that was made available to them by the AWB.

**Health: Rural Services**

Mr SECKER (2.36 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Would the minister advise the House what recent measures the government has taken to improve health services in country areas?

Mr ABBOTT—I do thank the member for Barker for his question. This might be a rather longer answer than usual. This government does not just talk about country people; we spend the money necessary to improve their health services. Thanks to the incentive payments that were part of Strengthening Medicare, the GP bulk-billing rate in country Australia is at an all-time high at almost 70 per cent. That is a new record, thanks to the policies of the Howard government.

In January, the government announced that it would double incentive payments to GP proceduralists—that is, GPs who do anaesthesia, obstetrics and surgery—to try to ensure that country hospitals do not lose their doctors. Also in January, the government announced a new Medicare payment for antenatal checks in country areas which are delivered by nurses and midwives on behalf of GPs. I should point out to the House that this is the first time that midwives have been brought under the Medicare system.

The recent pharmacy agreement increased funding for rural pharmacy programs by more than 50 per cent, to $111 million. Today the government announced a new rural clinical school at Tamworth. Soon there will be 13 rural clinical schools around Australia to ensure that one-quarter of medical students do at least 50 per cent of their clinical training in country areas. Before Christmas, the government committed $1 million to help the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine to upgrade its training programs.

In all of these matters, the government has sought the advice of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia. I pay tribute to its recently retired president, Dr Sue Page. It is impossible to entirely end the tyranny of distance but this government is always looking for new ways to help country Australians, which is why it is truly said that the Howard government is the best friend that Medicare has ever had.

**Oil for Food Program**

Mr RUDD (2.39 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister. I refer to the statement issued yesterday by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry that...
there was ‘nothing new’ in the audit report by the United States Defense Department in September 2003 which identified the AWB by name as a company that was abusing the oil for food program. Deputy Prime Minister, if there was nothing new in this report—and therefore the government already knew about the AWB’s inflated contract prices of up to $15 million—how did the government already know, and when?

Mr VAILE—I will let the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry speak for himself about his statement. I make the point that the report the member for Griffith is referring to is a report on the oil for food program to the CPA—which is something that I mentioned in this place yesterday—that was for official use only. It assessed a number of contracts that were approved by the UN under the oil for food program, but those contracts that had been approved under the oil for food program had not been completed or delivered.

Two were listed there, and this is where the member for Griffith has been misleading the House. Of the two listed Australian wheat contracts—obviously one was the AWB—one was identified as ‘potentially overpriced’. It was not in the language that the member for Griffith used. It was not ‘containing kickbacks’. That report went to the CPA. Both contracts were reprioritised by the CPA and delivered and paid for by the World Food Program. They had not been delivered under the UN oil for food program; they were checked out by the CPA. The CPA went on with them, and they were paid for by the World Food Program. To prove the point, on ABC Radio this morning, the head of the CPA, Paul Bremer, said in answer to questions from Fran Kelly:

So we knew there was corruption. I don’t remember hearing about the Australian Wheat Board. He was then asked:

Would it surprise you to know that countries involved with those industries, and involved with the CPA in fact, as Australia was there in Iraq, might not have known of those set asides or those kind of kickbacks?

He said again:

I don’t remember hearing about the Australian Wheat Board.

That was the CPA, which ultimately approved those contracts that you referred to. They had them delivered, and had them paid for by the World Food Program.

Aviation

Mr NEVILLE (2.43 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Transport and Regional Services. Would the minister advise the House of the measures the government is taking to ensure the growth of our aviation industry?

Mr TRUSS—I thank the honourable member for Hinkler for his question. I acknowledge his keen interest in transport issues and particularly in aviation matters. I am pleased to report to the House that, last week, the government secured an agreement with Brazil on a draft treaty to provide scheduled air services between our two countries. This agreement has the potential to strengthen the links, the trade and other opportunities between Australia and one of the fastest growing economies in the world—a country with 180 million people—and to increase interests and matters in common with Australia. This new agreement will allow international airlines of both countries to operate up to seven weekly services, using any type of passenger aircraft. They will also be able to operate up to three weekly air cargo services each, and that will provide opportunities to build also the air freight between our countries.

Forty thousand people travelled between Brazil and Australia in the 12 months to October 2005. This is a market that has been
growing at about eight per cent per annum since 1999. Our yearly airfreighted exports to Brazil are valued at $42 million.

While no airline at the moment has plans to take up these rights, it does give us the opportunity to develop services over the months and years ahead and to broaden the travel opportunities between Australia and South America. Over the last 12 months my department has held a wide range of bilateral aviation discussions with countries like Argentina, Austria, Germany, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Mexico, Switzerland and the United Kingdom and also informal discussions with the United States of America. We are achieving, bit by bit, opportunities for Australian airlines to operate into other parts of the world and to provide more opportunities for Australians to have choice in the way in which they travel around the world and to visit more countries by way of direct services.

Oil for Food Program

Mr RUDD (2.45 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister. I refer to the Deputy Prime Minister’s statement that the findings of the United States Department of Defense September 2003 report which names the AWB were unsubstantiated and did not use the word ‘kickbacks’. Will the Deputy Prime Minister now confirm to parliament that he misled the House, given that the report refers explicitly to kickbacks, including a finding that ‘former Iraqi ministers had provided information indicating illicit kickbacks were standard practice for oil for food contracts’?

The SPEAKER—The member for Griffith would be aware that to accuse a member of misleading the House requires a substantive motion.

Mr Price—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. You did not pick up the Deputy Prime Minister when he accused the opposition of misleading the House. We have to have a consistent rule here.

The SPEAKER—The Chief Opposition Whip will resume his seat. As he was probably observing, I am still calling the Deputy Prime Minister to answer the question.

Mr VAILE—Mr Speaker, I have not misled the House. In the document, when it talks about Australian wheat, it says ‘potentially overpriced’. The member for Griffith is referring to the preamble at the start of the report.

Live Animal Exports

Mr BAKER (2.47 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Is the minister aware of the benefits of Australia’s live export industry to Australian farming families in rural communities, and are there any alternative views?

Mr McGAURAN—I thank the honourable member for Braddon for his question. He would have been disturbed by the incidents over the weekend of animal rights activists at Devonport in his electorate attempting to disrupt or prevent a legitimate and lawful trade in Australian livestock. Even more disturbing to the member for Braddon, to me and to interested members of parliament would have been the response since that disgraceful behaviour over the weekend, where we saw a press release issued by Senator Bartlett of the Australian Democrats which made a couple of claims. The first is:

... ending live exports, there would be minimal impact on most rural sectors and extra jobs in the regional areas which so desperately need them.

Abolish the livestock export trade, according to Senator Bartlett, and you lose no jobs. It is $1 billion every year in income, a trade in which there are hundreds—indeed thousands—of jobs involved for transporters, processors and handlers as well as, of course, the farmers who produce the stock. So the
absurdity of that economic equation by Senator Bartlett defies belief. It is so unnecessary, because we have the highest standards in the world. If we were to vacate the field, as Senator Bartlett suggests, then our international competitors would fill the void in an instant, leaving Australian farmers, their families, farm workers and all those through the supply chain without jobs, without income. It shows a complete lack of understanding by Senator Bartlett and the Democrats, as well as animal liberationists, of the interests of Australian agricultural families and the like.

The second claim by Senator Bartlett is that you could replace the livestock export trade with ‘a thriving export market for processed meat from Australia’. The fact is that many of the Muslim countries in the Middle East and Asia hold a strong preference for fresh meat because of consumer requirements and religious beliefs. Also, many of the markets do not have refrigeration—not at the point of disembarkation, not in transport vehicles, not in homes—so there are issues of food safety. At the same time, in many communities cultural and religious preferences demand that meat needs to be purchased and consumed near where the livestock is slaughtered.

The Australian livestock trade under this government will continue under the highest possible standards, and the government will continue to support a vital export trade that supports our rural and national economies. But will the Labor Party? When are we going to get a commitment from the Labor Party on support for the livestock export trade and all the safeguards in place? Joining Senator Bartlett in calling for the industry to stop overnight is the Meat Workers Union, a Labor Party associate.

Mr Gavan O’Connor—you single-handedly wrecked the industry, you hypocrite.

Mr McGauran—The shadow minister for agriculture is trying to lift his profile. He is trying to make his electorate more happy. He wants to go up the index. Invite the Treasurer or else support Australian farmers.

Oil for Food Program

Mr Rudd (2.51 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister. Deputy Prime Minister, are you aware of this report which I have here and which was on the front page of the New York Times in March 2001, three months after your department approved—

Government members interjecting—

The Speaker—The member for Griffith has made his point.

Mr Rudd—the AWB’s new contract arrangements with Iraq, which quoted diplomats warning:

... the Iraqis add bogus additional charges like “inland transportation” when the goods arrive at ports, or buy goods at inflated prices, often 10 percent or more over the necessary price.

And it went on to list wheat as one specific example. Deputy Prime Minister, if you were not aware of the front page of the New York Times and the warnings that it conveyed—

Government members interjecting—

Mr Rudd—Deputy Prime Minister, if you were not aware of this warning from the New York Times, being warning No. 14 to your government about concerns over kickbacks in the oil for food program, what warning would it have taken to have prevented your government from acting on this $300 million ‘wheat for weapons’ scandal?

Mr Vaile—I am not aware of the article that the member for Griffith refers to. I do read some international papers, but I cannot recall reading that particular edition.
Just as a general point to the member for Griffith: right through this debate, when allegations and assertions have been made, the government has made inquiries, got the information and taken it back to the UN. The UN Security Council 661 committee, which had responsibility for the certification of these contracts, every time continued to certify those contracts and those contracts continued to be operated on.

Higher Education

Mr TOLLNER (2.53 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Education, Science and Training. Would the minister inform the House of what the government is doing to assist students from remote, rural and regional areas with the cost of their higher education?

Ms JULIE BISHOP—I thank the member for Solomon for his question and I acknowledge his deep interest in this issue. I am pleased to be able to report to the House that over 22,000 students will benefit this year from a 2006 Commonwealth learning scholarship. The member for Solomon would be pleased to learn that Indigenous students and students from rural, regional and remote areas are most likely to benefit. These scholarships are part of a $400 million investment over five years by the Australian government to assist students in higher education with their education and accommodation costs. Specifically this year, $68 million will be allocated to scholarships to assist over 5,000 new students and 7,500 continuing students with a scholarship for their education costs, each valued at about $2,000 to $2,080; and to assist over 3,500 new students and 6,500 continuing students with an accommodation scholarship to assist with their accommodation costs, each valued at about $4,100.

Compare this government’s commitment to Indigenous and rural and regional students with that of the ALP. The ALP voted against $400 million worth of scholarships over five years. They voted against it as part of their opposition to an $11 billion package over the next decade in Backing Australia’s Future. These scholarships are evidence of the Howard government’s commitment to ensuring greater participation and greater equity for Indigenous students and students from rural, regional and remote areas.

Taxation

Mr WINDSOR (2.56 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. It relates to a question I asked on 7 December last year and the Prime Minister’s follow-up answer in writing on 22 December regarding the taxation of adjustment payments paid to ground water users in the Namoi Valley, wherein he confirmed that the Commonwealth is going to treat as income for taxation purposes any payments received by irrigators from the joint irrigator-state-Commonwealth funded program, even though the payment is for the loss of a capital asset. Prime Minister, given that another grant from the Namoi Valley structural adjustment program given to some Namoi Valley ground water irrigators in the Carroll area near Gunnedah has not been subject to taxation, even though both adjustment programs are to alleviate the same problem and assist irrigators to adjust to reductions in ground water allocations, and given the confused position that many irrigators and their accountants find themselves in, could you please explain and release for public scrutiny the methodology used to establish the different taxation regimes for these two structural adjustment programs?

Honourable members interjecting—

Mr WINDSOR—This is a serious question. Prime Minister, do you believe it is fair for the Commonwealth to tax not only its own one-third contribution to this $150 million program but also the New South Wales
government’s contribution and irrigators’ contributions?

The SPEAKER—In calling the Prime Minister, I would remind the honourable member that the last part of that question asks for an opinion. But I call the Prime Minister to respond to the question.

Mr HOWARD—In reply to the member for New England, it is a very detailed question, but I will have a look at the methodology. I do recall writing. It was my understanding, when I got the advice that was given to me at the time I signed the letter, that the principles we have applied are long-standing principles that have been applied for decades by governments of both political persuasions. But it is a fair question. I do not mind digging into the methodology and I will provide the honourable member with whatever information I can find that might help explain the rationale for a policy that has been adhered to by governments for a long time.

Centrelink

Mr KEENAN (2.58 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Human Services. Would the minister inform the House what action the government is taking to improve productivity in Centrelink?

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order!

Mr HOCKEY—I know that it is Valentine’s day, but be calm. I thank the member for Stirling for his question. I know that he, like everyone else in this House—and I am being generous to the Labor Party here—believes that we have to improve service quality in Centrelink offices to ensure that those who are seeking services are getting the services that they are entitled to.

It was brought to my attention early on in the ministry that in some cases Centrelink staff were taking as many days in unplanned absences as they were in holidays each year. This was having a profound effect on the staffing levels of the over 300 customer service centres across the Centrelink network.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr HOCKEY—In order to address this, the management of Centrelink worked closely with the staff to try to reduce the number of unplanned absences during the year. In six months we have reduced the number of days that have been lost to unplanned absences by 24,000—24,000 days have been claimed back from unplanned absences by Centrelink staff. That is the equivalent of setting up a new call centre of approximately 200 people. It is the equivalent of setting up four new Centrelink offices.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr HOCKEY—The Labor Party tend to treat this as a joke.

Mr Danby interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Melbourne Ports is warned.

Mr HOCKEY—It is very important for the 24,000 staff of Centrelink but, even more importantly, it is a significant improvement in service for the six million customers of Centrelink because it means that the queues will be smaller and that there is more likely to be someone answering the phone. There is still some way to go, but clawing back 24,000 lost days is a significant step forward and a further indication of the commitment of the government to improve service delivery by the Commonwealth.

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

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER

Deputy Speaker’s Rulings

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (3.01 pm)—I have some questions for you, Mr Speaker. I
raised with you last night the rulings of the Deputy Speaker, the member for Page, concerning my speech on appropriation bills Nos 3 and 4, and you agreed to examine the *Hansard*. I have also examined the *Hansard* and wish to ask you a number of questions concerning the 14 occasions on which the Deputy Speaker interrupted my speech. The first question is: is it the case that standing order 76 provides exceptions to the rule that a member must speak only on the subject matter of a question under discussion, and that standing order 76(c) expressly lists the appropriation bills as an occasion when public affairs may be debated? If so, on what basis did the Deputy Speaker interrupt me to require me to ‘talk to the appropriation’ when I was discussing the Wheat Board scandal—that is, when I was debating a public affair?

My second question concerns the Deputy Speaker’s statement that the appropriation bill ‘is not an opportunity to attack the Prime Minister or ministers’. The remarks I was making—which I hope you have had the opportunity to read—were indeed critical of the Prime Minister and other ministers, but parliament is a place of robust debate, and my remarks were no more critical than many other speeches which have been made during the appropriation debate. Are opposition members no longer permitted to criticise the Prime Minister or other ministers in debates on the appropriation or other bills?

My third question concerns the Deputy Speaker requiring me to sit down—that is, gagging me—while I was quoting from the Prime Minister’s ‘Address to the Nation’ of 20 March 2003. Was the Deputy Speaker in order in gagging me? If so, are members of this House no longer able to quote from the Prime Minister’s ‘Address to the Nation’ of 20 March 2003?

My fourth question concerns the action of the Deputy Speaker in gagging me after I stated:

There is now no doubt that AWB provided kickbacks to the Iraqi regime and no doubt that it did so after July 2002.

Was the Deputy Speaker in order to gag me for making this statement? If so, can members of this House not point out to the House that AWB provided kickbacks to the Iraqi regime?

My fifth question concerns the Deputy Speaker’s continued interruption after he desisted from his endeavours to sit me down. I was discussing the Wheat Board and he interrupted me to say:

My understanding is that the Australian Wheat Board is not funded by the government.

So what, Mr Speaker? I was discussing a public affair. The previous speaker, the member for Fisher—

**The SPEAKER**—The member will ask his questions. He will not debate his questions.

**Mr KELVIN THOMSON**—Thank you, Mr Speaker. My final question to you is: was the Deputy Speaker’s statement consistent with standing orders and House *Practice*?

**The SPEAKER**—I thank the member for Wills for a fairly lengthy series of questions. I will respond, as follows, in three parts. First of all, the Deputy Speaker is fully responsible for the conduct of the proceedings when he is in the chair. If members are unhappy with the decisions of the occupier of the chair, those matters should be dealt with at that time. The third point is that, as Speaker, I cannot sit in judgment as to events when the Deputy Speaker was presiding. But, in relation to the first part of the member’s question, it is a longstanding practice that Speakers do not interpret the standing orders or the *Practice*—they are there as they stand.
Deputy Speaker’s Rulings

Ms GILLARD (3.06 pm)—Mr Speaker, further to the questions put to you by the member for Wills: are we to understand your ruling to mean that Deputy Speaker Causley—and indeed all occupants of the chair—should be applying the standing orders and House of Representatives Practice? I would put it to you, Mr Speaker, that that is not what Deputy Speaker Causley was doing last night.

Secondly, in the interests of the efficient conduct of the House, I suggest that there may need to be some discussion of these matters amongst the Speaker’s panel to get some consistency of rulings so that members of the House who are exercising their rights at any time of the day or night, including after dinner, can have some certainty as to what to expect in how the standing orders and House of Representatives Practice are to be applied.

The SPEAKER—I thank the Manager of Opposition Business. I make the point that it is not the Speaker’s role to give guidance on the application of standing orders, nor would I suggest to the Manager of Opposition Business that she should reflect on the Deputy Speaker. I made the point very clearly in my answer to the member for Wills, in my response to the points raised, and I refer her back to that answer.

PERSONAL EXPLANATIONS

Mrs VALE (Hughes) (3.07 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

The SPEAKER—Does the honourable member claim to have been misrepresented?

Mrs VALE—Yes.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mrs VALE—On this morning’s ABC Radio 666, the ABC said that I said that Muslim families are having too many children. I have never used those words, and I would never use those words. This is a complete fabrication on the part of the ABC.

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (3.08 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

The SPEAKER—Does the honourable member claim to have been misrepresented?

Mr MURPHY—Yes, most grievously.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mr MURPHY—You will doubtlessly recall that just prior to question time yesterday I stated in relation to Mr Max Moore-Wilton that he should be flogged for promoting the expansion of Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport because, as an airport, it is operating very well as a shopping centre and a car park. Today Sydney Airport Corporation Ltd, Public Affairs, issued a media release titled No move on curfew, which said:

Sydney Airport is not seeking the removal of the curfew or the current 80 movements per hour cap as stated by the Federal Member for Lowe, Mr John Murphy in Parliament yesterday. Mr Murphy is evidently basing his remarks on a media report in the Sydney Morning Herald on Thursday 9 February 2006 which did not fully quote—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member will come to where he has been misrepresented.

Mr MURPHY—I have to read it out, because I have six points to make in relation to the media release. I am being scourged by Mr Max Moore-Wilton. The media release says that the Sydney Morning Herald:

... did not fully quote Mr Max Moore-Wilton’s remarks on the John Laws program on Wednesday 8 February 2006. As Mr Moore-Wilton indicated in that interview Sydney Airport operates within the framework of Federal law and that Sydney Airport has to abide by the curfew and other restrictions mandated by the Government.
Mr Murphy’s support for personal flagellation is unfortunate and typical of the negative attitude he shows to all issues relating to the development of Sydney Airport and the creation of new jobs in the region. “Sydney Airport will continue to endeavour to communicate with Mr Murphy to ensure he has a better understanding of the issues”, Mr Moore-Wilton said.

I make six points. Firstly, I did not claim that Sydney airport is seeking the removal of the curfew or the current 80 movements per hour cap at Sydney airport; I said that in relation to Mr Moore-Wilton. Secondly, I did not refer to the John Laws program, and that does not detract from the fact that the only gratuitous information conveyed to Mr Laws by Mr Moore-Wilton was the motherhood statement that Sydney airport ‘operates within the framework of federal law and that Sydney airport has to abide by the curfew and other restrictions mandated by government’.

Thirdly, Mr Moore-Wilton cannot escape the fact that he said that he was talking to the federal government about the curfew and his preference to have no curfew at Sydney airport. Fourthly, I take extreme exception to the pompous and patronising statement made by Mr Moore-Wilton about me today. Fifthly, it is Mr Moore-Wilton who has no insight into his own condition and his understanding of the issues concerning Sydney airport and its impact on my electorate. Sixthly, I will continue to whip, scourge, lash and flog Mr Moore-Wilton.

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Lowe will resume his seat; he has made his point.

DOCUMENTS
Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (3.11 pm)—Documents are tabled as listed in the schedule circulated to honourable members. Details of the documents will be recorded in the Votes and Proceedings.

MAIN COMMITTEE
Mr BARTLETT (Macquarie) (3.11 pm)—by leave—I move:

That, unless otherwise ordered, for the Main Committee meeting today the first item of business shall be Members’ 3 minute statements continuing for a period of 30 minutes, irrespective of suspensions for divisions in the House.

Question agreed to.

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE
Climate Change

The SPEAKER—I have received a letter from the honourable member for Grayndler proposing that a definite matter of public importance be submitted to the House for discussion, namely:

The urgent need for the Government to take action to avoid dangerous climate change based upon independent scientific analysis.

I call upon those members who approve of the proposed discussion to rise in their places.

More than the number of members required by the standing orders having risen in their places—

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler) (3.13 pm)—A dangerous climate of fear clouds the Howard government climate policy, and the victims of that climate of fear have been some of Australia’s top scientists at the CSIRO. Just like the ‘wheat for weapons’ scandal, this is a government that governs in its own political interests, not in the national interests. Last night’s Four Corners program raised serious allegations that senior CSIRO scientists are being gagged on climate change issues when it does not suit the Howard government’s political message. One of Australia’s most respected climate scientists—nationally and internationally—Dr Graeme Pearman, was gagged because he said that we need greenhouse gas emission
targets and we need carbon trading to help avoid dangerous climate change.

Who is Graeme Pearman? Dr Pearman joined the CSIRO in 1971 and was Chief of Atmospheric Research at the CSIRO for a decade. He published 150 scientific papers. He was the winner of the UN Environment Program global award in 1989 and the recipient of an Order of Australia in 1999. In 2003 he received the Federation Medal, but in 2004 he was made redundant. The CSIRO did not need a person of this stature! Frankly, I think we need the involvement of more people like Graeme Pearman in public debate, and we need his views on the public record.

I want to tell the House that I have some personal experience with this. On 28 July 2004 I organised a forum, at Newtown RSL in my electorate, titled, ‘The day before tomorrow: the real threat of climate change and what Australia should do about it’. I placed ads in the newspapers. We produced posters. I direct-mailed around the electorate. I had speakers advertised for this information forum—Kelvin Thomson, the shadow minister for the environment; Anna Reynolds, the climate change campaign director from WWF; and Dr Graeme Pearman from the CSIRO—on the greatest challenge facing the global community. But Dr Pearman rang us up the day before the forum was to take place—it was not taking place during an election campaign, it was not canvassing votes for any political party; it was doing what good local members in this place do on both sides of the House and doing what Dr Pearman has told me he has done before for forums of all political persuasions: being there as an eminent scientist—and said that he was told he was not allowed to come to that information forum in my electorate to talk about climate change.

It is a disgrace that other scientists have been gagged; he is not alone. Dr Barrie Pittock was expressly told that he could not talk about mitigation, about how we might reduce greenhouse gases and about rising sea levels in the Pacific. But such is the attempt from the government to deceive and spin that in responding to the launch of Labor’s Pacific climate change strategy on 6 January 2006, the Minister for the Environment and Heritage said, ‘I have spoken to the head of the Australian Greenhouse Office this morning. In terms of sea level rise and its impact on Tuvalu in particular but the Pacific in general, the jury is really out. Saying that we are going to evacuate them is very premature. Let’s hope it never happens.’ The response of the federal environment minister was: ‘Let’s just cross our fingers and hope it never happens.’ Political inadequacy is one thing but the systematic destruction of the very nature of Australia’s Public Service, in the dissembling of information, is another.

The Australian Greenhouse Office produced a report in 2003 entitled Climate change—an Australian guide to the science and potential impacts. It says at page 155:

For the rest of the Pacific region, however, the number of people who experience flooding by the 2050s could increase by a factor of more than 50, to between 60,000 and 90,000 in an average year... Vulnerability in the Pacific Islands could impinge indirectly on Australia, through our external relations and aid programs.

Again, the report Climate change—risk and vulnerability given to the department in July of last year warned about rising sea levels and the impact on our Pacific neighbours. But when Labor comes up with some foresight, some policy and planning to do something about it, what is the government’s response? One, let us cross our fingers and, two, it misleads once again on the advice the government had been given by the Australian Greenhouse Office.
If you want an example of the intimidation that has occurred under this arrogant government that thinks that it controls a one-party state just because it controls both houses in this parliament, then have a look at the exchange between Kevin Hennessy, the coordinator of the CSIRO Climate Impact Group, and Janine Cohen on the Four Corners program last night. There you see it all laid out before you. You see an extraordinary dissembling by this official. Here you have it, and it says it all about the climate of fear—

Mr Hunt interjecting—

Mr ALBANESE—and intimidation from these spivs opposite.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—Order! The member for Flinders will have an opportunity to reply.

Mr ALBANESE—Four Corners asked Kevin Hennessy, ‘Some scientists believe that there’ll be more environmental refugees. Is that a possibility?’

KEVIN HENNESSY, CSIRO IMPACT GROUP: I can’t really comment on that.

JANINE COHEN: Why can’t you comment on that?

KEVIN HENNESSY, CSIRO IMPACT GROUP: That’s, that’s, er... No, I can’t comment on that.

JANINE COHEN: Is that part of editorial policy? You can’t comment on things that affect immigration?

KEVIN HENNESSY, CSIRO IMPACT GROUP: No, I can’t comment on that.

JANINE COHEN: Can I just ask you why you can’t comment?

KEVIN HENNESSY, CSIRO IMPACT GROUP: Not on camera.

JANINE COHEN: Oh, OK. But is it a policy thing?

KEVIN HENNESSY, CSIRO IMPACT GROUP: I can’t comment on that. And so it goes.

Mr Hunt—An absolutely cowardly attack.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Flinders, if he wants to speak, will remain quiet.

Mr ALBANESE—This is an attack on the government, a cowardly government that hides behind the bureaucrats and officials, that intimidates them and that threatens world-renowned scientists with redundancies if they actually speak about what they are expert in. And these clowns over here have the hide to say that it is us attacking the bureaucrats. These are the clowns that will not allow bureaucrats to answer questions in Senate estimates hearings. These are the clowns that attack independent institutions, world-renowned institutions such as the CSIRO—one of the world’s great science organisations intimidated. And if you want to see it, parliamentary secretary—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler will address his remarks through the chair.

Mr ALBANESE—just have a look at the body language of Mr Hennessy in that Four Corners program last night. Just have a look at the graphic depiction of the intimidation. What we have seen from the government are completely contradictory positions and it was clear last night. I also encourage people to watch the Insight program on SBS in a couple of weeks, because the minister put in an absolute shocker there. He could not explain the contradictions in the government’s position.

These are the government’s contradictions: firstly, that Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions are on track—‘She’ll be right, mate; we’re doing real well.’ The fact is that, but for land use changes in New South Wales and Queensland, we are headed for a disaster. The Australian Greenhouse Office reports that emissions from energy and trans-
port will be 70 per cent above the 1990 baseline by 2020. The ABARE report given to the climate pact meeting—this is best case scenario, if everything they want to do comes off—indicates a 50 per cent increase in greenhouse gas emissions. This is at a time when the rest of the world is indicating that we need to move to a 60 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. A great contradiction is there.

The other great contradiction is that somehow ratifying Kyoto will be bad for the economy. We know that the government does not actually believe that, because we know that the Treasurer took a proposal to the cabinet in 2003 to introduce a national greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme—and we know that he was knocked over by the Prime Minister. We have asked questions in this House on that basis. The truth is that it is one thing to be a climate sceptic. We know that the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources is a climate sceptic. Just last week he was saying that there will be no impact of climate change on the Great Barrier Reef—we know that he does not believe that it is happening. But it is another thing for a government that prides itself on its free market ideology to be a market sceptic. That is what this government is. Due to ideology it has rejected the Kyoto protocol and it has rejected emissions trading—it has actually gone out there and said that it is bad for the economy.

The great contradiction is that, on the one hand the government says it is going to meet the target of 108 per cent; on the other hand it says that the Kyoto protocol is bad for the economy. The truth is that the Kyoto protocol is a carrot and a stick. The carrot is that, if you meet your target, you open up economic opportunities—

*Mr Hunt interjecting*—

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER**—Order! The member for Flinders will have an opportunity to reply.

**Mr ALBANESE**—in what the future economy will look like, in what the future is—the future in areas such as solar energy, which increased globally in 2004, the latest figures, by 65 per cent. Fifteen years ago we were in the position to be the Silicon Valley of the solar industry; now we account for less than one per cent. With the reaching of the mandatory renewable energy target, and the refusal of the government to get on board and do something about that, we are seeing a decline.

The member opposite, the member for Flinders, talks about the climate pact. We see the climate pact as being positive. We see discussions that are taking place around the world as being positive. But they are extremely limited, because they do not provide a real solution. You need both the push of new technology and the pull of the market to make them happen. One of the government’s favoured ideologues on this, who they brought out from the Pew Centre in the United States, Eileen Claussen, had this to say:

If you really want results you have to do something that’s mandatory. It’s not going to happen with voluntary approaches.

Because history tells us that good intentions simply are not enough. They certainly are not enough, and surely we should look at cases such as Enron in the United States and James Hardie to see that, unless you intervene and establish a market, you will not get the innovation. It is an absurd position because the government—the Treasurer, the environment minister, the foreign minister—is on record as saying that what we need here is a price signal, but not yet.

What an absurd proposition. Here we have the carbon market that will be the world’s
biggest market. And we are saying, ‘We don’t want to get involved; we want everyone else to have a head start.’ That is why Australia is isolated. The government said that Kyoto would not come into effect—Russia ratified it, and it did. They said emissions trading would not start, and it did on 1 January last year. They said that it would not last beyond the Montreal climate change summit, but that summit saw the world move forward and start negotiations for the global situation post 2012. But we are not around the table for those decisions. Australia and the United States, alone among industrialised countries around the world, are on the outside looking in. We cannot afford that luxury—we need to engage, because younger generations will recall climate sceptics who denied human contribution to climate change as being misguided, but those who acknowledge the problem but fail to do anything about it will be judged much more seriously indeed. We need to take action now. We need to take action if we are going to avoid dangerous climate change.

Mr Hunt (Flinders—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage) (3.28 pm)—I want to take the allegations of the member for Grayndler head on. I want to make this a debate about hypocrisy. This debate comes down to two key differences. On the one hand we have what is happening on our watch today with the reality of a world-leading set of changes. There is the creation of the Asia-Pacific partnership, the largest initiative on the planet in terms of actual decreases in greenhouse gases. The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I intervened and I would expect the member for Grayndler to respect that.

Mr Hunt—ABARE is talking about an approximate 90 billion tonnes of greenhouse gases. I repeat for the member for Grayndler: 90 billion tonnes of greenhouse gases over the period to 2050—approximately three times more than that which would be projected under the Kyoto agreement. But it is in addition to—

Mr Albanese—That’s not true.

Ms George—That’s rubbish!

Mr Hunt—That is the figure of ABARE. If you wish to challenge it, do so; but we have yet to see any credible challenge. So we draw a distinction here between two things: between the action at present and the hypocrisy as presented by the now fleeing member for Grayndler. The action on the one hand is what has occurred under the current watch and leadership of Senator Ian Campbell, Minister for the Environment and Heritage, the foreign minister and the Prime Minister; and what is being alleged by, and the silence and hypocrisy that comes from, our friends on the other side of the chamber.

Minister Campbell has done essentially three critical things in Australian greenhouse policy, which has put Australia at the forefront of international initiatives on greenhouse. Firstly, he has said clearly and categorically that from a government perspective there is an acceptance of the science. He has done that. He has pushed the position forward and he has made it absolutely clear. It is a categorical position and it is one which is underpinned by $1.9 billion in investment by the Australian government. Secondly, he has acknowledged and been an international advocate for the fact that there has to be a 50 per cent reduction globally in greenhouse gases over the course of this century. That is not a denial. That is not the action of some-
body who wants to see something hidden. That is a bold and courageous pronouncement, and it sets over the coming years the direction, the test and the challenge for Australian policy. We make no apologies for that hard position.

The third, and I think the most profound and the most significant, thing the minister for the environment—along with the minister for industry and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, with the support of the Prime Minister—has done is to help establish and found the Asia-Pacific partnership, or the Sydney partnership, as it is sometimes known. That brought together countries that produce 50 per cent of the world’s emissions. It brought together Australia, the United States, Japan, South Korea, China and India. China and India are the largest emerging economies in the world, economies which for the most part are not included and not covered by Kyoto. This addresses a volume much greater than Kyoto does. This partnership sets those countries together on a path which included the world’s first true greenhouse gas aid initiative, something which was dismissed by not just the member for Grayndler but also the Leader of the Opposition. Unfortunately for them the member for Batman pulled the rug out from underneath them and showed precisely that it was a worthy initiative and a critical initiative. That is what we have done on the one hand.

I can talk also about my own experience here. Dr Geoff Love, the Director of the Bureau of Meteorology, an organisation for which I have responsibility, very early on in my career talked about the reality of climate change. My view is very simple: you make that case directly and as forcefully as possible to as senior people as possible in the government. That presentation was made to senior ministers, with the support of Senator Ian Campbell, the foreign minister and the industry minister. It was critical in doing two things: firstly, in encouraging action within the Bureau of Meteorology—

_Mr Albanese interjecting—_

_The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Order! Member for Grayndler._

_Mr HUNT—and, secondly, in helping to lead to the creation of the Asia-Pacific partnership._

_Mr Albanese interjecting—_

_The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Order! Member for Grayndler._

_Mr HUNT—I say to the member for Grayndler—_

_The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler is warned!_ 

_Mr HUNT—that we have, as a new generation, taken it on directly—_

_Mr Albanese—Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. When I was addressing this matter—_

_The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler has no right to debate with the chair. He might have noted I pulled up the member for Flinders when he was interjecting; I am doing the same to the member for Grayndler. The member for Grayndler will resume his seat._

_Mr Albanese—the member for Flinders—_

_The DEPUTY SPEAKER—the member for Grayndler will resume his seat._

_Mr Albanese—that is balance, Mr Deputy Speaker!_ 

_The DEPUTY SPEAKER—the member for Grayndler will remove himself under standing order 94(a)._ 

_Mr Albanese—So—_

_The DEPUTY SPEAKER—the member for Grayndler will remove himself under standing order 94(a) or be named._
Mr Albanese—So you are throwing me out?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I said 94(a). Remove yourself from the chamber.

Ms George—For what? For taking a point of order?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—For arguing with the chair. You have no right. There is no standing order. The member for Grayndler will remove himself under 94(a).

Mr Albanese—Mr Deputy Speaker, I raise a point of order. I have to be allowed to move a point of order.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—You can take a point of order.

Mr Albanese—Yes. That is what I was trying to do, take a point of order. I think it is reasonable that I be allowed to take a point of order.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—What is the point of order?

Mr Albanese—My point of order is that there needs to be balance. I accept being called to order—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—You are now reflecting on the chair.

Mr Albanese—Mr Deputy Speaker, I am merely pointing out the fact that the parliamentary secretary, when it was my opportunity to speak, did not speak softly but yelled across the chamber.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler is now reflecting on the chair. Under standing order 94(a), remove yourself from the chamber.

Mr Albanese—For being allowed to move—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler will be named if he does not remove himself.

Mr Kelvin Thomson—Mr Deputy Speaker, I raise a point of order. On what basis was the member for Grayndler warned for interjecting when the member for Flinders was not warned for interjecting.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Wills is now reflecting on the chair.

Mr Kelvin Thomson—I am entitled to an explanation as to why the member for Flinders was not warned. If you study the transcript, you will see that the—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Wills will resume his seat and I will explain. When the member for Flinders interjected, I called him to order and told him he would have a right to reply—on three occasions that I remember. I am doing exactly the same thing to the member for Grayndler. He has then taken offence at that and tried to argue with the chair. He has then refused to obey the chair and he has been asked to leave the chamber under standing order 94(a).

Mr Albanese—I moved a point of order.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler has no right to debate it.

Mr Albanese—I have a right to move a point of order.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—You do not have a right to move a point of order; you have a right to take a point of order.

Mr Albanese—I took a point of order.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—And the point of order was ruled on.

Mr Albanese—Can I take another point of order?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Take a point of order.

Mr Albanese—My point of order is this: I asked you to reflect on your ruling and your exclusion of me from the chamber given the circumstances which occurred, which were that I could barely hear myself when I spoke and that there was no warning issued to the member opposite.
The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I have the point of order.

Mr Albanese—I ask you to reconsider. Thank you.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I will reconsider, Member for Grayndler, but remember when you are called to order the chair has the right to do that.

Mr Hunt—I was making a very simple point: we have presented a strong case internally that you have a new watch within the government that is absolutely clear as to the reality of this phenomenon. It has not just taken a position but encouraged the bureaucracy to make the strongest case possible on the basis of facts. On the basis of those facts it has presented public statements, and on the basis of those public statements it has pursued the strongest of international action. That is the reality. We have stood absolutely clear on what we regard to be the position and the responsibilities.

We can compare this with a silence on the extraordinary greenhouse factory of desalination within Sydney—a silence from the member for Grayndler and his team on the greenhouse factory, a silence on the fact that the states—the Labor states—are currently proposing 25 new power stations in Australia, many of which have a heavy coal fired base, including Hazelwood in Victoria. We now finally have a backflip on the Asia-Pacific partnership, after it had been rejected. And, in addition to that, over the last few weeks we have had an extraordinary attack in relation to Australia’s role at Montreal, where Australia was not only heavily engaged in the meeting of the parties and the conference of the parties and not only invited to be part of the ‘Friends of the President’ meeting in Ottawa but, under the leadership of Senator Campbell, played an absolutely instrumental role in pulling together the Montreal plan of action in relation to a post-Kyoto framework.

How do we take this forward? There are three key principles here. Firstly, Australia is one of the few countries meeting its targets under the Kyoto protocol. We are actually doing what those opposite are arguing for and delivering, whereas they are silent about the hypocrisy of much of the rest of the world. Secondly, we have moved beyond that to a complementary but, I would argue, more significant agreement, the Asia-Pacific partnership, and I will address some of the elements of that. And, thirdly, we are pursuing a powerful but balanced domestic greenhouse initiative.

Let us look at what is happening internationally and the silence of our friends on the opposition bench. Firstly, while Australia is on track—and it does not matter what is the source of us being on track; I think that is a good thing, not a bad thing—let us look at the EU. The EU is 5.1 per cent over its targets. Germany is 2.1 per cent over its targets. The Netherlands is 6.6 per cent over its targets. Denmark is 20.2 per cent over its target. Japan is 13 per cent over. New Zealand is 32 per cent over. Canada is 19 per cent over. Australia is on track. Australia is on track whereas these countries are in breach of their Kyoto targets. We are delivering whereas others are promising. For some reason, the member for Grayndler thinks that there is a moral debt when you are delivering and a moral supremacy when you are promising but failing to deliver. That is the first point.

Secondly, in relation to the Asia-Pacific partnership and what the Australian government has helped to create in partnership with the other five countries, we have laid down an initiative which will deliver an estimated 90 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas abatement between now and 2050. Is that all that is necessary? No. If we said that, it would be
flawed. But it is a fundamental contribution, on a greater scale than what is being delivered under Kyoto.

Let me provide the facts to the House. The facts are these. The Kyoto agreement produces a greenhouse gas abatement of approximately 500 million tonnes of CO₂ or CO₂-like gases per year. If you were to multiply that out between now and 2050, you would be looking at 25 billion tonnes of CO₂. But even if that process were to escalate and to triple—even if we took the most conservative estimates in relation to the Asia-Pacific partnership and the most expansive outcomes in relation to the Kyoto protocol—we would still have a difference of 75 billion tonnes under Kyoto and 90 billion tonnes under the ABARE estimates for the Asia-Pacific partnership. However, the great thing is that these are not the same gases. These are complementary reductions.

What we have done is provide a complementary reduction over and above anything which is calculated in relation to Kyoto. It brings in the United States, India and China. These are the greatest sources of CO₂ emissions in the world. Australia has just over one per cent of emissions. If we are to have a global effect, we need to take domestic action. None of us deny that. But, most significantly, we need to be able to leverage the international effect of how you decrease the total global greenhouse gases available. How do you do that? The answer is simple. We have brought together these six countries. It is a foundation and a platform, and that is a conservative estimate from ABARE.

No other country in the world has been able to leverage its own size relative to the total greenhouse gases which it is looking to save and abate worldwide. That is a very simple proposition. Of all the different nations in the world, Australia has put together on a reduction versus per capita basis the single greatest savings package through the Asia-Pacific partnership.

We also recognise that there are critical domestic initiatives which we seek to take—at $1.9 billion. That is a combination of three things. The first involves a reduction of CO₂ and like gases from fossil fuel outputs. We make no apologies for trying to get the greatest savings at the source of the greatest emissions. The second is in relation to renewable energy, whether that is encouraging solar, wind or water. It is all of those different things. We actually created a wind industry in Australia. If the states want to take it further, it is up to them. And the third thing is that we are responsible for an international initiative which provides the first truly international greenhouse gas initiative. We have a proud history and a proud record.

(Time expired)

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith) (3.43 pm)—The member for Flinders has made a great deal out of very little. It is too little too late. Interestingly, not one word has been said to defend the principle of scientific inquiry that was raised in last night’s Four Corners program—not one single word. How can the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage come into the House when the national broadcaster has produced a 45-minute documentary detailing charges against the government of which he is a member—significant and important charges, including whistleblower comments from someone who was a previous speechwriter to the environment minister—and not mention it at all. That defies the politics of this place, I tell you—not one word about Four Corners, not one word of defence of scientific inquiry. There is a recognition that finally the minister for the environment accepts that there needs to be targets. Hallelujah! I hope the Deputy Prime Minister realises it too.
Climate change policy in this country is in crisis due to the Howard government’s persistent refusal to seriously address the issue. Many voices are raised—constantly. The National Farmers Federation group in Western Australia, the Australian Medical Association, Engineers Australia and, of course, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—the largest collection of scientists addressing this single issue—all speak to the need for us to have robust, targeted reductions in our greenhouse emissions, with time lines.

Alone amongst developed countries, with the exception of the US, we fail to ratify the Kyoto treaty. Although the Prime Minister thought it was a good idea at the time, we now denigrate Kyoto under Minister Campbell and Foreign Minister Downer. At first the absolute refusal of the government to look at climate change was based on climate scepticism. That is fading away. Then it was based on the lack of effectiveness of Kyoto, despite the fact that the government claims to have met the target. That argument is fading away. Then it was on the fact that there was a better option—the Asia-Pacific climate pact that the member opposite refers to. It has no targets and no time lines. That has faded away as well. All we are really left with is the big lie: ‘We are doing more than anyone else to address this issue and you should believe us when we tell you what we are doing about climate change.’

But no matter how big the effort to push a propaganda line might be, climate change is bigger. This, undoubtedly and regrettably, is the biggest immediate long-term environmental challenge we face. A failure to concretely come to some policy outcome on climate change has not only a negative environmental impact but also social and economic consequences for us. Climate change is so big that people who study it—and many do—need to speak to it. They must present scientific papers, they must appear in public, they must speak to the media and we must hear their voices. In order to get policy right, policymakers—governments—need to make decisions based on sound science. In order to have an informed, open debate, the public needs to know what scientists think and, of course, in the spirit of the Enlightenment—the Prime Minister spoke favourably to that spirit—to hear what they have to say.

But that spirit has been broken. Following last night’s Four Corners program, we have compelling testimony from senior CSIRO scientists; present and former leading climate change scientists have been directly pressured into modifying or submerging their views on climate change and how best it should be addressed in policy terms. The loss of their expertise and critical insights in this debate is a great loss. But the more serious allegation is that climate change policy has been perverted, we might say polluted, at the highest levels by special interest lobbyists with access to and involvement in the preparation of cabinet submissions, documents and costings.

This is genuinely a very serious issue. Not one single word spoken by the member for Flinders points to this. The self-named greenhouse mafia have, if the research by ex-Liberal Party ministerial speechwriter Guy Pearse is accurate—and there is no reason to think that it isn’t—perverted the greenhouse policy processes of the government. They have rendered Australia more vulnerable to climate change, they have exposed our Pacific neighbours to a greater risk of becoming environmental refugees through an absence of robust policy and they have clearly tarnished Australia’s reputation as a country which values and respects the spirit of scientific inquiry. The perversion of policy ends up, from last night’s Four Corners, with what I would describe as ‘tortured pollie
speak’. That is Senator Campbell’s assertion that:

Australia is doing more than most countries in the greenhouse policy area. We’re respected for our policy efforts, for our investments and our practical policy outcomes.

‘More than most countries’? We need to do a great deal more than we are doing. To remind Australians, as a nation we are more vulnerable than most to climate change. We are a land of drought and flooding rains, and, with our thin soil profile, we are more vulnerable than most to climate change. We are also the nation with the highest—or second-highest, depending on how you count them—per capita levels of greenhouse gas emissions in the developed world. That is the situation that Australia is in. We have no targets, we have no time lines and we will blow out our greenhouse gas emissions by 23 per cent in 2020. So when the government says that we are still on track, the train wreck is coming just around the corner and we will be off the rails.

The minister says we are ‘respected for our policy efforts’. It is common knowledge that in international fora the participation by Australia in the environment debate, just as with our participation in debates about the International Court of Justice or UNESCO’s convention on cultural diversity, is seen as a spoiling contribution. That is something that is well known and well discussed in international fora.

‘Respected for our investments’? Hardly. In fact, by failing to sign on to Kyoto we have reduced the opportunities for Australian businesses to export energy efficiency and renewables. Without a national greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme we cannot even begin to trade in carbon reduction offsets. We have reduced the stimulus for local business at the same time as failing to sign our way into an international trading arrangement. The current situation with mandatory renewable energy targets sitting only at two per cent—and now I think we know why they are only at two per cent—means that renewable industries, wind et cetera, have hit the wall in their inability to grow and in so doing provide some of the clean and green energy that is needed as demand for energy rises.

There is job growth in renewables, there is job growth in energy efficiency and there is job growth in developing innovative industries and technologies to successfully meet the challenge of climate change. But the Howard government, fiddling while we burn, is now without a shred of credibility or authority as we learn that the greenhouse mafia have moved through the halls of power in Canberra.

Last night’s revelations were just another example of how this government has intimidated senior government officials and government agency management. A serious pattern is emerging. We have seen some evidence of it this week and in the week previous in the AWB debate. Now we have CSIRO management effectively either putting pressure on senior CSIRO scientists or the scientists themselves exercising self-censorship, knowing that, if they speak out, their programs or funding have the capacity or the likelihood of being cut. There were very clear allegations and evidence to that effect on Four Corners last night.

The government claims that it has done a great deal about climate change, but something completely different is happening. It is actually penalising and punishing those great Australian scientific minds that want to speak to the issue and deliver policy suggestions to the government that could see us seriously address the issue.

The science has been overwhelmingly conclusive for years. The situation is serious.
The expertise is being muzzled by government, and the truth of the Four Corners program shows that now the government panders to self-interest. It has been manipulated by industry forces. As they say, always back the horse called self-interest, because you know it is always trying.

Regrettably, there is no such thing as ministerial responsibility now—none whatsoever. The minister has not been called to account for the allegations that were aired on Four Corners, and it is ridiculous that even ministers such as the minister for immigration still get off scot-free. She is in charge of immigration and she has presided over a litany of horrible mistakes and they are ongoing; they still continue. The former minister for science was also named in the paper today with a charge that he too has presided over pressuring and bringing influence to bear on scientists working for the CSIRO.

The future is unfolding before our eyes. Canada’s Inuits see it in disappearing Arctic ice and permafrost. Australians see it in fatal heatwaves and extended droughts. Scientists see it in tree rings, ancient coral and bubbles trapped in icicles. All of these things reveal that the world has not been as warm as it is now for a millennium or more, and that the last years have been the hottest on record. But in Australia the government is numb and blind to what is going on in our world, and in this building and in the building that surrounds it the government stands accused of allowing a fatally compromised policy to inform Australia’s response to climate change and of muzzling those scientists whose informed views would assist us in addressing this most serious issue. (Time expired)

Mr BROADBENT (McMillan) (3.53 pm)—It is a great country we are in where we can have a debate like this, where there is enthusiastic, open and forthright debate on an issue that is important to the nation. It is also personal for me. I am more than happy to participate in this debate, as the issue of climate change and its impacts are of particular importance to my electorate of McMillan. A sizeable proportion of the population of McMillan is directly dependent on the brown coal power electricity generated in the Latrobe Valley. It is well known to this House that of even greater importance is the contribution this power source makes to the manufacturing industry in Victoria and its overall economy—and the national economy.

Implicit in the matter of public importance raised for discussion by the member for Grayndler is that the Howard government is sitting on its hands on the question of climate change and its impact. He seized on last night’s Four Corners program on the ABC as an opportunity to attack the government’s environmental credentials. The member for Grayndler has called for the urgent need for the government to take action to avoid dangerous climate change based upon independent scientific analysis. He has apparently overlooked the fact that the Howard government is already committed to a $1.9 billion package of climate change measures. He also seems to be oblivious of the fact that, while there is agreement on the fact there is climate change, there are still uncertainties about some aspects of climate change science. What is needed in facing the challenge of climate change is a measured and coordinated approach, not a shoot from the hip reaction based on alarmist and sensational claims, again based on extreme views of the impact of climate change. This government recognises the need for development of renewable energy and is pouring considerable resources into a range of initiatives. But the simple fact is that in the short term we will continue to be heavily dependent on coal based electricity generation if we are to maintain our economic development and
high employment rates. This is why this government recently committed $2.2 million to a project in the Latrobe Valley to support the development of technologies to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions from brown coal.

If ever there were an example of why the federal government should not be rushed into decision making in its response to climate change, it would be the unseemly haste in rushing to support the development of wind turbines in a number of areas. In the McMillan electorate we have the beautiful coastal vista outside Wonthaggi permanently scarred by wind turbines that are producing what can only be called a token amount of electricity at great cost— that is, when the wind blows—and at only 13 per cent efficiency. Further east, the Victorian government is trying to ride roughshod over local planning authorities and residents to approve developments at Bald Hills and Dollar. We will see about that. Again, the Bracks government in Victoria has taken little or no account of the objections of residents to the visual impact on the scenic areas of the state that rely on tourism and the potential impact on local birdlife. All this is to appease a noisy minority and is an effort to attract a handful of Green votes or preferences.

We are going through the same process here in the Australian Capital Territory, where there are a number of wind turbine projects planned or under way. Again we have the same noisy minority trying to shout down communities that have genuine concerns about these monstrosities in their midst. Again they are being accused of NIMBYism and this, to me, is the feeblest criticism of anyone exercising his or her democratic right to oppose a development they feel is going to have a negative impact on their life and on their amenity.

Around the capital at the moment, particularly the Molonglo ridge area—which you, Mr Deputy Speaker McMullan, would be well aware of—there are a number of local people who do not want that area destroyed by wind turbines. If it is destroyed by wind turbines, the vista and the amenities of the area will be changed forever, because these things take a very short time to put up, they are there for 30 years and then they will have to be torn down. To me they will always be ugly; to me they have destroyed the amenity and the beauty of the areas in which they exist, and may even go further by destroying the amenity and the beauty of Gippsland—especially that trip that takes you from Melbourne to the Prom. It is one of the great wonder trips of that part of Victoria.

I just wish the member for Grayndler and the member for Kingsford Smith would go down to Victoria and look at what the Bracks government is doing in the name of renewable energy. I do not want your Molonglo hills destroyed on the altar of renewable energy, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am a great supporter of renewable energy and the way we go about it. In the committees that I work with there are some very good people from the opposition, without naming names, and we are at one on renewable energy and the desire of this parliament to respond to climate change and respond to renewable energy. We have different ways we might like to go about it, but we will respond in a way where we can mount the arguments.

I do not think the member for Grayndler today mounted a great argument. I thought he was very good with the Deputy Speaker in the way he handled himself and was able to remain in the room. However, the member for Kingsford Smith was obviously passionate about what he was on about, and it was a great performance. I am not sure whether it was a great contribution, but it was a good performance that will perhaps encourage
other people to take a deeper and abiding interest.

A writer in the Canberra Times drew the analogy between the opponents of the wind turbines and Don Quixote in his tilting at windmills on the plains of La Mancha. I look at it rather as a David and Goliath struggle, and we all know who won that battle.

When I came to this place on my first occasion—this is my third—it was under the Hawke government. They had a particular committee on which they needed to place a former minister. His name was Barry Jones. They created a committee called the Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies. I asked the then former minister Mr Jones one day, ‘Mr Jones, what’s your long-term strategy around this place?’ and he said, ‘Next Tuesday.’ But the truth is that we took that committee very seriously.

We had a lot of dealings with CSIRO, because Barry Jones at that time took a huge interest in what was happening to CSIRO, where the nation would go in the future, and what was happening to Australia as a whole, particularly with regard to its land. They did a report for us that showed very clearly how our rangelands were drying. I just want to mention one thing about dealing with the CSIRO. It was very clear that all the scientists there were very open regarding the technical aspects of what they were doing. They were not entering at any time into the policy of where we were headed. That was clearly left for a committee report or for the minister or, as in our case here, for the parliamentary secretary. Those rangelands were drying then—and I think there is an ongoing process now—and salting.

The nation has responded since 1990 in many ways, but particularly the federal government has responded. How have we responded? Here is some information. Australia’s climate change package includes $100 million for the Renewable Energy Development Initiative; a $75 million Solar Cities program, where there will be at least four solar cities chosen from a short list; $20.5 million of renewable energy storage; a $31.6 million Challenge Plus partnership with industry to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; a $243 million Greenhouse Gas Abatement Program; a $205 million Renewable Remote Power Generation Program; a $52 million Photovoltaic Rebate Program; and a $14 million wind energy forecasting capacity program.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute today. Climate change is important to the nation. We have had a gradual increase in the temperature over 1,000 years. I hope there will be a gradual increase in this debate, and Australia will come to— (Time expired)

COMMITTEES
Selection Committee
Report

Mr CAUSLEY (Page) (4.03 pm)—I present the report of the Selection Committee relating to the consideration of committee and delegation reports and private members’ business on Monday, 27 February 2006. The report will be printed in today’s Hansard and the items accorded priority for debate will be published in the Notice Paper for the next sitting.

The report read as follows—
Report relating to the consideration of committee and delegation reports and private Members’ business on Monday, 27 February 2006.

Pursuant to standing order 222, the Selection Committee has determined the order of precedence and times to be allotted for consideration of committee and delegation reports and private Members’ business on Monday, 27 February 2006. The order of precedence and the allotments
of time determined by the Committee are as follows:

COMMITTEE AND DELEGATION REPORTS
Presentation and statements
1 Joint Standing Committee on Treaties
Report 71: Treaties tabled on 29 November 2005
The Committee determined that statements on the report may be made—all statements to conclude by 12:40 p.m.

Speech time limits—
Each Member—5 minutes.

[Minimum number of proposed Members speaking = 2 x 5 mins]

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS
Order of precedence
Notices
1 Mr. Johnson to move:

That this House:

(1) recognises that:

(a) a report from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) State of World Population 2005—the Promise of Equality: Gender Equity, Reproductive Health and Millennium Development Goals was released on 12 October and that the theme of the report is that gender equality reduces poverty, saves and improves lives;

(b) a major platform for achieving sustainable development is gender equality and the empowerment of women; and

(c) gender inequities in all countries limit the economic and social participation of women in the building of healthy and dynamic nations;

(2) encourages:

(a) the UNFPA to continue to work towards achieving gender equality; and

(b) the Government to continue to support the Millennium Development Goals because they have led to significant improvements in women’s health, safety and economic participation and increased their share in the benefits of strengthened economic growth; and

(3) recognises that these improvements have been achieved through culturally and religiously appropriate activities and has resulted in a reduction in the incidence of fistula, maternal and child mortality. (Notice given 10 November 2005.)

Time allotted—35 minutes.
Speech time limits—
Mover of motion—5 minutes.
First Opposition Member speaking—5 minutes.
Other Members—5 minutes each.

[Minimum number of proposed Members speaking = 7 x 5 mins]

The Committee determined that consideration of this matter should continue on a future day.

2 Mr. Hartsuyker to move:

That this House:

(1) notes:

(a) that the Pacific Highway is a State road designed, built, owned, and maintained by the New South Wales State Government;

(b) that there have been unacceptable delays and substantial cost over-runs in the upgrade of the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway standard from Hexham to the Queensland border;

(c) notwithstanding that the Pacific Highway is a State road, the Australian Government has made a substantial commitment to the upgrade under the Pacific Highway Reconstruction Program Agreement and Auslink;

(d) that there have been unacceptable delays to the commencement of work on bypassing population centres along the highway;

(e) tenders have been received for the construction of the Bonville Deviation and the State Minister for Roads, Mr Tripodi, plans to delay commencement of works until mid 2006; and
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(f) the public consultation process has failed to achieve route outcomes which are acceptable to communities along the highway; and

(2) calls on the New South Wales Labor Government to:

(a) exercise more stringent cost and project management control over the highway upgrade; and

(b) accelerate progress on this upgrade with a view to completing a dual carriageway between Hexham and the Queensland border by 2016. (Notice given 8 February 2006.)

Time allotted—remaining private Members’ business time prior to 1.45 p.m.

Speech time limits—
Mover of motion—5 minutes.
First Opposition Member speaking—5 minutes.
Other Members—5 minutes each.

[Minimum number of proposed Members speaking = 6 x 5 mins]

The Committee determined that consideration of this matter should continue on a future day.

Ms Plibersek to move:

That this House:

(1) notes:

(a) the spiralling cost of child care in many parts of Australia;

(b) that a large number of families cannot either find or afford high quality, local child care;

(c) the low labour force participation rates of women with dependant children in Australia, relative to many other OECD nations; and

(d) that families cannot claim the child care tax offset until after the end of the financial year following the year when child care fees had been paid, even though the Government has all the details necessary to process the offset earlier; and

(2) calls on the Government to:

(a) develop policies to create more places for children in high quality care in areas where more places are needed;

(b) recognise that planning is needed in the long day care market to correct market failures, and make it possible for parents with young children to participate in the workforce; and

(c) implement Labor’s proposals to allow families to benefit from the child care tax offset at least a year earlier than the Government’s scheme allows. (Notice given 13 February 2006.)

Time allotted—40 minutes.

Speech time limits—
Mover of motion—10 minutes.
First Government Member speaking—10 minutes.
Other Members—5 minutes each.
[Minimum number of proposed Members speaking = 2 x 10 mins and 4 x 5 mins]

The Committee determined that consideration of this matter should continue on a future day.

4 Mrs Irwin to move:

That this House:

(1) notes that the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU):

(a) is the focal point for global parliamentary dialogue and, as the primary vehicle for strengthening parliaments worldwide, works globally for the establishment of representative democracy, providing an unparalleled parliamentary dimension to international cooperation;

(b) at its Assemblies, initiates debates on issues of international interest and concern in order to raise awareness and action by parliaments and parliamentarians;

(c) defends and promotes human rights, particularly through the Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians;

(d) stresses the representation of both genders within the ranks of parliamentarians, facilitating the participation of women parliamentarians in its forums;
(e) encourages good governance and democratic capacity building through its programs and work with regional inter-parliamentary organisations, international inter-governmental and non-government organisations; and

(f) supports the efforts of the United Nations (at which it has observer status), works in close co-operation with the UN and is seeking a closer strategic partnership with the UN so as to promote more substantive interaction and coordination between the IPU and the UN;

(2) welcomes recent reforms of the IPU that were strongly supported by Australian delegations, and which have resulted in improved reporting mechanisms, including detailed and comprehensive financial statements; and

(3) commends past and present Australian delegations for their contribution to the IPU, as reflected in the leading role taken in the work of standing committees, drafting committees, geopolitical groups and the meeting of women parliamentarians. (Notice given 22 June 2005.)

Time allotted—10 minutes.

Speech time limits—

Mover of motion—5 minutes.

First Government Member speaking—5 minutes.

[Minimum number of proposed Members speaking = 2 x 5 mins]

The Committee determined that consideration of this matter should continue on a future day.

Mr Quick to move:

That this House:

(1) acknowledges the fact that alcohol misuse remains the number one health and social issue confronting the Australian community;

(2) expresses its appreciation to the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation for its outstanding efforts to date in raising public awareness of the dangers of alcohol and licit substance misuse and the importance of responsible consumption of alcohol;

(3) notes the effectiveness of the grants program administered by the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation over the past four years;

(4) notes in particular the work of the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation in addressing the scourge of inhalant abuse among young indigenous Australians; and

(5) calls on the Government to provide sufficient funding to the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation’s Public Fund in the 2006-2007 Budget to enable the Foundation to continue its work in addressing the causes of, and harms arising from, alcohol and licit substance misuse. (Notice given 1 December 2005.)

Time allotted—remaining private Members’ business time.

Speech time limits—

Mover of motion—5 minutes.

First Government Member speaking—5 minutes.

[Minimum number of proposed Members speaking = 2 x 5 mins]

The Committee determined that consideration of this matter should continue on a future day.

BUSINESS

Rearrangement

Dr WASHER (Moore) (4.03 pm)—by leave—I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent the order of the day, private Members’ business, relating to the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005, being called on immediately and the motion for the second reading then to be moved and debate to ensue, and, unless otherwise ordered, this order of the day to have precedence (until resolved) over Government business orders of the day during the sittings this week.

The SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

Ms Gillard—I second the motion.

Question agreed to.
THERAPEUTIC GOODS AMENDMENT (REPEAL OF MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR APPROVAL OF RU486) BILL 2005

Debate resumed from 13 February.

Second Reading

Dr WASHER (Moore) (4.04 pm)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The history important to this debate on RU486 (mifepristone) comes about because this drug belongs to the special category of drugs under the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989 (the act) known as restricted goods, which cannot be evaluated, listed, registered or imported without the written approval of the minister for health.

Further, any such written approval must be laid before each house of parliament by the minister within five sitting days of being given.

Restricted goods only apply to abortifacients—that is, exclusively to medicines intended to induce an abortion.

All other medicines are evaluated and regulated by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) without any requirement for approval from the minister.

A sponsor seeking to market an abortifacient such as RU486 would need to submit an application with supporting data demonstrating quality, safety and effectiveness of the drug through the same process as all prescription medicines in Australia. The key difference is that in the case of RU486 ministerial written approval is required before evaluation by the TGA can occur.

The restricted goods provision was incorporated into the act in 1996 as a result of amendments introduced in the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Bill 1996 by Senator Brian Harradine.

The amendments were supported by both the Liberal-National Party government and the Labor opposition.

This made the minister for health, rather than the TGA, ultimately responsible for decisions in relation to evaluation, registration, listing or importation of abortifacients.

Senator Meg Lees argued at the time that this would effectively deter sponsors from seeking to bring RU486 into Australia, an argument that has proven to be true. Please do not confuse authorised prescribers as changing the restricted goods status of this drug.

Sponsors often face significant costs in putting together supporting evidence for an application to the TGA, which demands full cost recovery.

The TGA is a globally respected organisation and is the appropriate authority to assess and evaluate the risks posed by therapeutic goods, applying any measures necessary for treating the risks posed and monitoring and reviewing the risks over time. So far the TGA has been entrusted by government to evaluate more than 50,000 therapeutic goods. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that it is also qualified to manage the risks associated with medicines such as RU486.

In 2005 two Queensland based gynaecologists, Caroline de Costa and Michael Carrette, submitted an application to become authorised prescribers of RU486. This was referred to the TGA by the minister.

A TGA bill before the Senate gave Senators Lyn Allison, Judith Troeth, Fiona Nash and Claire Moore the opportunity to change this ministerial control in the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005.

This bill will ensure all medications for use in Australia are appropriately evaluated.
by the TGA and the Australian Drug Evaluation Committee, the group of independent experts appointed by the health minister.

The member for Murray, Dr Sharman Stone, supports this position, as she has experienced the plight of disadvantaged people in her electorate in having only a ‘surgical requiring anaesthetic’ option for termination of pregnancy.

Clearly this debate is not about one’s views on abortion, as this is a legal procedure determined by state and territory laws. There should be no difficulty in separating the issue of abortion from the question of method.

Currently this parliament sanctions and Medicare rebates surgical—that is, suction curettage with anaesthesia termination of pregnancy—a procedure with many similar risk factors to RU486.

The reasons for abortion are an unwanted or unviable pregnancy. Unwanted pregnancies occur in multiple situations such as foetal abnormality, serious maternal health problems and severe psychological and social problems, to mention a few.

This debate is not about increasing the incidence of abortion, as careful research in many of the 35 countries where RU486 is used has not demonstrated this trend.

In the Netherlands, where abortion is legal and both surgical and medical—RU486—methods are available, and contraception and sex education are widely promoted, there exists one of the world’s lowest abortion rates.

In Australia, where RU486 is not available, the incidence of abortion is far too high, and we should take some lessons from the Netherlands.

As Dr Stone and I have advocated, we need to put in place better education and information programs that more effectively inform young people about their own sexuality, that empower them with better life skills and that teach them about responsible parenting and contraception. There is an urgent need to identify world’s best practice, with a view to our government implementing a national health and wellbeing program that is available in all schools.

As the highest rates of abortions occur in women between 20 and 24 years of age, there is also a need for media education similar to our highly successful tobacco Quit program.

This debate is not about parliamentarians rightly being entitled to different views on abortion, as there are many members with religious and moral views who oppose abortion.

Nevertheless, politicians are not entitled to use the power of the state and legislation to impose their own personal moral positions on the entire community.

We do have a political responsibility to ensure the safety and quality of health care and to ensure equitable access to lawful services and procedures.

There can be no excuse in this debate to confuse separating the issue of abortion from the method of abortion, particularly when the surgical method receives Medicare funding.

I would have thought that Christian belief would extend compassion to women confronted with unwanted pregnancy, particularly with gross foetal abnormality and serious maternal illness including cancer, and in cases of nonviable pregnancy and to at least allow the dignity of a thorough evaluation of a medical alternative.

This is not a debate about confidence or lack of confidence in the health minister, a man whom I believe has excelled in the job. We may have had a few minor differences
but that is expected in any mature political relationship.

The debate should not be influenced by extreme minority groups targeting marginal seats, aimed at intimidating people in these seats to confuse the debate as a debate about the pros and cons of abortion, which is a total lie.

The debate is certainly not about giving parliament greater levels of scrutiny and accountability by ministerial retention, now or in the future, of the power that requires his or her written approval for TGA assessment.

Under the current arrangements the health minister is simply required to notify the parliament of a decision to approve the application for evaluation of an abortifacient by the TGA.

Given the fact that such a decision is not disallowable, this would not amount to a significant level of parliamentary scrutiny.

Further, the minister is not required to table decisions not to approve such applications, meaning that the parliament would neither necessarily be informed nor have the capacity of any oversight of such a decision.

A proposition put by some that the bill, if approved, would abandon parliamentary responsibility to grapple with difficult social and ethical questions instead of leaving this to scientists, doctors, ethicists and officials specialising in the field but who are not as accountable for contentious decisions is, to say the least, ludicrous.

How many times have we rightly heard statements like, ‘I will take advice and report back to parliament,’ or, ‘We will await the outcome of an expert inquiry,’ or, ‘This is just a download from Google and not properly researched policy’?

Specialised scientific and medical advice built on evidence based research and expertise is the only way to determine appropriate methods of treatment.

These methods also need to be followed or reviewed on a regular basis to ensure safety, and funded by a sponsor.

Further evidence to confirm this absurd position will be ‘cherry-picking’ of risk factors of RU486 to suit an argument to effectively prevent proper evaluation by the TGA.

For example, I am sure one will be clostridium sordellii, which can cause septic shock. It is an organism found in soil and in the human gut and in 10 per cent of women’s vaginas. This will no doubt get a mention.

The four deaths in the USA and one in Canada associated with abortion are factual, but the FDA is not convinced that they are directly related to RU486 or prostaglandin usage.

Infection from this bacterium has occurred in people undergoing liver, colon, bowel and prostate procedures and has been associated with ear infection, wound infections and caesarean section. These types of infections are certainly not beyond our medical ability to prevent by the use of appropriate prophylaxis if deemed necessary, no doubt a job for the TGA to assess.

A number in this debate will talk of the drug in the light of medical misadventure or incompetence, a problem that makes any medication look dangerous if inappropriately administered or managed but of course not the fault of the drug itself.

Others will claim this drug is evil because it is designed to kill a foetus, but so of course is the Medicare rebatable surgical procedure of suction curettage with anaesthesia.

It is interesting to note that maternal death from pregnancy giving live birth is almost seven times greater than medical or surgical abortion, yet few of us would discourage women from having children.
I have no intention of pretending expertise in RU486 and prostaglandin combination usage, as it has never been utilised in this country, although of course prostaglandins have been extensively utilised on their own for a number of purposes.

There seems no doubt, however, from overseas experience that in the period of pregnancy before eight weeks gestation, when suction curettage can be used without greater risk of cervical and uterine damage, RU486 is a much safer option.

We almost all agree that, if abortion is deemed necessary, earlier rather than later is preferable.

Abortifacients like RU486 are already used in this country for termination of ectopic and intra-uterine pregnancy.

Methotrexate, a drug readily available, a folate antagonist, is used in certain cancers, psoriasis and rheumatoid arthritis and is one of these drugs. However, methotrexate lacks the efficacy and safety of RU486 for intra-uterine abortion.

I have always believed, like the majority of people in this place, that freedom of choice should be a right of all, within the constraints of the law. Women undergoing legal procedures should have the opportunity to have proper assessment of the medical alternative to surgery, otherwise there would be a lingering doubt that this is more about punishment than the responsibility of ensuring the best care possible.

The best care possible is determined by the TGA, with informed consent and, I emphasise, appropriate counselling between the patient and doctor, a view supported by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Australian Medical Association, the World Health Organisation and the Public Health Association of Australia, to mention but a few.

The TGA will enable us, as politicians, to ensure that the best scrutiny is given to RU486.

It is anticipated that adequate funding by a sponsor will be offered to introduce the medication to Australia if the current ministerial requirements and impediments are lifted. Not removing these impediments is an exercise in gross negligence to a section of our constituencies.

It is time for us to minimise the trauma to women undergoing a legal procedure for an unwanted or non-viable pregnancy. This debate is about method and definitely not about abortion, so we have no need to take the place of our state or territory politicians who have already legislated on the matter of abortion. Please also remember that women would not be pregnant without at least some assistance from a male and that the trauma associated with abortion extends beyond the individual to family and friends. A very significant part of that trauma is related to the method of the procedure. This is where this debate should remain acutely focused.

Any amendments presented in an attempt to politically dilute or pervert the findings of the TGA should be vigorously rejected.

Would anyone in this House seriously believe that any CEO of a sponsor company would sanction the very significant time and money to seek approval for a drug to be TGA assessed when this parliament could reject it out of hand?

The SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

Ms GILLARD (Lalor) (4.18 pm)—I second the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005. I congratulate the member for Moore, whom I am following, on the role he has played in this debate, and of course Sharman
Stone, now elevated to the Howard government ministry. I also offer my congratulations to Senators Moore, Allison, Troeth and Nash. I note that my Senate colleagues Senators Moore and Webber are in the gallery watching this debate.

I would like to make some comments today on what this debate is about, who this debate is about, the effect of the amendments which are to be moved and which are before the House of Representatives for its consideration, and the role of the Minister for Health and Ageing in this debate. This debate is of course about RU486, which belongs, as the member for Moore has said, to a special category of drugs under the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989 known as restricted goods. These restricted goods are defined under the act as drugs intended for use in women as abortifacients. The special category of drugs cannot be evaluated, registered, listed or imported without the prior written approval of the minister for health. A written approval must be laid before each house of parliament by the minister within five sitting days of it being given.

The regulations that ban the importation, trial, registration or listing of RU486 and similar abortion drugs without the written approval of the minister for health were incorporated into the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989 as a result of the passage of the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Bill 1996. The provisions relating to RU486 and the role of the minister for health were introduced into the 1996 legislation as a result of an amendment introduced by Senator Brian Harradine. This came about because Senator Harradine was concerned that RU486 had been allowed into Australia as part of two World Health Organisation sponsored clinical trials. One was in New South Wales and one was in Victoria. At the time of the amendment, Senator Harradine and those who supported the amendment restricting RU486 argued that the long-term health effects of using RU486 were unknown and therefore additional scrutiny was required. That argument may have had some merit in 1996, but 10 years on, with the drug now having been used by 2.5 million women, these arguments no longer have force.

It has been noted in the course of the public debate about RU486 that Labor members supported this amendment. It was done on the voices. But when one looks at the Hansard record of what motivated Labor members at that time it is clear that they thought there should be some extra scrutiny of RU486 but they did not believe that what they were putting in place at that point would amount to a complete ban on RU486. That is made clear by the words of the then shadow minister for health, Michael Lee, amongst others. It has in effect become a complete ban, for the reasons that the member for Moore has gone to. The manufacturer of RU486 and the people who would seek to import RU486 are not going to do so if they have to face the uncertainties of a political process, whether that be a political process involving ministerial approval or, indeed, a political process involving parliamentary disallowance, as the amendment which is to be moved to this bill suggests.

It has been an effective ban. We know that RU486 has not become available in Australia. Obviously, given that it is now off patent—so that the amount of money paid for the drug and the reward to the manufacturer are therefore necessarily quite low—and considering the time and cost that would be involved in filing an application for TGA approval, it is unsurprising that an entity making a commercial decision in the face of political hurdles has decided not to even enter the race which ultimately would have made RU486 available.
The bill before us would change the system. It would remove the requirement that RU486 and other designated abortifacients obtain the permission of the Minister for Health and Ageing for importation, trial or listing. The permission of the TGA would still be required, as would ethics approval. In my view, this puts RU486 where it belongs: to be treated like any other drug being imported, trialled, prescribed under the Special Access Scheme or submitted for registration in this country.

The bill before us today is about neither whether abortion should be legal in this country—that is not a decision for this parliament under our current political and legal system—nor whether a medical abortion is legal. This bill is about whether the best method to assess RU486 for safety should lie with the Therapeutic Goods Administration or with the minister for health. In my view, it should lie with the Therapeutic Goods Administration, which we trust to assess the safety and effectiveness of tens of thousands of medicines, many of them dangerous—many of them dangerous new cancer medicines, many of them dangerous and addictive pain-killing medicines, many of them medicines which, if misused, can cause real human distress. We trust the Therapeutic Goods Administration to do that for tens of thousands of medications and drugs. I believe that we can trust the Therapeutic Goods Administration to do that for RU486. The impact of this bill is to give the Therapeutic Goods Administration the power to do the work in respect of RU486 that it is empowered to do in respect of other drugs and medicines—work that it has done successfully for tens of thousands of drugs.

If this bill were adopted, the way in which the system would function for RU486 would be as follows—and we need to note that RU486, because it has not been registered in Australia, for the reasons of which I have spoken, has not been approved for use in Australia. If this bill were adopted and the drug were then imported to Australia for use in clinical studies or under the Special Access Scheme for individual patients, all submissions for importation would have to be approved not only by the Therapeutic Goods Administration but also by the relevant ethics committees that would work on this issue. So we would have two layers of checking: the TGA and the relevant ethics committees. If an application were made for registration of the drug for sale in Australia, this application would have to be considered by the Australian Drug Evaluation Committee, the ADEC, which is an expert advisory group appointed by the minister. Given these layers of checking—if the drug remains unregistered, it goes to the TGA and then an ethics committee; if registration is sought, the TGA and the Australian Drug Evaluation Committee are involved—I ask the question: what further work is it that political intervention by any minister for health could do? The system is robust and should be allowed to do the work that has been set for it, and that is what this bill would achieve.

Having addressed the question of what this bill is about, I want to speak briefly about who this bill is about. In some of the public commentary there has been the image that women will be irresponsibly purchasing RU486, if it is available in Australia, to unthinkingly procure an abortion, or that this is a debate about irresponsible young girls or irresponsible young women. The evidence, whether we like it or not, is to the contrary. There is no evidence that Australian women have abortions unthinkingly. We know that over the past decade the proportion of Medicare funded abortions done for teenagers has fallen by 12 per cent—and that is a tremendously good thing—but the proportion for patients over 35 has risen by 37 per cent. We also know that a patient seeking an abortion
was 40 per cent more likely to be married or in a de facto relationship in 2002 than in 1992. Any imagery in this debate of irresponsible young girls is false imagery and not imagery that we should allow to cloud our opinion. It seems that abortions are being had by women in committed relationships in the older age range. We do not necessarily know why, but I say that we should respect their decision because we will never know as much about their individual circumstances as they do.

Having addressed what this debate is about and who this debate is about, I want to spend some time talking about the possible amendments to this bill that have been foreshadowed in the House of Representatives. I note that some of the proponents of those amendments are here today, sitting in the House, listening to the debate. I understand that the amendments are put forward in absolute good faith and they will be spoken to at the appropriate point. But I cannot agree with them, and I will outline my reasons for not agreeing with them at this stage.

Two amendments have been foreshadowed. One has been proposed by the member for Lindsay, who is here now. Currently, as we have discussed, the Minister for Health and Ageing has the ability to approve or not approve the importation of RU486. Under the member for Lindsay’s amendment, the minister would still retain this power. However, after the minister had made a determination, whether positive or negative, the determination would become a disallowable instrument. This is flawed on two counts. Firstly, the very thing that has made the current scheme of arrangements for RU486 an effective ban—the very thing that has driven that result—is the fact that there is a level of political decision making and uncertainty for a manufacturer or importer. The amendment suggested by the member for Lindsay would make this problem worse. A manufacturer or importer would not only need to go to a ministerial level but would also need to submit themselves to the vagaries of a parliamentary debate on a disallowance motion. I believe that would in effect be a continuation of the ban, because the manufacturer or importer would not run those risks. So, whilst I understand that the amendment is put forward in absolute good faith, I cannot agree with it. I think it would mean a continuing effective ban on RU486 and would introduce a new level of uncertainty.

I also note that the amendment would have the capacity to significantly impact on the work of this parliamentary chamber and the other place because one could anticipate that we would face very regular disallowance debates on RU486. I leave members to contemplate whether they think that is a desirable prospect. A disallowance debate could be triggered by any individual decision of the minister. Those decisions could be made on a number of applications for importation—an application for registration, an application to vary that registration and the like.

An amendment has also been proposed by the member for Bowman. This amendment is in some ways comparable to the amendment moved by Senators Colbeck and Scullion in the Senate, which I note was defeated, but it is also slightly different. The key difference between the amendment proposed by the member for Bowman and the amendment proposed by the member for Lindsay is that, under the member for Bowman’s amendment, there is no continuing role for the Minister for Health and Ageing. Under this amendment, a decision by the Therapeutic Goods Administration to register or list RU486—that is, any determination that RU486 is safe and effective—would be a disallowable instrument. It should be noted that once again there may be more than one
such determination. For example, the TGA could make separate decisions on different applications for RU486 from different manufacturers. In my view this amendment is different to the amendment proposed by the member for Lindsay in that it is less likely to trigger multiple RU486 debates, but it is still possible that the parliament could find itself debating this matter on more than one occasion.

It should be noted that the definition of ‘restricted goods’ under the member for Bowman’s amendment is wider than RU486 and abortifacients and would include a range of yet to be developed drugs such as those to improve brain performance. My central criticism of the member for Lindsay’s amendment stands in relation to this amendment. Once again, if you inject this level of political intervention in the process and the uncertainties of what would happen in a disallowance debate, it will amount to an effective ban because no manufacturer or importer will take a step down that path. So, in my view, both amendments ought to be opposed because, even though proposed with goodwill, they amount to a continuation of what has been an effective ban. I think the bill in this place should pass, unamended. I know that members are seriously considering how they are going to vote.

I would like to make some comments about what I think should not be part of this debate. Those comments relate to the role of the minister for health. There has been some commentary in the media—and indeed by the minister for health himself—that in some ways this debate relates to his values and his faith; his very publicly known Catholicism. Those things have played no role in how I am going to vote on this private member’s bill. I do not share the minister’s faith, but I respect it. Indeed, I respect very strongly anybody who can cleave so strongly to faith in the modern age. I think that is a very admirable personal quality. This is not about the minister’s faith. It would not matter whether the current minister were minister for health, whether I were minister for health, whether some other person in this parliament were minister for health or indeed whether some person who is yet to enter this parliament were minister for health—the same policy considerations I have outlined would continue to apply.

What I do say to the minister for health is that I have been concerned not by his faith but by how he has dealt with this debate. This is a debate we should deal with in the least inflammatory way, and not in the most inflammatory way. I do not think it is appropriate in that regard to misstate the number of abortions there are in Australia and to do that consistently. The minister for health consistently uses the figure of 100,000 abortions per year.

Mr Abbott—Up to 100,000 abortions.

Ms GILLARD—Even on the ‘up to’ figure which the minister interjects that he uses, he would know from departmental advice he has received that the department’s best estimate is somewhere between 73,000 and the 91,000 he mentions from the table. This is not a debate where someone should round up. Statistics can be so important. This is a debate where accuracy should be striven for. The minister is in a better position to be accurate, given the range of expert departmental advice available to him.

It is not a debate in which one should use terminology like ‘an epidemic of abortions’, ‘backyard miscarriages’ and ‘pop and forget pill’. I do not think any of those terms have any place in this debate. There is not one woman in this country who would view the decision to have an abortion as being a matter of taking a ‘pop and forget pill’. I would certainly want to believe that there is not one doctor in this country who would prescribe
RU486 and then let a woman go into dangerous circumstances. If there are large numbers of such unscrupulous doctors in this country, then shouldn’t we be desperately worried and acting today on what they may be doing with dangerous pain-killing medication, dangerous cancer medication and the like? We can overwhelmingly trust our medical professionals because overwhelmingly they have proven they should be trusted. That is why the argument about backyard miscarriages should not be entered into.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate. As I have made clear, I will certainly be supporting the legislation. The senators who are in the gallery here today are certainly in a position to tell us that senators managed to conduct this debate in a very civilised way overall and had an exchange of views about this very important issue. I look forward to a debate in this House in that spirit.

Miss Jackie Kell (Lindsay) (4.38 pm)—Last week when the Prime Minister was asked for his views on the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 he said:

I think there are a number of issues that have to be considered, not only the medical implications of it but also the principle that important decisions affecting the community should be made by people who are directly accountable to the community.

The Prime Minister went on:

I’ve never been one, incidentally, who believes it makes much sense to devote an enormous amount of time and energy and commitment of one’s life to win election to parliament, and to the high office of decision-making, and then to spend the next stage of life busily handing over decisions to people who are not accountable.

I agree with the Prime Minister. I did not thought the business of government is a spectator sport. The Prime Minister also said that RU486 was not an ordinary drug. That was why it was not automatically under the control of the Therapeutic Goods Authority, like other medicines. The Prime Minister said:

Self evidently this is not an ordinary drug. You don’t have a question at a news conference involving the Prime Minister of Australia and the Prime Minister of another country about a flu tablet.

Again, I agree with the Prime Minister. RU486 is different. It involves social issues and policy matters as well as technical issues, and it involves taking into account community standards.

As others have said, this is not a debate about abortion. It is about the approval of a particular class of drugs. The Prime Minister is not the only person who thinks that RU486 is not an ordinary drug. Back in 1996, when both houses of parliament passed the bill establishing the current regime, then Labor Senator Belinda Neal said:

These issues need to be addressed by the executive of this government ... with absolute and direct accountability ...

Then Greens Senator Christabel Chamarette said:

We deserve to have a voice on issues and not simply leave them to boards of experts.

One of the problems with this bill is that it does not address the call for greater transparency and accountability. All it does is substitute the TGA for the minister and leave the process as opaque as it is currently. Another problem is that the bill has generated a debate in which we are being called upon to choose between the minister and the TGA. In my view, this is an artificial choice that we do not need to make. There is a need to involve both the minister and the TGA.
The TGA has an important part to play in the approval process. It is an expert body and the most appropriate body to deal with health, safety and efficacy issues. But these are not the only issues involved in a decision about approving the use of this drug. The use of this drug involves policy issues and social considerations, and these issues are the responsibility of elected representatives and not unelected bodies. As Belinda Neal said, there is a role for the executive of the government. It is not the responsibility of the TGA to determine social and policy issues or to assess community attitudes. This is the role of elected politicians answerable to the people. Nor is it appropriate or practical for issues to be first considered by way of a disallowance motion, particularly a disallowance motion after the decision has already been made.

However, I do agree that the minister should not be the final judge of these issues. There should be a transparent process in which the minister is accountable for his or her decision. That accountability includes making available the TGA’s assessment of an application and the minister’s decision. Such a process would ensure that a minister would not disregard advice that he or she received without very good reason to do so. In such a case, there should be a means of reviewing the minister’s decision since these issues involve matters of judgment—and none of us gets it right all the time. It is our role to review the decisions of ministers—that is the role of elected parliamentarians.

Consequently, I am moving a principled amendment which sets out these matters. This procedure will facilitate debate about detailed amendments to give effect to these principles. I believe the process for approving drugs such as RU486 should be as follows: applications for approval of the drug are sent to the minister; the minister refers the application to the TGA for its assessment; upon receipt of the assessment, the minister makes a decision, giving reasons, and publishes it; the minister attaches the TGA’s assessment to the decision; and the decision, whether it be positive or negative, together with the TGA’s assessment, becomes a disallowable instrument which can be disallowed by either House.

I believe that these principles would give us the best practical system. It is a compromise between those who say that the existing system has not been tested and should not be fixed until we know it is broken and those who say that RU486 should be subjected to the same regime as any other drug. It also enables the parliament to discharge its responsibilities to the community by either affirming or rejecting the minister’s decision should members of parliament wish to call it into question. Because a number of issues relating to approving RU486 involve matters of judgment, it is appropriate that there should be this capacity to review the minister’s decision. It is our role as elected representatives to undertake that review.

Of course governments and parliamentarians must consult and consider carefully the assessments and views of experts in their fields of competence. Still, the community expects governments and parliaments to determine policy and weigh the variety of issues relevant to important decisions. The issue before us is to decide upon an approval process. The current system is flawed, but the system proposed by this bill does not address the flaws and even makes matters worse by removing elected representatives from the decision-making process.

I am proposing a regime which incorporates the principle that the views of experts must be known and heard and the principle that it is the role of elected representatives to make final decisions which involve social and policy issues and to take responsibility...
for them. It also represents a fair compromise between those who believe the current system is not flawed and those who want a transparent process which involves experts in the decision-making process and in which the various participants in that process are accountable. I commend these views to the House and move:

That all words after “That” be omitted with a view to substituting the following words:

“the House is of the opinion that the bill is unacceptable in its current form and the preferred policy approach should be:

(1) the Minister for Health and Ageing continuing to have the decision making role in relation to the approval of restricted goods as defined in the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989;
(2) the Minister being required to obtain written advice from the Therapeutic Goods Administration prior to giving written approval or refusal to approve; and
(3) the Minister’s decision being subject to disallowance by each House of Parliament”.

Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney) (4.47 pm)—I want to begin my comments today on the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 by congratulating the four female senators who have sponsored this bill for their courage and determination. I want to congratulate National Party Senator Fiona Nash, Liberal Senator Judith Troeth, Democrat Senator Lyn Allison, and the remarkable Senator Claire Moore, who I see here today.

The question before us today should be: should RU486 be treated differently from other drugs? The debate really should have been about whether there is a case to be made that this drug is so dangerous that it should be treated in a unique way. Unfortunately, we have drifted into a proxy debate about the morality of abortion and about whether parliamentarians have a right to inflict their views on Australian women. This is an enormous disappointment for many Australians suffering from different types of cancer, Cushing’s syndrome and so on, who have been waiting for RU486 to be approved for some of the other therapeutic uses of the drug.

The opponents of this bill have two main arguments for why RU486 should not be used in Australia. The arguments centre around the safety of the drug for the women using it and around the broader moral question of whether women should have access to abortions at all. Any drug, any surgical procedure, has risks. When the use of RU486 was first discussed in Australia, there was a great deal less evidence of its safety and efficacy than there is today. We are now able to look at evidence stretching back 15 years. More than 21 million women internationally have used the drug in more than 30 countries, including throughout Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand.
There have been five deaths after the use of RU486 which may or may not have been related to the use of the drug but were related to a virulent but rare infection. Clostridium sordellii is an organism found in soil and in the human gut. But there have been other deaths from infection with this same organism, including after a liver biopsy, colon disease, bowel dysfunction, a caesarean section, a prostate biopsy and an ear infection. Sadly, there have also been five deaths in women following live births.

Four of the women who died from this infection after using RU486 lived in California, and one in Canada. The jury is still out in the United States about whether the deaths were related to RU486 at all. There was also, sadly, a death early on in France, of a woman who died of heart failure after taking RU486. A woman with such a heart condition today would not be prescribed the drug.

Opponents of the drug would say that even one death, of any woman, is one death too many, and of course in a sense that is true. The logic of the argument falters, however, when you look at the comparative figures for other drugs and the figures for alternatives to RU486. No drug is risk free. Paracetamol, aspirin, even Viagra have their risks. In 2003, 59 deaths were caused in the United States as a result of taking aspirin. In 2003 in Australia, there were 48 deaths to which paracetamol was a contributing factor; 22 of those were suicide and 26 were accidental. In the United Kingdom, there are about 150 deaths each year from paracetamol but so far there have been none from RU486, although 31,000 British women use it as an abortifacient each year.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration reported on Viagra in 2002, after it had been used in Australia for three years. The Adverse Drug Reactions Advisory Committee had received 20 reports of myocardial infarction, which included four fatalities. A recent editorial in the journal Contraception noted that Viagra had a mortality rate of five deaths per 100,000 prescriptions, which is much higher than the worst-case scenario that we have been given for RU486, which is about one death per 100,000 patients. It seems passing strange to me that men, in consultation with their doctors, can be trusted to make decisions about a drug that has a higher death rate than RU486 but women contemplating a termination cannot be trusted to make such decisions for themselves.

The safety argument also falters when you consider the alternatives to legal medical or surgical abortions. Women die from unsafe abortions. Nineteen million unsafe abortions are estimated to take place each year. Most of these are in developing nations. There are 68,000 deaths associated with these procedures. Australian women used to die in large numbers when abortion was illegal in Australia. Illegal abortions performed prior to 1971 were second in the five main causes of maternal death for Australian women. In 1965 in Australia there were 45 maternal deaths due to abortion. There are some circumstances, we know, in which a woman will do whatever it takes to terminate a pregnancy—and that has always been the case. Restricting access to surgical or medical abortions is not about women’s safety. We also know that women die in childbirth. Fatality rates both from live births and from miscarriages are higher than for medical or surgical abortions. If safety were the real concern, we would stop giving birth.

I do not raise these figures for any frivolous reason but to point out that there are opponents of this legislation who say that RU486 has to be treated in a special way, as a special category of drug, because it is so much more dangerous than other drugs—and that is just not right. If the opponents of this
legislation genuinely believe that their objections are about the safety of the drug, let them give the evidence of its danger to the Australian Drug Evaluation Committee and the Therapeutic Goods Administration—and, surely, based on that expert evidence, those bodies would not pass it.

If opposition to this legislation is not about the safety of women using a particular drug, what is it about? Unfortunately, this debate has become a proxy debate about abortion itself. I say this is unfortunate because this parliament does not have the power to amend laws affecting the legality or otherwise of abortion—the states do that. All we can do is harass women who decide to have a termination, if they so choose. We cannot make abortion illegal where it is legal; all we can do is make it more humiliating, more expensive, more difficult or later in the term of a pregnancy, after a ‘cooling off period’ and mandatory counselling and so on.

All the emotional rhetoric and dishonesty usually used in abortion debates unfortunately has been dragged out and dusted off in this debate, so I would like to set a few things straight. The first thing I want to say is that there is no such thing as ‘pro-abortion’. Everyone in this chamber is pro-life. The notion that there are some parliamentarians or some people in the community who think abortions are just great and that there should be more of them is an absolute nonsense. I believe that every Australian would be happier if there were fewer abortions because that would mean fewer women going through what is at best an uncomfortable and unpleasant experience.

People who are pro-choice are just that. We do not want to make women have more abortions; we do not want to try and convince people who are unsure whether they should terminate a pregnancy. We are pro-choice. We believe that for most women it is a terribly difficult thing to decide to terminate a pregnancy, but we respect women enough to believe they have the ability and the right to make such decisions for themselves.

Being pro-choice means giving women genuine choices. Most are making a decision that they just cannot cope with one more child—they cannot cope physically, emotionally, mentally, financially or for some other reason. They do not feel they can be a good mother to a child or to another child. If we are genuine about giving women choices then we have to be prepared to provide the support that would make it possible for them to continue with the pregnancy if they want to—support like paid maternity leave; affordable and accessible child care; workplaces that respect the needs of working parents; and affordable housing, so they are not flogging themselves to pay the mortgage. All too often I hear people telling other people that they should have children but offering no constructive help or support when it comes to raising those kids. On the contrary, if you end up a single mother this government will hound you and traduce you, telling you that mothering is worthless and that you should get out into the workforce and make some real contribution to society.

The second great myth that has been trotted out in this debate is that giving women a choice between medical and surgical abortion will make having an abortion easy and that will increase the rate. There is absolutely no evidence of this. The countries that allow the use of RU486 have had no associated increase in abortion rates and, in some cases, rates have fallen. The notion that throwing a few obstacles in a woman’s way will make her continue with a pregnancy is just foolish. I believe that this argument is actually code for saying that women should be punished for terminating a pregnancy, that the proce-
dure should be as nasty as possible to teach them a lesson. It is a reminder of our original sin and a punishment for having had sex with anything but procreation in mind. It is like the old days when women were denied pain relief during childbirth because it was thought that it was good for us morally to suffer.

An associated myth is that, if we make abortions more difficult to obtain, we will decrease the abortion rate. I think that there are two ways to decrease the abortion rate: reduce unwanted pregnancies and reduce the pressure of having kids. The Netherlands has the lowest abortion rate recorded worldwide. But, since November 1984, women in the Netherlands have been able to obtain abortions free of charge under the government sponsored national health insurance system. They teach their young people to use the ‘double Dutch’ method of contraception—condoms and contraceptive pills at the same time—and have contraception readily available. They have open and extensive sex education classes starting early in a child’s life. They have extremely low teen pregnancy rates. If the Australian government wants to lower abortion rates it should support better sex education in schools, including frank discussion about contraceptive options and also a focus on teenagers’ self-esteem so they can resist pressure to have unwanted or unsafe sex.

The fourth argument being used is that the ‘experts’ are unaccountable and, conversely, only politicians are accountable. Politicians are generally accountable—I agree—but politicians can also be subject to electoral pressures. Of course, the greater objection to parliamentarians deciding the fate of this or any other medicine is that we just do not have the necessary technical knowledge. We could—and should—spend our lives reading the medical evidence for safety and efficacy. I already have a job: it is representing the people of the electorate of Sydney in the federal parliament. If I wanted to spend my life reviewing medical literature, I would have chosen another field of endeavour. I also find it extraordinary that the Minister for Health and Ageing, the man leading the charge on giving parliament the responsibility for making a complex decision about the efficacy and safety of RU486, is the same man who said we could not be trusted to decide who should be our next head of state.

The fifth area which needs clearing up in this debate is the notion that this is the Catholics against the world. Frankly, I thought Senator Nettle’s T-shirt was a juvenile stunt that put Tony Abbott right where he wanted to be—that is, at the centre of the debate. I do not believe in promoting the health minister that way, and I do not believe in insulting Australian Catholics. Although the official position of the Catholic Church in Australia is clearly opposed to the use of RU486 and to any other method of procuring an abortion, I would say that the Catholics in this place, as well as other people of faith, and people of faith in the community do not have a homogenous view on this legislation. I know plenty of Catholics who say they might not have an abortion themselves but that they do not believe their view should determine public policy. There are many people of faith in this place who feel the same way, and they have every right to their views and I respect their views. I do not think we progress the argument at all by making this a sectarian attack or by insulting people of good faith with genuinely held beliefs.

Finally, I want to canvass another argument that is used by antichoice campaigners—that is, the argument that women who have abortions suffer trauma as a result. This is a variation on the ‘it is all about women’s health’ argument, which I mentioned earlier. Sadness, a sense of loss and feelings of grief
are natural for some women after a termination. Some women even suffer depression. Some women who have beautiful, much wanted, living children suffer from antenatal and post-natal depression or even post-partum psychosis. So do some women who give up for adoption the babies they carried in utero for nine months. A sense of loss or grief which some women feel after terminating a pregnancy does not mean the woman believes she made the wrong decision. Sometimes hard decisions, even sad decisions, are still right decisions. For most women, though, there is no question about the right decision for them. Nearly all of the women surveyed in a recently published Swedish study described their abortion as a relief.

In the end, although I feel that this debate should simply have been about whether RU486 is so much more dangerous than other drugs as to require a separate approval process to deal with it, the debate has in fact widened. I think some of the comments of members and senators opposed to the private member’s bill point to their real agenda. Comments such as Barnaby Joyce’s in Melbourne comparing a pregnant woman with a pram and Danna Vale’s exhortations yesterday to populate or perish show there are still people who believe a woman’s role in life is to be a vessel to carry the next generation of men—that is, that we have no right to make decisions about when we have children, how many children we have, with whom we have them and in what circumstances. These are not easy decisions. Much as we like to fool ourselves, we do not control our fertility. We can get pregnant accidentally, we can miscarry spontaneously, we can try but not conceive, we can lose the love of our lives without ever having had a child or we can seek but never find the mate we want to share the experience of parenting with. Life is uncertain and sometimes dangerous. Having children is a wonderful gift, but I think that all children deserve to be wanted and welcomed.

Mr LAMING (Bowman) (5.04 pm)—What will probably be many hours of debate on a drug that has been debated for many years may seem somewhat tiresome to many, but I hope that we do persevere in what will be a day of very important contributions. For those contributions to be made, I do hope that we do not resort to listing the grievances of both sides of what has been a terribly vexing and at times poisonous debate. We need to remind ourselves that today we are debating the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 and that effectively, if we can possibly hold the debate to it, we are discussing whether RU486 should run through a ministerial approval process, whether it should be restricted to the TGA for consideration or whether there is another option—that is, the route of either of the two amendments that have been put to this chamber today.

I am disappointed somewhat in the contribution of the member for Sydney. For a senior member of the opposition to effectively list grievances of one side of an abortion debate I really do not feel is a terribly valuable contribution, and I would have hoped that we could have focused a little more on how we are going to handle difficult and challenging pharmaceuticals of the future. With any long awaited change, and there has been a decade of expectation since the 1996 laws were introduced, there is always the risk of an over-correction. My concern, and that of a number of other colleagues, is that a truly complex pharmaceutical—that is, complex in its use and in its ethical and moral implications—does deserve consideration of more than purely safety and efficacy. This is not a debate about safety or about not trusting the figures. The FDA has looked at this drug
The Cochrane Collaboration has examined the use of this drug expansively, so we have different verification. The debate today on this private member’s bill should be: does that evidence go exclusively to the TGA for consideration?

The TGA is a fine organisation. For anyone who has visited that institution, it is a place full of dedicated scientists who are considering the evidence of the day—that is, scientific evidence, evidence that is available to them. But I put to this chamber that, with some truly complex and challenging pharmaceuticals, we will need consideration of a whole lot more than just safety and efficacy. You would have to have lived under a rock for the last decade to think that debate over pharmaceuticals like RU486 is about only safety and efficacy. If anything, this country has suffered because there has not been informed debate because that safety and efficacy data has not been available, having not been prepared by our own TGA.

My concern is that this valuable organisation is but a unit of the Department of Health and Ageing. When an application comes for listing on the therapeutic goods register, it is ticked off not by the parliament or the minister but by the secretary of the department of health or the secretary’s delegate. So far removed is that TGA process from the concerns and the beliefs of the community that I stand here with a number of other colleagues and put this simple question: should we have one additional level of scrutiny after a body that is explicitly targeted at looking and safety and efficacy?

If one looks at the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989 one will see that there are a few circumstances in which the secretary can refuse to sign off on a TGA approval. There are about 12 of them. They are incredible pieces of minutiae. Let me just say that in history I do not believe that the secretary has ever turned down a recommendation. There have been some controversial drugs that have come before the TGA, but nothing like RU486. Some of the reasons why a secretary can turn the recommendation down are if a drug is deemed not eligible or if the secretary deems the evidence to indicate that it is not safe, it is not packaged appropriately, it has been imported improperly, it contains some restricted good, some part of its manufacture has been overseas or the listed manufacturer is not in fact the manufacturer. We do not have any means whereby any other input—social, community, anything: not even parliamentary or ministerial pressure—can be brought to bear on a secretary to have any other view.

For a great body of pharmaceuticals, that is entirely appropriate. I have no problem with that. But I make the point—and I appreciate the member for Lalor paying some attention to the details of my amendment—that the amendment that I propose today is not about drugs other than the eight drugs in this class of abortifacients. I merely make the point to the member for Lalor and to others that the TGA is about to be confronted by enormously challenging pharmaceuticals in the future and that to rely on the TGA alone, I think, will be found deficient.

In time, I believe that we will be grateful if we amend this bill today and amend the act in the near future to deal with some of the following: gene technology; biopharma, where pharmaceuticals are actually grown within plants and foodstuffs; and situations where pharmacogenetics allow us to develop drugs that are targeted to people of a unique or particular genetic profile. I can even extend the analogy to embryonic stem cell research, therapeutic cloning or euthanasia. While not exactly the same as RU486, these are areas where we have allowed legislative and parliamentary debate, community discourse and, in many cases, the willingness to
vote, be it a conscience vote or otherwise. These pharmaceuticals will raise equivalent ethical concerns, if not greater ones at times. They should be afforded similar scrutiny over and above that which the TGA can offer.

My belief is that for these categories—and many of the categories are yet to be defined—we will need another level of scrutiny post science. I speak as a person of science—not a terribly bright one, but one who was trained in the scientific model, doing a scientific degree. Even I find myself saying that I could not ever hope to make the complete decision with science alone.

The opposing view, of course, is that the woman or the individual being treated should be able to discuss any kind of pharmaceutical with their carer or clinician. My view is that if we pass this private member’s bill today and the TGA is the ultimate arbiter, it is not that far off that, if some eastern European medical scientist or Korean researcher with a wonderful idea can produce a pharmaceutical that is safe and effective, it will be on Australian shelves. They think it up, and then every individual Australian must think it through. I do not patronise the individual to say that they cannot think through complex ethical and moral dilemmas if presented with the information. I merely say that, in many other areas of policy, we actually do allow some higher level of analysis, and at times legislation and a vote.

I may be naive. I may be new here. I may have an overly optimistic belief that this chamber can somehow coalesce the views of a broad community and come to some sort of solution—not a perfect one. But I would like to see that debate come here in situations where we are quite aware that this is an extremely sensitised debate.

The criticism of the position of bringing it back to parliament is that the TGA are eminently capable. They are for safety, efficacy, quality and availability. That is what they specialise in. But they go no further. I stand to be corrected, but if you wanted to talk about morality and the ethical implications of pharmaceuticals with the TGA, you would find yourself in the legal unit. That is probably as close as you would get to having those discussions. It is not a body designed for that role. Some will say that parliament has no role for this form of decision making, but I put to you that this class of drugs sits with a number of highly contentious issues that deserve at least one more level of scrutiny.

An interesting claim has been made that there will be a lack of certainty for an applicant who may bring a drug like RU486 into the TGA process—convoluted and expensive as it is—only to see it fail at the last minute here in parliament. All indications here are, first of all, that this is not being brought by some multibillion dollar company. That IP has been handed over long ago. There are not rows and rows of people stacking up to approve drugs in this category. There is one drug, RU486—well known, used in scores of countries—that will be brought to the TGA and, with FDA information and analysis, will have a reasonable chance of getting through the TGA. Certainly we ourselves will have evidence that the passage of that drug is quite possible through the parliament. That evidence will come from the votes tomorrow and come from the Senate vote that has already taken place.

I want to clarify that using a solution like a disallowable instrument will not result in multiple applications to this place. A disallowable instrument is something that is frequently applied in this parliament. It is often used. It works very well with excises. It is one with which we are all familiar. It gives a chance for parliament to challenge a regulation or a decision by a scientific body. I think
that is a perfectly reasonable way of approaching this challenge.

But here we have a dilemma. The TGA process might be often used and might be quick, but, given the time it takes to get through the TGA, an additional two or three weeks in the parliament is relatively insignificant. But, once the TGA process is knocked over by a disallowable instrument, you really cannot launch more vexatious applications for the sake of it. Certainly within the TGA act there is a chance, through the special access scheme, to bring in small amounts for, say, research purposes. But that would not be subject to a disallowable instrument; that would be an application to the TGA separately to say, ‘We would like to use this medication for research.’ It would have to jump certain bars. It is highly unlikely that a well-established and long used overseas drug like RU486 would suddenly find research applications in Australia.

One application could go right through to a disallowable instrument and either be knocked over or otherwise, but you would not see generic versions of RU486 or multiple private sector organisations pushing similar products. It is one product. It is RU486. There have been no subsequent versions of this pharmaceutical. There are no other competing first-to-market arrangements here; it is one tired old pharmaceutical that has been around for 15 years. It will either get up or it will not. Yes, after TGA consideration, it will come back here one more time for a vote. But I think it is a tremendous insurance to know that the community views come here for that ultimate vote and it is likely to be once and only once, unless of course there are new pharmaceuticals of a similar character.

I think Australians will be very relieved to know that such an option remains for them if, say, a more advanced version of RU486 were to be developed—say a second trimester abortifacient. ‘Oh, it is safe. It is effective. The drug is of fine quality,’ says the TGA. What then? The secretary of health signs off on it and that is it. What are we going to do if we have that situation? Will we turn around and write new legislation trying to block a single drug? It is very wise now to have the insurance of such a disallowable instrument from this amendment today.

Of course the risk we have is that many will be quietly coveting the opportunity to come to the parliament and knock over RU486 with a vote. My view is that we should not see that as being some means to obstruct a new pharmaceutical; it is an opportunity for the wide sentiment in the community to find their way here and ultimately to be voted upon. If there were a higher body, I think as a doctor I would be prepared to say I would like to know what the higher body would think. But if this is where a vote has to happen, then I think we have to be prepared to let that decision be made. After all, we are paid to make tough decisions and we do so quite regularly.

Today will be a torturous day for many. It will be a hard debate. It will not be as hard for me as it was as a clinician doing 10 surgical terminations of pregnancy in the morning and then counselling women in the afternoon about infertility, and the awful period that I had in between the two sessions trying to resolve and understand precisely what I was doing in my job. With a medical background, I can never pretend to have walked in the shoes of someone who has had to make a choice between surgical or medical termination or nothing at all.

I do not for a moment stand up here and say that I have a view on a drug going through or otherwise. I do believe that if the amendments are defeated in this House in the next 24 hours I will still support the bill to
ensure that those options are available to women. But I am unable to convince myself that completely leaving these decisions to the TGA is the right thing to do. For those reasons, I believe the amendment that I have proposed, with a disallowable instrument in parliament where there is disagreement with the findings of the TGA, is a reasonably elegant solution to what is otherwise an insoluble problem.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr McMullan)—Before I call on the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, I just want to clarify something. Although the member for Bowman has talked about the amendment he has proposed, he is actually not moving it now. You are proposing to do so in the consideration in detail stage?

Mr LAMING—Yes.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Thank you for that. I did understand that.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (5.18 pm)—The Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 removes the restricted goods category from the Therapeutic Goods Act and in so doing places the onus of determining the safety and effectiveness of RU486 and similar drugs into the hands of the Therapeutic Goods Administration. This bill does not require us to make a decision about the rights or wrongs of the use of RU486 for abortions in Australia. Nor does it force it. This bill is not about abdicating responsibility that elected representatives should exercise. Ethical decisions should be made by parliament, but, in the case of abortion, those decisions were made decades ago by state parliaments. At the federal level Medicare helps pay the cost of a surgical abortion. That decision too was made some time ago. Let us be clear: this bill fixes an anomaly where RU486 and similar drugs are the only drugs in this country that are to be approved or not by the minister for health rather than the TGA.

The question before us is this: is the TGA competent and capable to rule on the safe and effective use of RU486 for Australian women? The answer for me is an unequivocal yes. If it were no, it should be of grave concern, given the drugs approved for use in Australia by the TGA. The TGA has overseen the approval of nearly 50,000 drugs, many of which are dangerous and have serious side effects. The TGA is independent and operates on the basis of expert assessment and constant review. The TGA’s decisions cannot be amended or challenged by the sponsors of drugs or by parliamentarians.

So even though all that this bill does is correct that anomaly, the debate surrounding this bill has become one of: should women have access to medical abortion or not? My view is that women should have control over our reproductive lives. The reproductive experience is a difficult one. Contraception, pregnancy, miscarriage, termination and difficult births are all part of our reproductive reality over about 40 years. Women have to treat these possibilities seriously, and we do. Decisions about control over our fertility are first and foremost ours to make, and we take these decisions very seriously.

Over the ages abortion has been a serious issue for women, because our fertility is not fully controllable. Women understand the need for access to reliable contraception, but the reality is that no contraceptive method is foolproof. Every woman’s body is different and reacts differently to contraception. It is because our fertility is not fully controllable that safe and legal options for abortion are necessary and should be accessible to those women who want to choose them.

Women are also the main nurturers and carers of children. Of course we understand the implications of terminating a pregnancy,
and it is no wonder that this issue provokes such gut-wrenching emotion or deep-seated feeling. We women can and do deal with these hard questions, but we need safe choices. The need for safe choices in difficult situations and the belief that a woman and her doctor are perfectly capable of making decisions about termination of pregnancy guide my view.

My own thinking on abortion has altered over the years. I find it a very complex issue on a range of emotional and personal fronts, but I continue to believe that women must always have the choice of terminating a pregnancy safely. I do not know any woman who would find abortion an easy choice; it is always a difficult and emotional decision. But the decision to have an abortion is not made any easier by the fact that our society expects women to be silent about their experiences, their pain and their anxiety. The public reaction to Senator Lyn Allison is proof that the personal experiences of one in three Australian women are almost never part of the moral or political debate, so we have a very long way to go before we stop demonising individual women and start supporting them in their difficult choices.

Of course we need better education to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and more support for women if they are making a decision that might be to terminate their pregnancy. No-one concerned with basic human wellbeing would call themselves pro abortion or anti life. Nobody I know says that there should be more abortions. Nobody I know wants to see more women going through the turmoil that terminating a pregnancy can involve. But the key to reducing abortions is reducing unwanted pregnancies, not restricting access to safe and legal abortions. Restricting access to safe and legal abortions means one thing: women die. It is a simple fact, a fact that unfortunately still has such a serious impact on so many women throughout the world.

Accessibility is crucial, and that means abortions must not just be legal but be available, affordable and safe for all women. In many countries RU486 is an alternative for women who cannot or do not want to go through a surgical procedure. It is also an alternative that doctors can offer women in regional areas who do not have access to surgical abortions. It disappoints me that some people think that RU486 could lead to more abortions in Australia. I am appalled by the health minister’s argument that if RU486 is licensed we could see a spate of backyard miscarriages. No-one supporting this bill wants to see women taking RU486 without medical supervision. Throwing around words like ‘backyard miscarriages’ is not only misleading but inflammatory and manipulative, and the health minister should not play around with people’s emotions in that way.

Mr Abbott—So where would these miscarriages take place?

Ms MACKLIN—Obviously the minister for health continues to want to throw these allegations around. As a woman I cannot even begin to comprehend why a woman would go around taking RU486 in an irresponsible way, and it only seems to be the case that the minister for health has that view. Studies in France, England, Wales and Sweden show that there was no increase in the incidence of abortions at all when RU486 was legalised. As for miscarriages, in about five per cent of cases where women have taken RU486, a minor surgical procedure is needed to complete the abortion. This is also the case with natural miscarriages.

RU486 is an alternative to a surgical procedure for the termination of pregnancy. It offers women a choice over how they undergo an abortion, not whether or not they have an abortion. Those who suggest that
more women would be willing to have an abortion if it involved a pill should listen to women’s experiences first. Abortion has been a social reality for thousands of years, whether it is safe or unsafe. It is not something that hangs on the difference between taking a pill and having a surgical procedure. Approval of RU486 is not an advertisement for abortion, nor should it ever be portrayed as an inducement for abortion. The safety of RU486 or a higher incidence of abortions should never be code for questioning women’s access to safe surgical or medical abortions. The parliament has no role in meddling in decisions over which method a woman can use to terminate her pregnancy—that is for her and her doctor to decide together.

Finally, I want to emphasise that of course the Therapeutic Goods Administration is an accountable institution. Its board has ministerial appointees; it is governed by a rigorous act and a vast set of regulations. The TGA’s decisions are transparent and based on expert evaluation of evidence. The TGA also insists on continuous monitoring of new evidence, even after a licence has been granted. We, as members of the public, can hold the TGA to account through the Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act. It is certainly not the case that the TGA is some renegade fly-by-night operation.

If opposition to this bill is about lack of confidence in the TGA, then it is the parliament’s task to address those concerns. But the fact is that no-one is questioning its professionalism. If the TGA retains this parliament’s confidence then the TGA is competent to make a ruling on the safety, efficacy and conditions for use of RU486—just like it does for all other drugs. For these reasons I will also be opposing the amendments moved to this bill. The decision on the safety and efficacy of RU486 is for expert scientists based on evidence and safety.

Finally, I must make it clear that this bill is not about a vote of confidence in the health minister personally or in his government. If this bill is seen to be a personal vote of confidence in the health minister, he has no-one but himself to blame. The health minister’s actions alone have personalised this bill. A vote like this should not be an invitation for ministerial arm-twisting and cajoling, including on the spurious basis that a contrary vote would be a vote of no-confidence in either the minister or the entire government. So let us not have the minister for health distracting any further from the crux of this issue. The bill is about treating RU486 the same way that we treat every other drug in this country. Can I leave it up to experts to determine the safety and efficacy of RU486? And if they decide it is safe, can I leave it up to women and their doctors to decide the best way to terminate a pregnancy? My answer is yes. For me, they are the places where these decisions should belong.

Ms PANOPoulos (Indi) (5.30 pm)—I want to thank the Prime Minister for giving members of the House a conscience vote on the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005. As we all know, ‘free’ votes are rare in the Australian parliament, and we as parliamentarians are bound not by party votes or practices but by our individual consciences. I welcome this aspect of the debate on the bill.

But before we embark on further debate on what has already been something of a rhetorical minefield of loaded language it is important to put some things on the record in this place. This is not a debate about the religious practices of the Minister for Health and Ageing. This is not a debate about the rights of women. This is not a debate about the rights of embryos. This is not a debate about men telling women what they should do.
This is a debate on a clumsy bill, foisted on the parliament by four women with well-meaning but essentially misguided motives.

I want to place on record that I support the current arrangements that exist in state and federal law regarding abortion. We know that, in Australia, the legislation pertaining to abortion and pregnancy termination is not an Australian government matter but the responsibility of state governments. Each jurisdiction has different legislation, adding to the complexity of this matter.

The substance of this bill is simple, but its effects would be far-reaching. In some ways, the bill is nothing more than a ruse, clearly muddying the waters of sophisticated discussion on an important ethical and medical issue. The question must be raised as to why we did not have this debate when Mr Wooldridge was minister for health. Why did we not have this debate when Senator Patterson was minister for health? And, indeed, why did we not have this debate when the member for Fremantle precariously held the health portfolio?

The member for Lalor was at pains last week to say, ‘This debate is not about Tony.’ She and other members of the Labor Party and the feminist sisterhood have done a good job of making the debate about Minister Abbott in a most personal and vindictive way, which has clouded sensible debate on this issue. The member for Lalor seems obsessed with the religious beliefs of the minister for health, as are many others. The female sisterhood of the Labor Party is at it again: they criticise the minister for health for his Catholicism and his views on abortion—which, incidentally, are not exclusively Catholic views—and then wonder why the growing number of the religious right will not vote for them.

One thing I find personally intolerable is revisionist history, and for this reason it is important to look at the legislative background that gives rise to debate on this bill. Back in 1996, the amendment that gave the minister for health discretion in approving the importation and use of RU486 and other abortifacient drugs was supported by every political party. When the 1996 act was amended, abortifacient drugs, of which RU486 is one, were classified as restricted drugs and required the consent of the minister for health before their importation into Australia. There is nothing particularly controversial about that. It was, after all, something that received bipartisan support in this place. Even the Greens, believe it or not, supported the amendment.

The Greens senators in the other chamber might recount the words of one of their own, Senator Chamarette, when she claimed back in 1996 of members of parliament and senators:

We deserve to have parliamentary scrutiny of decisions ... and not simply leave them to boards of experts.

There were no T-shirts with the words ‘Mr Abbott, get your rosaries off our ovaries’ back then, as one particularly silly and juvenile Greens senator proudly displayed last week.

For those who want to make the point that RU486 should be assessed by the TGA, as is the case with thousands of other drugs, the 1996 legislation gives the answer. RU486 falls into a different category of drug as its purpose does not fit into the legislative prescription of a therapeutic good.

The 1996 debate on ministerial control of RU486 only occurred because in 1994 a very junior official in the department of health ingenuously decided to approve the importation of RU486 without the knowledge or consent of the minister for health, and then proceed with trials of the drug by Family Planning Victoria, which were then sus-
pended by the then minister, Dr Lawrence—a Labor minister—because the organisation had not properly informed women of the drug’s health risks and side effects. Indeed, there are significant health risks that I shall comment on a little later.

The current restrictions are necessary and should remain in place. Regrettably, the bill takes away the power of the executive and gives it to the bureaucrats. Symbolically, this bill represents perhaps the greatest dispersal of power in this country in the last 30 years. What sort of trend does that set for the future decisions of this parliament? Are our ministers and elected representatives bereft of making decisions that affect the Australian people? Why should we as legislators, and the minister for health in particular, let the faceless, unaccountable, undemocratic and unelected cabal at the Therapeutic Goods Administration supplant our role as accountable, elected and responsible representatives of the people?

As the great George Burton Adams said when writing on the 1626 trial of the Duke of Buckingham:
The modern doctrine of ministerial responsibility can hardly be more fully stated ... The minister is responsible and must be held accountable.
I for one have every faith in the minister to do the right thing by the government’s standards. How effective can the Therapeutic Goods Administration be in deciding the merits of a drug that, by the current legislative standards of the 1996 amendment, is clearly not ‘therapeutic’?

The most assiduous promoters of the drug state the overseas experience that the drug is widely available in the US. I wonder whether these advocates have actually read the disclaimers in the US that women have to sign before they clock up treatment for a chemically induced abortion through RU486. I count myself as one of the few Australian parliamentarians—perhaps the only one—to have received comprehensive briefings on the safety and efficacy of RU486 by the pro-life movement, the pro-choice movement and the independent authority, the American Food and Drug Administration. This was an invaluable opportunity in the formation of my own conscience on this matter to hear the pros and cons of both sides of this argument.

The story was not all rosy. The American Food and Drug Administration is aware of the deaths linked to RU486 use—so aware that it is establishing an inquiry into the safety of RU486. Since its approval of RU486 in 2000, significant safety concerns have arisen. In July 2005, the FDA issued a public health advisory on RU486 and said that there had been four documented cases of death from infection in little over 18 months following medical abortion with RU486. I have seen the briefs of the complainants in the cases against Danco Laboratories—which is the US distributor of RU486—that were filed by the families of two young women who recently died in California as a result of using RU486.

The promotional material makes it sound so easy: a ‘safe and effective’, ‘nonsurgical’ method of termination, but the reality is quite different. After the initial dose of RU486, the patient then needs to take a second drug—a prostaglandin Cytotec or misoprostol—which causes the uterine contractions that expel the embryo. Curiously, the experience has been that RU486 has neither significantly increased the number of abortions nor increased its availability in rural and remote areas. Yet, over time, it essentially substitutes surgical terminations with a chemically induced procedure. This raises the prospect of whether we should be encouraging rural women down this path fraught with the possible medical dangers without the likelihood of appropriate medical superintendence.
With rural obstetricians in something of a decline, midwifery units in short supply in rural and regional areas and the difficulties associated with doctor shortages in some areas of rural and regional Australia, replacing a surgical termination with a chemically induced one, and then not having the associated medical expertise to administer it, worries me deeply. The fact is that the level of medical assistance and supervision needed after a chemically induced abortion—for example, via RU486—is even greater than that of a surgical termination.

We know from the research undertaken by the Parliamentary Library that ‘medical abortion, like surgical abortion, requires the availability of an appropriate level of back-up medical care to address possible complications arising from the procedure’. Up to eight per cent of the cases will not result in a successful termination. There have been numerous cases of the foetus failing to expel from the uterus. Rural women will require instant medical assistance in the case of the ensuing internal bleeding, cramping, infection, haemorrhaging, abdominal pain, pelvic pain, septic shock or ruptured ectopic pregnancy that can commonly occur with RU486. In other words, where RU486 is used, the medical practitioner must be able to perform an emergency surgical abortion or have ready access to surgical abortion.

The proponents of RU486 list its ‘safety’ as its redeeming feature. This is seriously misleading as they conveniently omit statistics regarding the incidence of heavy bleeding and pain which is a direct concomitant of this form of chemically induced abortion. For instance, the New England Journal of Medicine reported trials where nine per cent of women reported bleeding after 30 days and one per cent were still bleeding after 60 days. They found:

Excessive bleeding necessitated blood transfusions in four women, and accounted for 25 to 27 hospitalizations ... 56 of 59 surgical interventions, and 22 of 49 administrations of intravenous fluid. A Columbia University study also found that ‘20 per cent of women bled or spotted for five to six weeks’. So much for the safe alternative to surgical abortion.

The medical disclaimers for RU486 in the US clearly state that if one cannot easily get emergency medical help after taking the pill then it should not be taken. Representing a rural area myself, I am disturbed by this fact. We have also got to be a little sceptical of the fact that most of the medical literature supporting RU486 is sanctioned by the pharmaceutical industry.

This bill raises important moral and ethical issues which I feel are not best left in the hands of laboratory technicians and bureaucrats. Governments are here to govern and ministers are here to be held accountable. Those of us in this place representing rural and regional areas carry a heavy responsibility of a significant medical, ethical and social magnitude when coming to a position on this bill. I am comfortable with my decision to vote against this bill, even though in all likelihood it will pass in its current form. Some of my enthusiastic colleagues have submitted amendments. I know these are well meaning, but essentially for me they miss the point. I feel Australia is best served by retaining the current arrangements which recognise the primacy of the parliament and the role of the executive government of the day.

I will vote against this bill not under the influence of the flurry of email activity from people right across the country or the significant increase in telephone traffic to my electorate office but, rather, because the current situation has served us well and should continue. This drug will not increase access to abortion for country women, it will not make abortion safer but will increasingly substitute surgical abortion—the latter being the safer
and more efficient abortion option. I for one do not wish to see my public duty as a representative supplanted on such a serious ethical and social minefield by an unelected, unrepresentative and faceless bureaucracy and will be opposing the bill.

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (5.43 pm)—The debate on the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 goes beyond considering a small amendment to the Therapeutic Goods Act. The principles we are debating go to the heart of democratic government and the rights of citizens. The major parties in this parliament have allowed their members a conscience vote on this issue. The decision to remove the discretion of the Minister for Health and Ageing to allow the import and registration of the abortion drug RU486 will be decided by each of the 150 members of this House, as it has been with the 76 members of the Senate.

We have an opportunity to exercise our individual conscience. We will not allow the majority view of our party rooms to dictate how we vote on this issue. We all acknowledge that our views on this issue will be determined by what we understand to be our own moral and ethical beliefs. But the 20 million or so other Australians depending on the outcome of this debate will not have the fundamental right to follow their own conscience. If we regard this issue as one which demands that members of this parliament should be free to vote according to their conscience, why then would we even consider keeping on our statute books a law which denies the right of Australian citizens to exercise their own conscience?

On the one hand, we have opponents of this bill who assert that in a democracy we must obey the moral dictates of those who are acknowledged to be moral and ethical leaders. The opponents fail to accept that ours is a pluralist society which accepts a range of standards. We are governed in accordance with accepted norms rather than so-called moral truths. Those who believe that abortion is wrong are free to hold their beliefs and, within reason, to spread those beliefs to others. But they do not have the right to impose restrictions on behaviour which is acceptable to a substantial proportion if not a majority of the population. To impose their moral beliefs on others is nothing less than tyranny. Some speakers in this debate have said and will say that it is not about abortion—that abortion under acceptable conditions is not illegal in Australia.

But this debate is very much about restricting access to abortion. In that way, it is part of an agenda being followed in many parts of the world. Unable to prohibit abortion in Australia and in other countries, the anti-abortion lobby has attempted, and in some countries succeeded, in restricting access to abortion. That is the only reason behind the original move by Senator Harradine in 1996, and that is the only reason behind the members who are opposing the bill now. Their real objection to allowing the use of RU486 is that it can make abortion more accessible and acceptable. That was the clear message in the original debate back in 1996. In the words of former Senator Lees:

While respecting Senator Harradine’s views, opinions and beliefs on this issue, I do have to make it very clear to senators that what we are voting for, if we support those amendments, is a restriction on women for the right to choose. They are restricting a woman’s choice, to require her to terminate a pregnancy only by surgical means. They will effectively take away what is now termed the morning after pill or RU486 and future generations of this pill or a similar substance.

That is precisely what happened and has been the case for the last 10 years, and the opponents of this bill will want to keep it that way. If they cannot stop abortion altogether,
they want to make it so hard to access that it might as well be banned. By preventing access to an alternative to surgical abortion, opponents know that many women will not be able to travel to the hospitals and clinics where these services are available. For women in smaller regional centres as well as outer urban and not so remote locations, medical abortion is a safe alternative. While all states have set requirements for legal abortion, equality of access can be limited by allowing only surgical abortion. RU486 is a safe and effective means of abortion. It can be less expensive and reduce the demand on scarce surgery resources.

But opponents of this bill would not allow these considerations. For them, the fact that RU486 can be used in the earlier stages of a pregnancy, with fewer risks than those associated with surgical abortion, is not something they want to see. In their time-honoured tradition, they want to pile on the guilt. At the very least, they want to keep abortion as an invasive procedure with all the risks of surgery. They do not really have the interests of women at heart. They only have their own agenda, and they will stop at nothing to impose their own will on all Australian women.

It was interesting to note the greater number of women senators voting in favour of this bill, and it will be very interesting to note the number of women in this House who vote in support of the bill. While this bill would remove the Minister for Health and Ageing from the approval process, registration for use of RU486 in Australia would require the approval of the Therapeutic Goods Administration, the authority charged with the responsibility of vetting all drugs approved for use in Australia. It may also require local clinical trials before being widely available. This is the same Therapeutic Goods Administration that approved Viagra, Vioxx and Celebrex for use in Australia, all without referral to the minister of the day. But no-one in this debate is suggesting that the TGA is not a competent and objective authority to rigorously assess the risks and benefits of RU486 before any approval.

RU486 is approved for use in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and in most western European countries as well as in Russia, China, Israel and New Zealand. RU486 has been used in many of those countries for more than 10 years without raising serious concerns for its safety. The World Health Organisation has certified RU486 as safe and acceptable to women. The use of RU486 is supported by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Australian Medical Association. There are risks with any medical treatment, but we must also consider that around 70,000 women die each year as a result of unsafe abortions. Many thousands more are left with disease and injury as a result of unsafe abortions.

One estimate suggests that worldwide there are about 50 million abortions each year. In Australia estimates range up to 100,000 abortions each year. The question to be asked is: is that too many? Few people would suggest that abortion should be the preferred method for women to control their fertility. But we have countries that have very low birth rates, such as Japan, where abortion is legal and where, until recently, the contraceptive pill was banned. And Poland, a Roman Catholic country where abortion is banned and contraceptives are severely restricted, has one of the world’s lowest birth rates.

In Australia those who express alarm at the number of abortions are often the same people who advocate restrictions on access to sex education and contraception. They are so far out of touch with the beliefs and aspirations of Australian women. And then we
get the absurd claims by the member for Hughes, who wants Australian women to join her crusade.

I will now turn to the proposed amendments to this bill. The effect of both is to single out RU486 as the only drug or class of drugs whose registration is subject to disallowance by this parliament. Again we see an agenda of restricting access to procedures which are otherwise not illegal—that is, they definitely have the same agenda as Senator Harradine did 10 years ago. The only difference is that it also places a greater risk on the drug manufacturer. Not only does the manufacturer need to seek approval from the Therapeutic Goods Administration but, having succeeded in that objective assessment, they also face the political risk of the parliament rejecting the application. It is the same old tactic: place as many obstacles as you can in the way of allowing women access to safer and cheaper abortion.

In the present political climate you have to ask whom they think they are fooling with an argument that the parliament should have the final say in government decision making. As I said at the beginning, the true conscience vote on this issue is the decision made in good conscience by a woman, on the advice of her doctor and, if she wishes, her partner and family. To say that only the parliament is qualified to make such a decision is a definite slur on Australian women.

Abortion is accepted by a significant proportion of the Australian people. Our laws must be based on the accepted norms of Australian society, not on the views of self-appointed moralists. Our conscience votes on this bill must be to allow all Australian women the right to exercise their own consciences. I will vote for this bill, and I definitely will not vote for the amendments.

Dr SOUTHCOTT (Boothby) (5.55 pm)—In considering how to vote on the private member’s bill before us, the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005, like all members, I weighed a number of factors. The first consideration was that abortion under some circumstances is lawful in the six states and two internal territories of Australia. In Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales a common-law test is applied. In Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory there is a detailed statutory regime which deals with the termination of pregnancy. For example, in South Australia the termination of a pregnancy is not unlawful where carried out within 28 weeks of conception in a prescribed hospital by a legally qualified medical practitioner, provided he or she is of the opinion, formed in good faith, that either the maternal health or the foetal disability ground is satisfied. Two doctors must certify this in writing and the abortion must be carried out in a hospital. That is the current law in South Australia. Each state and territory is different but has laws relating to the termination of a pregnancy which are based to an extent on common-law tests set down in judgments over 35 years ago. So the first consideration was that abortion is a lawful procedure under certain circumstances under state and territory law.

The last time the federal parliament had an extensive debate on the issue of abortion was in March 1979. The motion moved then by the Country Party member for Hume, Mr Stephen Lusher, requested that the government introduce legislation to provide that medical benefits would not be provided by the Commonwealth for the termination of a pregnancy unless performed to protect the life of the mother from a physical pathological condition. This motion was amended to read that the Commonwealth should not pay medical benefits for the termination of pregnancy unless per-
formed in accordance with the law of a state or territory.

For almost 27 years that has more or less been the position in the federal parliament, an understanding that any changes to the abortion laws would come from the state and territory parliaments. But the federal parliament clearly does have a role in the approval, listing and monitoring of drugs. So, in considering the issue of RU486 being used as an abortifacient, the issue is who should determine whether it is safe for maternal health for this drug to be listed. My view is that, if listed for a termination of pregnancy in accordance with state or territory law, the Therapeutic Goods Administration is entirely competent to determine the safety, quality and effectiveness of this drug. There has been a lot of discussion about the risk and adverse effects of RU486. That is a matter for the TGA to determine.

The TGA makes evidence based risk assessments. If it determines that RU486 is not safe it will not be listed. If it determines that it is safe, it will be listed. The TGA’s role is to identify, assess and evaluate the risks posed by drugs and medications. RU486 would only be registered as an abortifacient if it is shown to be safe and effective for that purpose. But there are a number of fail-safes before this would occur.

The final decision in registering any therapeutic good for inclusion on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods rests with the Secretary of the Department of Health and Ageing or the secretary’s delegate in the TGA. This occurs after the secretary has received a resolution from the Australian Drug Evaluation Committee, an independent group of medical experts—some of them eminent medical experts—appointed by the minister. The secretary of the department then has circumscribed grounds on which refusal of any therapeutic good can be made. These grounds include: the goods are not eligible for listing, or the goods are not safe for the purposes for which they are to be used. Although no refusal to register has ever been made, that power is there for any drug, exercised by the Secretary of the Department of Health and Ageing. After this stage, the National Drugs and Poisons Schedule Committee is able to apply conditions for the prescribing of medicines. The committee consists of state and territory government members and other persons nominated by the minister, including technical experts. So I have satisfied myself that the TGA is quite able to determine if RU486 is safe for listing in Australia.

The last step that would happen is that, if a woman decided to have a medical abortion, this would be done in consultation with a doctor. The professional bodies, such as the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Royal Australia and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, have developed protocols and guidelines in the use of this drug and would expect their members to prescribe it in accordance with these protocols. RU486 would only be administered by a qualified medical practitioner who would be responsible for the supervision and monitoring of their patient.

I sincerely appreciate the many representations I have received covering a wide range of views. As I have said in my speech, there are already several layers of accountability here. Firstly, the termination of a pregnancy would have to be in accordance with the law of a state or territory. Secondly, the TGA must have applied an evidence based risk assessment to RU486 using all available information and determined it to be safe and effective for the purpose for which it is intended to be listed before it is registered in Australia. Thirdly, a qualified medical practitioner must prescribe the drug and monitor
their patient in accordance with protocols and guidelines developed by the professional colleges. And, lastly, the woman must give an informed consent to a medical abortion after a discussion with her doctor and a consideration of her options.

If all those conditions are met, I see no reason to oppose this private member’s bill. These free votes, and this debate in particular, are never easy but each member brings to it their own experiences and view of the world. Having weighed the issues, considered all the representations and read the report on the bill by the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee and other material carefully, I will be voting for the bill.

Ms GEORGE (Throsby) (6.03 pm)—We are being asked to revisit the decision made by parliament in 1996 when an amendment to the TGA Act was carried to create a new category of drugs known as restricted goods. As we know, these restrictive goods included RU486, which cannot be evaluated, registered, listed or imported without the written approval of the minister for health. All other medicines used in this country have been evaluated and regulated by the TGA without any requirement for approval by the minister. I believe the TGA has provided independent scientific advice on new medications in a very professional and impartial manner for the last 20 years.

Under the current arrangements, in my view there is not a significant level of parliamentary scrutiny in relation to RU486, despite the claims made by people in this debate. In my reading of the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 as it stands, the minister is simply required to notify the parliament of a decision to approve an application for evaluation by the TGA, but the minister is not required to table decisions to not approve such applications—meaning that the parliament is neither necessarily informed of these, nor does it have the capacity for any oversight of such decisions.

Some 10 years since that amendment was made to the act, we are being asked to revisit the decision. I, like most other politicians, have received numerous submissions from constituents both for and against the private member’s bill. Some views against the bill have been put very forcefully to me. I have taken all the views from my constituents into consideration, and I have read as much as I can to try to come to a decision that, in all conscience, would allow me to vote in a particular way. I do accept that, in arriving at my conclusion, as a local representative I am accountable to my electorate as to how I vote and the reasons for coming to my decision. It is a conscience vote that I have arrived at in good faith, and I trust that my constituents, even those that will not necessarily agree with the position I put, will treat that decision in good faith.

Having read and thought about the issue I think the fundamental question that has to be answered is this: who in my view is the appropriate authority to evaluate the risks associated with RU486 and determine its appropriateness or otherwise for authorised use in Australia? I have come to the conclusion—and I will give you the reasons in a minute—that in my view the appropriate body is the TGA, and accordingly I will be voting in support of this private member’s bill.

In coming to this position on the bill, I have tried to analyse the arguments both for and against. I have posed a number of questions that I have worked through in coming to that position. The first question is: what do we now know about the use of RU486, which has been used over the decade since the amendment was introduced in 1996? The
second question is: what does the experience of the use of that drug conclude about the level of risk involved in the use of RU486? The third question is: what is my assessment, as a lay person, of the safety of the drug? The fourth question is: should medical abortion, using RU486, be allowed in Australia? Previous speakers have pointed out that abortion under certain circumstances under state and territory law is legal.

While I can come to some personal conclusions and answers to the questions I have posed, as I have thought through these issues, I believe that no politician should be the ultimate authority on these issues. We will have our personal views, but those views will not necessarily be based on expertise or a scientific basis for making those judgments. Accordingly, I believe, as previous speakers have outlined, that the TGA has been specifically charged with a responsibility that goes beyond that of individual personal views.

The TGA is specifically charged with identifying, assessing and evaluating the risks posed by therapeutic goods; applying any measures necessary for treating the risks posed; and monitoring and reviewing the risks over time. In other words, evidence based evaluation of the merits or otherwise and the risk profile of RU486 can only be undertaken by an independent body relying on scientific and medical expertise. How better to resolve the genuine concerns expressed by my constituents—and many members in the chamber—about the safety of RU486 than by referring it to the TGA for evaluation and assessment?

In my reading for this debate, what are some of the conclusions that I have personally come to and what is the knowledge that has been accumulated in the past decade, since the decision was originally made? We know that RU486 has been used over the past 10 years in about 33 to 35 countries. There is now a much greater understanding of the level of risk, as a result of clinical trials and widespread use. Some two million terminations have now occurred using RU486 in Europe and the United States. It was first licensed in France in 1988, in the UK in 1991 and in the US in 2000. Countries approving its use include France, New Zealand, Britain, Sweden, the USA, Israel, China, countries in western Europe, Turkey and Tunisia.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation’s medical advisory panel concluded that the drug is safe and effective for medical abortion and approved its use in their 151 member associations across the world. Interestingly, RU486 has been included on the World Health Organisation’s essential drug list. The WHO has declared medical abortion ‘safe, effective and acceptable if the few conditions which warrant control are identified and post-abortion care is available’. The use of RU486 is supported by the AMA here in Australia, by the UK and by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

The President of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists said recently:

One of its uses is in early termination of pregnancy, and there is evidence that it’s sometimes a better and safer option for women than surgical termination.

It is true that, in the submissions that I have received from constituents, concern has been expressed because there have, it appears, been five deaths attributed to RU486 in the United States and in Canada after women developed septicemia. This occurred over a five-year period during which there were an estimated 530,000 medical abortions using the drug. According to people with more expertise than me—and I quote from Dr Weis-
berg from the Family Planning Association—'The death rate in medical abortions of one in 100,000 was the same as for surgical abortions and lower than the rates for childbirth and ectopic pregnancy at seven and 32 per 100,000 women respectively.'

It is worth noting that in European countries, where RU486 has been available for some time, there has been no increase in the overall number or rate of abortions, but the proportion of abortions performed at earlier gestations has risen. It is true that medical abortions, like surgical abortions, can have serious side effects. Complications, though rare, can include excessive vaginal bleeding requiring transfusion, incomplete abortions or ongoing pregnancy requiring a surgical abortion. There is no doubt in my mind, having read the material, that an appropriate level of backup medical care is needed to ensure that there is speedy treatment in the event of possible complications. Despite the arguments of some that somehow this medication will be readily accessible, the drug, as we know, under the protocols developed by the AMA would only ever be administered by a qualified professional in a licensed facility.

I want to conclude by referring to an article which caught my attention recently. There have been many headlines about RU486 being the killer drug. This article, written by Dr Sally Cockburn, was headed ‘RU486 might be a drug for life’. Naturally, I was most intrigued by the heading and I looked further at the article. It talked about the genesis of RU486. I did not know this—and I think many others who want to argue whether RU486 is or is not a therapeutic drug might have a look at this article—but Dr Cockburn pointed out that the genesis of RU486 began in France in the 1980s, when it was first developed as an exciting new drug formulated to treat Cushing’s disease. She stated:

This drug blocked cortisol and reversed health problems like diabetes. By 1992, research indicated this same drug might hold hope for ageing, cancer, viral and stress related diseases, as well as dementia. The drug offered potential treatment for some of mankind’s most devastating diseases: inoperable brain tumours, ovarian cancer and certain breast cancers.

She went on:

But most amazing were the studies showing it also interfered with replication of HIV…

Dr Cockburn asks: could a cure for cancer or HIV-AIDS be caught up by the fact that RU486 research is, as she says ‘mostly gathering dust’? It is an interesting perspective on the drug RU486, and one which we hear little about.

The intent of the bill before us today is, in my view, reasonably straightforward. I believe that those who oppose the use of RU486—and do so in all sincerity—because of safety concerns have a strong argument to also support this bill. If their concerns about safety are correct, the TGA would not approve the drug for use in Australia.

RU486 has now been used by about two million women. It has been endorsed as safe and effective by people more eminent and with greater expertise than I have—by eminent medical bodies including the WHO, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, similar colleges in both the UK and America, the AMA and the American Medical Association.

By supporting this private member’s bill, we will allow the independent TGA to evaluate RU486 in the same impartial manner that it has done with almost 50,000 therapeutic goods that have already come before it. I believe that the TGA has the integrity and competence to assess whether or not RU486 is safe and suitable for use in Australia.
Dr STONE (Murray—Minister for Workforce Participation) (6.16 pm)—I rise to very strongly support the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005. Since the Harradine amendment of 1996, no pharmaceutical company has applied for approval for the trialling, supply or distribution of the now restricted RU486. Clearly, after 1996, pharmaceutical companies anticipated that a very costly application for consideration of the safety and efficacy of RU486 would simply not succeed. Consequently, since 1996, Australian doctors have not had the option of recommending a medical rather than a surgical abortion for their patients. So, despite pregnancy terminations being lawful in all states and territories, medical terminations are effectively banned. This surprises the international medical fraternity, who are used to Australia being a world leader or early adopter of best medical practice.

I argue that it is totally unacceptable to have, effectively, a ban on medical abortions in a developed country like ours, where doctors and their patients should expect to have access to the safest medical procedures for a lawful procedure. It is 10 years now since the 1996 Harradine amendments. It is now imperative that we remove the roadblocks that are dissuading pharmaceutical companies from applying to have RU486 evaluated properly.

RU486 has, in those 10 years, become well established as a very safe, non-surgical option for women requiring an abortion. As many other speakers have said, in over 30 countries including France, where the drug was developed, New Zealand, the UK, the USA, Israel, China, Sweden—in all of those countries—the women can expect, when they go to their doctor, to have an alternative to surgical abortions if that is what best suits their condition.

Medical research carried out in these countries and more than one million episodes of the drug’s use have found that the drug avoids surgical and anaesthetic risks and is as safe as surgical abortions, which are very safe indeed. However, unlike surgical procedures, this drug can be used from the earliest stages of pregnancy, and usually that is the preferred process if an abortion is needed—as early as possible. As well, in no country has the use of RU486 led to an increase in the number of abortions performed.

It is important to note that the drug RU486, or mifepristone, is not an over-the-counter product. This is not like the so-called morning-after pill, which has a different but still very important function. RU486 can only be prescribed and its use supervised by a doctor. Protocols for the drug’s use requiring close medical supervision have been mandated in all countries where it is used. You would not expect any doctor, rural or urban based, who was not intending to closely supervise this drug’s use to prescribe it.

The World Health Organisation has now designated RU486 as an essential drug for developing countries. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in the United Kingdom recommends non-surgical in preference to surgical abortions for women with pregnancies of 49 days or less. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, our most eminent body of specialists; the National Association of Specialist Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine; the Australian Medical Association; and the Public Health Association of Australia are all amongst those who ask that RU486 be allowed to go through for evaluation by the TGA, the eminent and evidence based specialist body that assesses all drugs in Australia. And of course they hope that, after that
process, there will be an approval for this drug so that they can prescribe it where it is the best option for their patients. RU486 now has at least a 10-year history in its use internationally, and its history is of a safe and effective, non-surgical option for doctors to prescribe—not that those of us in this House who support the bill are trying to call the safety of this drug; we say that it should go to the TGA for its expert assessment.

The further major development since 1996 is that, while the Australian government supports the concept that comprehensive, affordable and confidential reproductive health services should be reasonably available to all Australians, the 1996 Harradine amendment has effectively banned RU486. This has meant that rural women terminating a pregnancy often have a much more traumatic, costly and delayed abortion because surgical procedures are too often no longer locally available to them. In fact, rural communities’ access to any reproductive health related medical procedures—for example, the implantation or removal of a contraceptive under the skin, the insertion of an IUD, a vasectomy or indeed a pregnancy termination—is today far less likely to be available in a rural medical clinic or country hospital than in a capital city.

It is a different world beyond the tram tracks, and I am not just talking about the smallest country towns, where access to medical procedures is limited or nonexistent. For example, none of the doctors, specialist gynaecologists or obstetricians in the city of Bendigo, which has a population of over 100,000, will carry out a surgical pregnancy termination. I am told that no terminations are carried out in my electorate, which includes two rural cities and 50 towns. Rural doctors who recommend or support a pregnancy termination direct their patients to find an abortion clinic in a capital city. That could be a seven-hour drive away. It is a serious issue for a person who is experiencing the trauma of having to think about an abortion to be told they must find their own way to an abortion clinic in the city. They are warned by the doctors or the nurses in their rural clinic that there will probably be protestors waiting to photograph them as they enter the city clinic and they will be abused by the placard-carrying protestors who are rostered on, typically day and night, outside these abortion clinics in the capital cities.

The patient will need private or public transport to the clinic and an overnight stay. Many country women I know have simply slept in a car; they could not afford the accommodation. A rural teenager with little support or a low-income woman or someone from a minority culture who is urgently in need of anonymity find it very hard to make the complex, costly arrangements of finding their way to a city abortion clinic, which typically delays the timing of their terminations by many weeks, causing additional trauma and distress.

Some rural doctors tell me that they do not carry out surgical abortions because of their own faith. I respect a doctor’s right to decide not to carry out an abortion and would expect they would refer their patients to others. However, the majority of doctors do not carry out surgical abortions in rural areas because they no longer perform any surgical procedures of any description. There is a whole range of reasons for that, including their insurance policies, their own experience and their access to hospitals that support their procedures. These doctors believe that the ability to prescribe a drug such as RU486 for their patients is a very important medical option for them. They talk about being better able to guarantee their patients’ anonymity and about it being a safe, more manageable and affordable outcome for their rural women patients. They know the difficulties

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and the stresses of having to find your way to a city clinic.

These country doctors would prescribe and supervise the drug’s use, of course. Should an emergency arise, their patients would have the same hospital emergency access as any other patient. Rural doctor organisations and specialists have made these same points over and over again, in particular in their submissions to the Senate inquiry into this matter. Doctors in at least three regional women’s health clinics—in Albury, Mildura and Cairns—have now applied to be individual authorised prescribers of RU486. One of these applications has already been in the system for three months. This gynaecologist applicant was told she would have an outcome in several weeks; it has already been three months. Obviously these rural gynaecologists, obstetricians and GPs are saying, ‘Please, can we remedy this current ban on medical abortions in Australia.’ Their patients deserve better.

Like most Australians, I am concerned that too many women—especially teenagers—find themselves in the traumatic situation of needing to terminate a pregnancy. We urgently need to address all of the factors that lead to an unwanted pregnancy, but that in no way negates the need to assist women who are in need right now and have a right to the best possible medical care. On the basis of the impact on rural women alone, I believe we need to repeal the amendment that has effectively blocked access to RU486 in Australia for the last 10 years. Of course, there were no references to rural population consequences during the 1996 debate. Perhaps they were not foreshadowed. Instead, several other arguments were advanced by those supporting Senator Harradine. The first argument was that the drug RU486 had unique characteristics, being an abortifacient. It was then claimed that, because of its special properties, decisions about access to this drug—or even whether it should be trialled—should be made by the minister of the day and not by the expert and independent TGA, which makes such decisions on all other drugs in Australia. Of course, the TGA consults the Australian Drug Evaluation Committee, another panel of experts.

This argument was and continues to be quite spurious. The fact is that the termination of a woman’s pregnancy by properly qualified medical practitioners is legal in all Australian states and territories, according to each jurisdiction’s psycho-social and medical criteria. It is therefore quite inappropriate for anyone to suggest that we should be re-debating the social policy which delivered lawful abortions to all Australian states and territories 30 or so years ago. This issue is, instead, about who is best equipped to assess the safest and best drug alternatives for a lawful medical situation. Quite obviously I believe the task of drug evaluation is best entrusted to the TGA.

The second argument in the 1996 debate was that the drug was so unsafe, as well as being an abortifacient, that its introduction to Australia required extra scrutiny and transparency. Thus supporters of Senator Harradine contended that the new process for evaluation of RU486 would become more effective, transparent and accountable. It became ‘restricted’ and the minister’s unilateral discretion replaced the expert, evidence based TGA process.

The Harradine amendments did not provide any extra levels of efficacy, scrutiny or transparency; in fact, the opposite is the case. The Harradine 1996 TGA Act amendment does not require the minister to notify the parliament or to justify why he might deny a request for a trial, evaluation or monitoring by the TGA. No guidance is given as to the criteria the minister should use or may use in coming to his or her decision on the request.
There is therefore no added layer of evidence based scrutiny at all as a result of the Harradine amendment. The opposite effect has been realised and the message has gone out to pharmaceutical companies, ‘Do not bother further with this drug in Australia.’

I will comment on the two amendments submitted or foreshadowed by the honourable members for Bowman and Lindsay respectively. These amendments do not add extra levels of scrutiny to the evaluation of any abortifacient drugs, although that appears to be the stated intention of these amendments. Instead their amendments would either have the minister of the day continuing to make a unilateral decision or place the drug before the parliament for a disallowable period. If only one member brought on a debate to have the drug considered, we would have a re-debate of this issue just as we are doing today.

In these new debates, which would happen again and again—we have to anticipate at least three new debates because we have three applications already before the TGA—we would see the arguments re-run, as we are seeing today, in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Again, much of the debate would be focused on an anti-abortion stance. This is irrelevant to the issue addressed in the main bill that we are debating today.

Abortion is lawful in Australia. Its legality was settled 30 years ago. We are not redebating that issue. Therefore, I strongly reject the Kelly and Laming amendments. They are simply perpetuating the status quo, which effectively produces a ban on RU486. I therefore strongly support the bill as already tabled. I wish very much to remove the minister’s unilateral discretion and have any applications for the consideration of the use of RU486 or any other abortifacient put before the scrutiny of the TGA.

Let me finally say why I think it is very objectionable that the TGA should be described as faceless men or petty bureaucrats. The TGA has been established to scientifically evaluate and monitor all legal drug access and use in Australia. It is a World Health Organisation collaborating centre, a designation which can only be achieved after consideration of the scientific and technical standing of the institution at the national and international levels, with particular reference to its recent records of achievement and its ongoing activities. The World Health Organisation has assessed the TGA and said it is of international standing and should therefore be a collaborating centre. The TGA, like Biosecurity Australia, is an internationally respected body capable of expert, independent, evidence based evaluation.

I repeat that there is a great deal of distress and trauma in the Australian society as a result of the current outcomes of the Harradine amendments of 1996. We are a developed country. Our Australian women deserve better than what they are able to access today. I am hoping very much that this bill will be supported by all of those in this House, because quite frankly our Australian women deserve better.
in most issues it is absolutely irrelevant. But this is one example where the breakdown of the male domination of Australian politics is leading to a change in outcomes, and I welcome it.

Fundamentally, the legislation before us is about process. I want to focus mainly on that question of process. I do not want to repeat the arguments that others have made. We have all been asked to keep our comments brief to allow as many people as possible to speak, and I will seek to do that. The argument in the broad has been put well by many, including the minister who has just concluded her remarks, whose views I share. But we cannot pretend that this is not a process debate without moral overtones, otherwise we would not be having a conscience vote about it. I make my position clear on that: I have always been pro-choice and I remain of that view.

But the process question has been somewhat confused, deliberately. There has been an attempt to render it into an argument about whether in some way the parliament should be supreme, whether elected people ought to be more accountable. It is true that this is the forum in which moral decisions about how the country should be run should be made, not by people with only technical expertise. But what we need to do to implement a majority view in both Houses of the parliament as to issues of morality and conscience is pass a law, not come up with a backdoor process to ban a method of implementing something which is lawful. We are creating here a de facto ban by process.

There are other drugs which the law bans in Australia. It is illegal to possess them and it is illegal to import them—it is not a question of anybody assessing them. You cannot possess these drugs. They are illegal because the parliament has resolved that should be so. But in this instance what we have is a legal process, which is being undertaken in Australia in significant numbers, and a de facto ban on one safe process for implementing it. I am concerned that this process debate has been subjected to a little bit of a red herring.

I am strongly of the view that good governance and accountability matter, that the Therapeutic Goods Administration have the skills and the appropriate level of responsibility to undertake the primary task of review, and that, provided they are allowed to appear before the estimates committee, they are decision makers accountable to this parliament. If the government, the parliament or the anti-abortion lobby want to ban abortion in this country, they should pass a law to do so, to ban the outcome—not put in place a de facto process to ban one method.

As I say, I am unequivocally and long-term pro-choice. The nation supports trusting the women of Australia and recognises that, if we change the process of approval of RU486, there will not be a headlong rush for more abortions; in fact, the international evidence does not suggest there will be any increase at all, with the access to RU486. It will be simply a change to a more convenient and, in many instances, safer and more appropriate method.

It is not that anybody welcomes abortions. They are a necessity for many women that the Australian people have resolved should be lawful. We are debating whether one method should be available to women in undertaking this lawful but not lightly taken path. Women should have access to all the reasonable options available to them so that they can make a safe, informed choice about their future. We should not be making it difficult, embarrassing or risky for them by some technicality, simply because those who are opposed to what they are doing cannot get the numbers to make it illegal.
There are a large number of other arguments that, if time permits, I will come back to. But I want to divert briefly to talk about a parliamentary point in the handling of this issue which I regard as very important. The worst thing that could happen would be for a misunderstanding of process to lead to an outcome not intended by those, when they vote, in this parliament. I refer to the amendment that the member for Lindsay moved in the second reading debate. It is an amendment that is within the standing orders and I do not say that there is anything wrong with moving it, but those who are contemplating supporting the amendment should do so clearly in the knowledge that carrying it will constitute the effective defeat of the second reading of the bill. The wording of the amendment makes that clear and, in my view, that is clearly the intention of the amendment. But whether that is the intention of the amendment or not—and I believe it is—it will be its effect.

If people wish to achieve the outcome of subsequent parliamentary review of TGA decisions—and I do not—the only way of doing so with this bill is to pass the second reading and then support amendments at the consideration in detail stage. If you think voting for the member for Lindsay’s amendment will achieve that outcome, you will be mistaken. That amendment will, if passed as a second reading amendment, effectively defeat the bill. There is some ambiguity in that matter and, if people are in any doubt, I would advise them, as I did when the amendment was moved, to consult *House of Representatives Practice*. But I am in no doubt and, in my view, the Minister for Health and Ageing and the member for Lindsay are in no doubt that the effect of the passing of the amendment would be to defeat the second reading of the bill.

I urge every member, when considering how they vote, to consider that fact. Some will still vote for it because that is the outcome they want to achieve. While I do not agree with them, that is a proper thing for them to do, if that is their view. But I would hate to see a result achieved by inadvertence or because a second reading amendment is a bit tricky and, by accident or design, people achieve a purpose by a technical amendment with regard to the standing orders.

I will not support that amendment; nor will I support the amendment proposed by the member for Bowman. I thought the member for Bowman spoke well in this debate, but I do not share the conclusion that he came to about process because I do not want to see the second-guessing of the TGA brought here to the parliament once, twice, three times—as outlined by the minister who just spoke—or at all. The core principle of that matter, as it relates to abortion, is resolved in our law at the moment and I do not wish to change it. But, if people wish to change it, they should bring in a bill to do so. To my chagrin, they could do it with regard to my constituency because this parliament could pass a law to make abortion illegal in the ACT. I would be vehemently opposed to that bill, but it is within the power of the parliament to do it. However, nobody has proposed doing it and, in my view, nor should they.

But I do not wish to see a backdoor method of banning a process that has been endorsed as safe and effective by the World Health Organisation, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Public Health Association, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the AMA, the American Medical Association, the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. All those bodies have said that this is a safe and effective
process for achieving a legal objective. Therefore, we should not be putting in place a procedural, technical process that would deny effective choice to Australian women in consultation with their doctors. This option should not be closed off by a special one-off process in order to achieve by administrative means what could not be achieved by legislation.

I think the amendments make the situation worse and not better. I see them rather as ‘Groundhog Day’ amendments, where we go again and again over the same debate that we have just had. I urge people, in considering whether to support the amendment moved by the member for Lindsay in the second reading debate, to realise that, should they do so, they will effectively defeat a second reading of this legislation. If that is what they wish to do, they should simply vote against the second reading, as I know many of my colleagues will—although I hope not a majority—and not do so by subterfuge through the member for Lindsay’s amendment.

Mrs DE-ANNE KELLY (Dawson—Parliamentary Secretary (Trade)) (6.44 pm)—I rise to support the second reading amendment to the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 moved by the member for Lindsay. This amendment goes to the heart of the question before us, which is effectively about government and ministerial responsibility and accountability versus the Therapeutic Goods Administration, a group of perhaps expert and very well meaning public servants. The Therapeutic Goods Administration is required to look at safety, quality and efficacy. I note that others have said it is a world-class organisation and it may well be, but it is not infallible. We need to recall that it was the TGA that approved Vioxx for Australia, which was withdrawn in 2004 with some estimated 55,000 deaths worldwide. So no organisation no matter how well meaning or expert is ever infallible.

I want to go to the heart and the crux of the differing arguments here. A proponent of the drug, Dr Caroline de Costa, who has put forward RU486 for approval, made the following statement:

The case for medical abortion in Australia should be judged not on political grounds but solely on evidence-based medical criteria.

That is all very well, except that in response there was a great concern that the drug could not be safely used in rural areas given the risks of incomplete termination, prolonged bleeding and infection. In response to these concerns, the Australian Medical Association said that they strongly supported the availability of medical abortion, describing the report raising these concerns about incomplete terminations and so on as ‘narrow and incomplete’ and criticising the report for focusing on the risks to a minority of rural women who do not have adequate medical backup. This gets us to the crux of the argument. It may be all very well to look at safety, quality and efficacy for a great majority of women in Australia—and I think there is an argument for that but I will come to that shortly—but only ministerial overview and an accountable government will look at the situation for every woman, not say that there is a minority of rural women who do not have adequate medical backup and that therefore they constitute a narrow argument that can be overlooked.

Mr Deputy Speaker Somlyay, coming from a rural area you would appreciate that it is a very real concern that all women should have medical procedures that involve adequate medical backup. But we are not here to discuss the arguments for and against this particular drug; we are here to argue about the process of approval. But the rural argument simply points out that even
amongst expert bodies such as the AMA there can be, if I could put it this way, a pushing aside of those who might comprise an uncomfortable minority.

As I have said, this is not a debate about the merits of this drug—it is about the approval process—but I do want to highlight some of the disingenuous arguments being used to support RU486. I want to refer to the manufacturer Pfizer. This is a dual drug process: women take RU486 in order to achieve an abortion and then take Cytotec or misoprostal. The manufacturer of Cytotec, Pfizer, has warned against the use of the drug on pregnant women, not just because of the danger of miscarriage but also because of other effects. In fact, Pfizer’s only clinical tests have been undertaken on its use for stomach ulcers. As I said, we are not here to debate the pros and cons of RU486, but I think it is very significant that, at the same time we are being told that this is a safe drug, in fact the manufacturer is not prepared to guarantee one of the drugs in use.

The other matter that concerns me greatly is that officials from the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in the United States are presently convening a workshop on what they see as a new threat to public health. This workshop will address the virulence of infection in otherwise healthy young women following an abortion using RU486. As I said, we are not here to debate the merits of this drug, but very significant are the disingenuous arguments being put forward to say that the issue of RU486 is very simple—it is a medical procedure; it is safe—when there are others who are very well credentialed who do not see it that way.

I would like to get back to the issue of the amendment moved by the member for Lindsay. What she has included in her amendment is expert oversight—not infallible, as we have seen, but certainly expert—ministerial responsibility and government accountability on the part of the minister for health of whatever political colour and in whatever government, and then, finally, parliamentary debate on the merits or otherwise of the drug in question. More than that, though, the member for Lindsay has required that all decisions be published—that everything be open, transparent and accountable to the Australian people.

It is not unusual for ministers to make decisions. In fact, that is why governments exist: to be accountable and to require ministers to make decisions. We do not, for instance—and I said this yesterday—allow a group of public servants, no matter how well meaning and expert, to make the decision to go to war. We do not allow the ANAO, the DSD, ASIO, ASPI, the service chiefs, our coalition allies or anybody else to make the decision, although all of their expert input and advice is used by the government and the Minister for Defence of the day, along with cabinet, to make the decision to go to war—and it is properly debated in this House. Why, then, wouldn’t we make the decision as a parliament to allow the Australian people access to such a debate through their elected representatives?

I thought it was very interesting to note the concerns of the member for Lalor about the member for Lindsay’s amendment. She said that the manufacturer of whatever drug is in question would not run the risk of parliament. Why wouldn’t they? If they had confidence in their product, had run all the appropriate trials and believed the product was safe, why wouldn’t they run the risk of parliament? Is it that drug manufacturers will not submit themselves to the democratic process? Is that what we are saying? If they will not and they were using that as an argument against ministerial oversight and par-
parliamentary debate, it is a subtle form of blackmail. If drug manufacturers have a product they are confident about, they should be happy to have that product not only overseen by an accountable minister but brought before the parliament and debated, otherwise you would have the ridiculous situation where drug manufacturers were accountable only to a small group of public servants—and I do not think the Australian public would permit that for very long. I am astonished that the Labor Party, who have been crying for the last few weeks for ministerial responsibility—

Mr Martin Ferguson—This is a conscience vote; it’s not the Labor Party.

Mrs DE-ANNE KELLY—Let me get to personal aspects of this vote in a moment. The member for Lalor did not mind discussing the Minister for Health and Ageing, so personal elements have already come into this debate and I expect that I can talk about what the Labor Party have said in this debate. For the last few weeks the Australian Labor Party have been calling loudly for ministerial responsibility, of which there is a great deal in the question of selling wheat, yet they do not want ministerial responsibility in the issue of a drug that causes the death of a foetus. The reality is that it is all right to have ministerial responsibility for selling wheat, which this government does, but you do not want to have the minister or the parliament having a look at drug manufacturers. Is anyone going to be accountable to parliament? Absolutely—they should be—and that is what is at the core of this amendment put forward by the member for Lindsay.

The member for Lalor then went on in quite a contradictory way. On the one hand, she said that no drug manufacturer would submit themselves to the parliament, but then she said that the parliamentary process would be swamped by applications and debate. You cannot have it both ways: either they are not going to come here because they do not want to be accountable or they are going to swamp the parliament. If that were the process, and manufacturers believed their drugs to be safe, the reality is that manufacturers would bring their drugs to the parliament, and the parliament would deal with that. We would not be swamped as a parliament; people would not come back repetitively.

There is demonstrable Australia-wide community interest both for and against this issue. We accept that this is an issue that arouses passions and concerns, but the Labor Party want to run and hide from this. They want it kept to a group, albeit a group of expert, though not infallible, public servants. They do not want it brought for the scrutiny of the parliament and the Australian people, and that causes me a great deal of concern. I urge other members in this House to set aside the emotional aspect of this debate; it is about an approval process. There are going to be a great number of drugs coming forward, not only drugs that cause abortion but drugs that will change genetics and change personality—drugs that we cannot even imagine at this point in time. It is proper that the Australian people are, and the Australian people would expect to be, a part of that debate and that process.

They would also expect that drug manufacturers would be accountable to a minister, accountable to a government, and that all aspects of this debate would be open and transparent for them in the parliament. I commend the amendment by the member for Lindsay to the House and ask my colleagues in this House to think very carefully about the way in which they vote, because this is not going to be the only drug. There are going to be many more with many other social, economic and ethical aspects for their approval, and the Australian people will not
Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (6.58 pm)—The debate about the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 has unfortunately been driven by emotion and conflict principally emanating from remarks made by members on the government benches on the other side of the House. Contrary to a suggestion from the member for Dawson, the previous speaker, I want to make it very clear that there is no predeter-

mined position by the Labor Party, the opposi-
tion, with respect to this issue. It is a con-
science vote. I want to compliment this side of the House for the mature and responsible manner in which each and every one of us has handled this debate. There has been no public point-scoring against one another, as has been the situation on the other side of the House on the government benches.

Having said that, I want to state very categorically that, as far as I am concerned, this is not a debate about an Australian woman’s right to an abortion—we had that debate a long time ago—and it is not a debate that the broader Australian community wants to revisit in this country. It has come and gone. We should be clear about that fact from the start. This issue is without a doubt a matter of pharmaceutical technical expertise, which is clearly not something the Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott, I or many others in this House possess. Yet the minister has argued that people should judge his decision on its merits and not on their preju-
dices—a reference to his belief that people think he has made this decision as a Catholic and not as a minister. I do not seek to argue this, but it must be said that the inflammatory language he has used in this debate as the minister for health does not add weight to his argument that he has made the decision im-

partially. Warning that use of the drug would lead to ‘backyard miscarriages’ and an inter-

net black market does not help in resolving such a sensitive and emotive issue as the one before the House this evening.

The debate this evening is about making a decision that affects people’s lives. It re-

quires the expertise of a regulatory authority and not an individual, no matter how well-

intentioned that individual might be. The Therapeutic Goods Administration is specifi-
cally charged with identifying, assessing and evaluating the risks posed by therapeutic goods. It must also monitor and review any risks over time. Thus it is the TGA that is the appropriate authority to assess and recom-

mend on RU486. Prior to 1996, the TGA had responsibility for reviewing and approving all drugs entering Australia but, under the 1996 Harradine amendments, provisions under the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Bill provided that any drug to do with abortion became a restricted good. This debate has, beyond doubt, illustrated the need for an im-

partial and qualified decision-maker in the TGA process. The decision should be made by the same experts we trust to make the decisions about all other drugs. So far as I am concerned, it is as simple as that.

The reality is that medicines used for any purpose other than abortion do not require the approval of the minister. It is only RU486 and medicines with the same effect which require the minister’s approval. So this de-

bate is not about abortion and neither is it about the safety of this particular drug. What this boils down to is a dispute about who manages the risks associated with allowing the importation of this drug.

We all know that drugs are not perfect. Most have side effects, some worse than oth-

ers. The point is that no drug is risk free. But there are highly respected bodies in the world that have clearly stated their support for RU486 and they need to be properly con-
sidered by experts in Australia. These bodies include: the World Health Organisation, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Public Health Association of Australia, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of the United Kingdom, the Australian Medical Association, the American Medical Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Food and Drug Administration of the United States and the Rural Doctors Association of Australia—something that the previous speaker, the member for Dawson, should give some consideration to.

The question is, therefore, whether or not the minister for health, Tony Abbott, really believes that he knows better than all those organisations. Politicians, while having an important role in public scrutiny in many areas, are not drug experts and they should not purport to be so. Only the TGA with its expertise can make that call.

This issue has unnecessarily divided people, causing public confusion, fear and misunderstanding about the safety of this drug. The latest example of the way this issue is being handled by this government is the comments recently by the member for Hughes, Danna Vale. The stupidity of these comments is such that they do not bear repeating, except to say that so far as I am concerned they are an insult to all intelligent people but particularly to the Muslim community. Those comments are not based on fact; they are alarmist and simply wrong. The Prime Minister has shown time and again that stupidity is, unfortunately, not a punishable offence in the Howard government.

This is where the independence and expertise of the TGA is necessary. It is an absolutely essential requirement for the process being debated before the House this evening. Let this drug be properly assessed and evaluated—as it has been, appropriately so, in other countries. It has been approved in Britain, the United States, much of Western Europe, Russia, China, Israel, New Zealand, Turkey and Tunisia. It has been in use for many years overseas. The Public Health Association of Australia, for example, estimates that it has been used by more than 21 million women in more than 30 countries.

I would also like to remind the House this evening of the people this decision potentially affects, and that is more than half this country’s population. This was reflected by the fact that of the 30 women in our Senate, 27 voted in favour of the private member’s bill to overturn the minister for health’s veto over the importation of RU486. Female representatives viewed this matter with an overwhelming consensus: let the decision be made by the appropriate body—the TGA—not a politician.

But this drug is not only of importance to women; it affects men as well. The minister for health and opponents of this drug are not just preventing women in Australia from accessing it. It should also not be forgotten that this drug is being used overseas to treat cancer patients. It is being used to treat breast, ovarian, prostate and other cancers and illnesses. I believe that it is a sad time in Australia when Australians have to travel abroad for a drug available in 30 countries around the world. What this debate comes down to is a pretty obvious consensus, and that is: take it out of the hands of the minister for health and give it to the experts, people appointed on merit by government to the TGA.

This issue goes to the heart of good governance, proper public policy and proper health policy. For the sake of all Australians the TGA should be allowed to make the decision on this drug, as it does on all other drugs not related to abortions. It is time for the minister for health to respect the views of
world health bodies, doctors, women and his own political colleagues.

I simply say in conclusion that there is no justifiable case for the minister for health, irrespective of who the minister for health is, deciding whether applications for evaluation of RU486 can proceed. Such a situation is at odds with the evidence based framework generally used to assess other medicines in Australia, and that is the crux of the debate. For this reason I support the private member’s bill and indicate my opposition to the amendment proposed by the member for Bowman and the amendment moved by the member for Lindsay. I commend the bill before the House. In doing so I say to the minister for health: front up to your responsibilities and stop trying to play politics with Australians’ health. It is far too important for simple political games.

Mr CAUSLEY (Page) (7.08 pm)—I am rather bemused that we are even debating the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 in the parliament at present, to be honest with you, because, quite frankly, the drug company Pfizer has not even moved to have RU486 registered as a drug in Australia. So we are pre-empting most of the things that are being said in this parliament. I have to take exception with some of the statements by the member for Batman where he attacked government members for referring to statements from the opposition then proceeded to attack some members of the government. It was rather hypocritical, I would have thought, given the comments that were made.

I cannot come to terms with the argument that says Pfizer will not apply to the TGA to have this drug registered because they have some concerns about the ability of the Minister for Health and Ageing to approve or not approve the drug. The member for Batman went on to talk about some of the other medical benefits of this particular drug. If it has those medical benefits, why has the company not applied to register the product? I would have thought that was the first step. To presume that a minister would disapprove of the drug I think is rather a big presumption.

The other thing I want to say, which I think this has probably been in the debate from a very early stage—it might have been started by the member for Lalor; if not, I will apologise for that—is that the attack seems to be on the minister himself. The debate certainly started that way, with the fact that he was a practising Catholic and he had a view from that particular position. That is a secular argument. I think it is very unfortunate that we are going to get into a secular argument over this particular position. I really do not think that this can be debated any other way than taking into consideration all of the detail.

I have also seen editorials saying that this is not a debate about abortion; this is a debate about RU486. I do not know how you can have a debate about RU486 without mentioning something about abortion, because that is what it is being peddled as: an abortion drug. So that must come into it.

Unlike the member for Batman I do not believe that law is always set in stone. He said that we have had the debate about abortion. But parliaments have the right to change the law; that is what they are put in place for, and from time to time they do change the law. That does not mean to say that the debate over abortion cannot be revisited—of course it can, if public opinion changes. That is what we are about. We are members of parliament; we reflect public opinion.

The other claim that has been put forward, very strongly I might say, by some of the
supporters—and I wonder whether this debate is about feminism or whether it is about RU486, from time to time, because I think some of the debate comes down to the position of strong feminists in our society—is that this is all about women’s health. I have had a very strong view for a long time. I do not come from a religious position. Although I claim to be Christian, and I am an Anglican, I do not come from that strong Christian position, but I have always had a view that abortion should only be allowed in certain circumstances: when the woman’s life is at risk, where there has been rape or where there might be some congenital problems with the foetus. I accept that those are valid arguments for an abortion. But I do not believe in abortion for convenience—I do not believe in that at all. I think those are some of the things that we need to take into consideration. A woman has to be in the pink of health to fall pregnant—if she is not in good health, she doesn’t. So I think this argument about health that has been put forward in this debate is a very spurious argument.

The other point that has been put forward, very strongly in some circumstances, is that this is absolutely a woman’s choice. I want to refute that. The last time I checked there was only one major claim about immaculate conception. There are two involved in this. I accept that some people walk away from their responsibilities, but most do not walk away from their responsibilities. During the debate that this House had over the Family Law Act members will have found that a lot of men have some very passionate positions on their children. From my age group, I suppose, I found that rather surprising; but they have very strong views about the fact that it is their child. I think we need to take a close look at that: there are two in this, not just one. I think there needs to be some consideration given to that.

Someone said to me the other day that in the past there were a lot of mistakes. Right through history there have been mistake pregnancies; there is no doubt or argument about that. But let me say: I know of quite a number of these mistake pregnancies, and they are very loved members of families. So just to say, ‘I didn’t plan this,’ and that for some reason, for convenience, you can just abort that pregnancy—I do not take that argument either.

It has been put forward by the member for Batman and others that we should rely on the Therapeutic Goods Administration. This is a faceless group of bureaucrats. They have no responsibility to the people. I thought human life was a little bit more than the clinical, cold consideration of a faceless group of bureaucrats. We have human emotions, and there is no doubt that human emotions come into this. We had a great debate in this parliament about euthanasia, a very good debate about euthanasia. Surely this is in exactly the same category. It is a very strong human debate about whether we should agree with this.

I do not think anyone has seriously taken into consideration the psychological effects this can have on someone. I know at the time women believe: ‘I’ve just got to do something about this. I really don’t want to go through with this. I’ve got to do something about this.’ I accept that that can be a position. But I have also met women who after the event have mourned that lost child for the rest of their lives. Probably not all have done so, but I know that it can have very deep psychological effects on some women. I do not think we take those effects into consideration. I do not know whether we think seriously enough before the termination; there can be some counselling as to what the effects might be. I think that is another thing we need to take very seriously.
The other thing we need to say is that in many ways—and not all; I would say that the community is divided on this debate—the community accepted abortion, as I put forward to you earlier, under very restricted circumstances where they believed there was a problem. But many in the community are asking me, ‘How can you say that 100,000 abortions a year in Australia’—and I know that number is a debated point; I accept that—‘are had due to health reasons, congenital reasons or rape?’ It is very hard to believe that you can come down with that position.

While I suppose I wrestle very deeply with this situation, maybe given the fact that I have a few grey hairs on my head and have seen a fair bit of life, I have come to the view that I have a great respect for life. I think it is one thing that you really have to take very seriously. I do not accept that this or any previous health minister would take a decision that they believed was wrong. I think that is a presumption which is completely wrong. I believe that the pharmaceutical company, if they believe this drug has something to offer, should go ahead with applying for the registration of the drug. How can you possibly say that a minister has rejected this when he has had no application to consider? I think it is an absolutely farcical position to be put. As I said from the start, I wonder what this debate is all about. Is this a debate about RU486 or is this a feminist agenda that is being pushed through the parliament?

Mr Murphy (Lowe) (7.17 pm)—I rise in opposition to this private member’s bill, the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005. Much has been said already in the Senate last week and in this House, but still more needs to be put to every member of this House in order to demonstrate that the bill is fundamentally opposed to reason, fundamentally opposed to good governance and fundamentally opposed to scientific and moral fact.

This bill is bad law. The consequences of this bill are equally bad law. Why is this bill bad law? I rely on the following points. One, the existing legislative scheme introduced as a late amendment to the original 1996 bill, the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Bill (No. 2) 1996, received bipartisan support in 1996. Two, both government and opposition members supported these amendments, which included critically section 23AA—Ministerial approval of evaluation, registration or listing of restricted goods. Three, RU486 is not merely a therapeutic drug because of its purpose to produce a chemical abortion, and it falls within a special category of drug called ‘restricted goods’. Four, because of this special recognition, the Therapeutic Goods Administration is not in my view the proper agency to administer this type of drug without political scrutiny. The nature of restricted goods means that the decision is not merely a clinical or medical one. Equally, the decision carries higher policy impacts involving social costs above and beyond the notions of freedom of the individual to choose. Hence, the public interest is paramount, specifically with respect to the release of restricted goods to the general public. I believe that it is not the responsibility of faceless bureaucrats to make decisions while operating under the influence of the pharmaceutical corporations.

Five, the TGA is a body dominated and influenced in reaching its decisions both intellectually and, most importantly, financially by medical scientists and the sponsors of these drugs, the pharmaceutical corporations that manufacture them—in this case, the manufacturer of RU486, Danco Laboratories. Six, the Therapeutic Goods Administration is by definition incompetent to administer decision making on dangerous drugs such as RU486. It is by definition non-therapeutic.
and positively harmful, particularly to women. Seven, the TGA was not envisaged to directly administer restricted goods without public scrutiny. The removal of the minister’s powers without an alternative for public accountability defies the Australian National Audit Office’s fivefold recommendations for greater public scrutiny of the TGA following the Pan Pharmaceuticals debacle. In that case, the TGA demonstrated its failure as an administrator. TGA stands for Therapeutic Goods Administration. What is a therapeutic good? The Parliamentary Library Bills Digest Number 40 of 2005-06 states:

A ‘therapeutic good’ can be broadly defined as ‘a good which is represented in any way to be, or is likely to be taken to be, for therapeutic use’.

This definition in itself does not preclude drugs such as RU486.

What is the statutory definition of a restricted good? The 1996 amendment to the Therapeutic Goods Act inserted the definition of restricted good in clause 1A, which states:

‘Restricted goods’ are defined to be drugs within Regulation 2 of the Therapeutic Goods Regulations (including progesterone antagonists and vaccines against human chorionic gonadotrophin) intended for use in women as abortifacients. RU486 falls within the definition of restricted good found in subsection 3(1) of the act. Why did this bill receive broad bipartisan support in 1996? It is instructive to read the speech of former Senator Brian Harradine in the debate on the Senate committee report. In part, during the debate on 8 May 1996, he said:

The purpose of these amendments is perfectly clear: to ensure that these particular drugs, which are significantly different in nature to other drugs which are termed therapeutic goods, should not be left entirely in the hands of science technologists and the sponsors of the particular drugs. As I said earlier, at that time both government and opposition members and senators supported this proposition and voted accordingly. What has changed since then? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The reasoning in 1996 is as valid now as it was then.

Yet, incredibly, this bill intends to repeal the definition of restricted goods entirely. Equally, the ministerial power presently found in section 23AA is intended to be repealed, along with sections 6AA, 6AB and subsection 57(9). The effect of these amendments is to wipe political accountability entirely from the administration of restricted goods, which include RU486. Instead, all drugs and other items are now to be within the exclusive domain of the TGA. In other words, the purpose of this bill is to entirely remove the distinction between what was hitherto the well-founded distinction between a therapeutic good and a restricted good, and administer the registration of both groups of drugs and other items as one and the same thing. In my view, this bill is flawed on every front: ethically, legally, medically and administratively.

Let us look again, in a little more detail, at the TGA’s performance—or, to be more precise, the lack of performance—as a competent administrator of drugs in Australia. Over the last 10 years alone, the TGA has been the subject of several audits by the Australian National Audit Office. There was the ANAO audit of 1996-97 over the conduct of the TGA. Fourteen recommendations were made by the ANAO concerning the fundamental operation of the TGA, including the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of the TGA, including shortcomings in several key areas, including timeliness of decision making, effectiveness of drug evaluation, consultation with consumer organisations and public reporting of adverse drug reactions, specifically, recommendation 12 at paragraph 3.27, which deals with its public reporting ‘to better meet the informa-
tion needs of Parliament and consumers in the interests of enhanced accountability’.

The ANAO conducted a further report in 2000-01, as a follow-up audit, to review the extent to which the TGA had implemented the recommendations from the 1996 report. Significantly, recommendation 3 at paragraph 3.17 states:

ANAO recommends that, to permit Parliament, industry and other stakeholders to understand variations in TGA’s evaluation performance:


These recommendations were supposed to be implemented by 2001. Indeed, we hear the mantra from agencies such as the TGA as noted in the ANAO’s 2000-01 report—that by 2000 the TGA had implemented, or partly implemented, 12 of the 14 recommendations through alternative means. This type of response is used often by government agencies and is synonymous with a ‘substantially implemented’ response. We hear this mantra often in other agencies as well; it is nothing more than a smokescreen. Over the last two years we have seen how ‘substantially implemented’ the changes within the TGA were—how efficient and expert the TGA was—with the eruption of the Pan Pharmaceuticals debacle. We are indebted to Pan Pharmaceuticals. The case demonstrated that all the pencil pushing by the TGA—all the box ticking—means absolutely nothing.

In 2005 the TGA was subject to a third audit by the ANAO, this time over the TGA’s failure to administer its statutory responsibilities for non-prescription medicines. In the 2005 audit, a further 26 recommendations on the conduct and culture of the TGA were made by the ANAO. The ANAO painted the picture that there is a serious cultural issue within the TGA with its ‘rubber stamping’ mentality and its proximity to the vested and sectional interest industry stakeholders it is supposed to be regulating.

The final insult to our parliament and the people of Australia came when the ANAO, clearly frustrated by the apparent lack of progress in changing the culture latent within the TGA, established an audit subcommittee in early to mid 2005 and engaged consultants, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, to assist in the ANAO’s work of overseeing and reporting to the secretary on the implementation of regulations designed to address these further recommendations. The consultant, Deloitte, was specifically required to ‘review broader aspects of the TGA’s administration, management and governance structure and make recommendations where appropriate’. In June 2005, Deloitte delivered its findings, stating that ‘the TGA requires holistic, behavioural change, including changes to the agency’s structure and transparency, better governance and accountability, and improved IT systems’. Incredibly, this report was only made available in December last year, some two months ago. In light of this report from Deloitte and the massive underperformance of the TGA, who are we to be giving more power to the TGA, at least until the manifest structural, transparency, governance and accountability issues are resolved?

Compounding this fundamental accountability and structural problem is the issue of bias and influence pervading the culture of the TGA. Who funds the TGA? The Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing’s annual report of 2004-05 states at page 331: ‘In 2004-05, the TGA received $76.083 Million in funding (revenue) from all sources. Of this, $67.338 Million was from industry fees and charges, $6.177 Million was from the Australian Government, and $2.568 Million was from the sale of goods and services.’ In other words, over 88.5 per cent of the TGA’s revenue is derived from pharmaceutical and other industry fees.
Where do they think the greatest influence over the TGA lies? Plainly the greatest influence over the TGA lies in the hands of the pharmaceutical industry. Until the endemic cultural problems within the TGA are sorted out, we as a parliament cannot be so irresponsible as to give the TGA sole responsibility for determination powers over the release of restricted goods such as RU486.

I next touch upon the medical issues of RU486. RU486 is an abortion drug. The intended use is to actually kill the unborn child. This drug is more lethal, more dangerous and more harmful to women taking it than surgical abortion. I ask you to look at the facts—the scientific facts—about RU486. (1) The American Food and Drug Administration website states that RU486 is actually a two-drug prescription. The first drug is mifepristone, of which 200 milligrams are taken orally. Next comes 400 micrograms of the drug misoprostol. (2) RU486 causes the death of the baby by blocking the pregnancy-maintaining actions of progesterone, a hormone of the woman’s body. This is why RU486 is presently classified as a restricted good. (3) The function of misoprostol is to cause strong uterine contractions, thereby emptying the uterus of the dead baby.

This event of forced contractions must be a most traumatic experience for a woman. I understand that this view is shared by key pro-abortion feminists, such as Professor Renata Klein, an associate professor in women’s studies at Deakin University, in RU-486; Misconceptions, Myths and Morals by Klein, Raymond and Dumble published by Spinfex Press, Melbourne.

Edouard Sakiz, then president of French pharmaceutical company Roussel-Uclaf, the original developers of the drug RU486, also states in his interview in Le Monde in August 1990, reprinted in the United Kingdom in the Guardian Weekly on 19 August 1990, that the RU486 procedure is:

... an appalling psychological ordeal because the woman ... has to ‘live’ with her abortion for at least a week using this technique.

That is, she has to have a dead body inside her body before the corpse is extracted.

I now move to the critical issue of harm to women. First, the drug is not foolproof. RU486 has a significant failure rate. Professor Caroline de Costa notes in the article ‘Medical abortion for Australian women: its time’ in the Medical Journal of Australia, 2005, page 183, that misoprostol fails to cause an abortion in two to seven per cent of women. The Canadian Medical Journal in 2005 reported that the RU486 procedure fails in five to eight per cent of cases in women, thus requiring surgical abortion due to ‘incomplete procedure, excessive bleeding or continuing abortion’. Further, the report of Ravn, Rasmussen, Knudsen and Kristiansen in Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand, 2005, at 84(11) cites an eight per cent failure rate.

I now turn to the issue of safety to women, including the risk of death. There are many references to supposedly authoritative texts saying that chemical abortion, including RU486, is as safe as or safer than surgical abortions. In response to these assertions, I bring to the House’s attention the statement of Dr PD Carney, who is on the board of associate editors of the journal Contraception, who states:

... the death rate from medical abortion [ru486] among Planned Parenthood patients [is] ... roughly 1.5 per 100,000, compared to a U.S. rate of 0.5 for early surgical abortion.

This means that the maternal death rate for chemical abortion is three times higher than the maternal death rate recorded for early surgical abortions.

I wish to remind the Minister for Health and Ageing of my determination to obtain
the truth from him and his predecessors on the exact number of medical procedures procured under Medicare for the purpose of procuring an abortion. I asked question on notice No. 1441 on the issue of pregnancy termination statistics on 13 April 2000 to the then Minister for Health and Ageing, the Honourable Dr Wooldridge. I was stonewalled. On 7 December 2000 I again asked follow-up questions to Dr Wooldridge for further clarification on the question of the number of Medicare funded pregnancy terminations. Again I was stonewalled. Finally, on 16 November 2004, I asked the present Minister for Health and Ageing and member for Warringah, the Hon. Tony Abbott, whether it was still not possible to estimate the number of late-term pregnancy abortions and what legal impediments prevented him from varying the Medicare codes such that it would be possible to determine the number of Medicare funded procedures that procure an abortion. Yes, again I was stonewalled.

It is clear that successive coalition ministers for health and ageing have not got the political will to establish the truth about the number of abortions carried out in Australia compared with other medical procedures that are not abortions but have the same HIC item number. I question tonight the bona fides of the minister for health. On this issue we come from same constituency. Why did the minister raise 100,000 abortions in Australia, conveniently, a few weeks after the last election? Why did the minister support the Bill Clinton position on abortion last week? Why does the minister duck my questions to him about the number of abortions carried out in Australia every year? Why did the member for Hughes claim that there are 100,000 abortions carried out in Australia every year? Why do they persist with this false claim?

All members that I have spoken to about this issue want to know the truth. The minister knows that he has the power to establish the correct figures on abortion in Australia. All members of this House that I have spoken to, irrespective of their position in relation to how they are going to vote, would like to reduce the number of abortions carried out in Australia.

I conclude, based on the verifiable and reputable data from medical research on failure rates, we can expect that between 5,000 and 8,000 attempted pregnancy terminations from RU486 per year will fail, thus requiring supplementary surgical abortions, with internal bleeding and psychological trauma. We cannot as a parliament entrust this decision to the TGA. We must take responsibility for the drug and maintain the decision made some 10 years ago in this parliament that RU486 is a dangerous drug that must not be permitted into the market.

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (7.37 pm)—I have been listening to the debate both in the Senate and in this place and I must say that it is of a very high level, and that is to be welcomed. We have seen this before in these areas that give rise to some emotional input. There has been a little bit of name calling, but I am fairly certain that everyone in this place is pro-life regardless of how we vote on this particular amendment to the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005; none of us want to encourage or in anyway promote termination of pregnancy or see those numbers increase.

There are consequences of going through an abortion. There are consequences emo-
tionally and there are physical risks in any surgical or medical procedure. But the fact is that this should not, in my view, be a debate about abortion. Rather, it should be a debate about providing a process, and for that process to provide an alternative to a procedure that has been legal for many years. My colleague the member for Moore spoke before me, and I would like to restate what he said because I think it is very relevant. He said that currently this parliament sanctions and Medicare rebates surgical procedures with similar risk factors to RU486. I am paraphrasing him slightly; I have not gone through the whole of what he said. I think it is important to restate that point: this parliament currently sanctions and Medicare rebates this kind of surgical procedure that brings about a termination of a pregnancy.

As I said, it should not be a debate about abortion, but rather a debate about a process and about providing an alternative to a procedure that has been legal for many years, a choice that provides women with an alternative to surgical termination of pregnancy. Abortion is legally and safely available under legislation that varies from state to state. These debates went on for many, many years and many of us remember the tragedy of backyard abortions. I doubt that too many people would really seriously want to return to that situation.

This legislation provides the option for women seeking a legal termination to pregnancy to make a choice according to the best medical advice and according to their personal circumstances. Having access to RU486 also provides for a termination at an earlier stage of pregnancy—surely a better outcome than a surgical procedure. Women living in rural communities—and I speak to this because I have many women living in rural areas in my election of Pearce in Western Australia—are disproportionately disadvantaged under the current arrangements. It is sometimes difficult to access facilities and, at a time of personal crisis, these women often need to leave their families and communities and seek services in metropolitan centres, adding to the physical, financial and psychological difficulties.

I believe that in this place our responsibility is to make sure that under the current legislative framework women have access to best practice when they seek a legal termination. That responsibility can best be exercised by allowing the appropriate medical advisory agency, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, to rigorously test the safety, efficacy and effectiveness of abortifacients such as RU486. It has been argued that the TGA, when considering applications for the importation and administration of pharmaceuticals, does not consider ethical issues. However, all pharmaceuticals are subject to high-level scrutiny by independent medical and health ethics committees under the present application approval processes.

Much of the argument to date has revolved around risk, and we heard a lot about that from the previous speaker, the member for Lowe. As risk management is a key function of the TGA, and this agency is made up of independent, qualified and highly responsible individuals, then it must surely be best placed to make a decision. To be safe and comply with state laws, both medical and surgical terminations must have appropriate medical oversight and approval, including, in some states, undergoing physical and mental health tests. It needs to be made absolutely clear that what we are debating in this place today is not a decision about the legality or the ethics of abortion; it is about process, it is about whether or not to allow the therapeutic goods administrator to do its work unfettered by sectional interests and political consideration.
By continuing with the current policy, Australian women are denied options other than surgical termination. As I said before, this also disproportionately impacts on women and their families in rural areas. Women seek to terminate pregnancy for many different reasons, and that must be a decision for them, their families and their medical advisers to determine. Again, I would like to remind the House of the contribution by the member for Moore when he said that the reasons for abortions are unwanted or nonviable pregnancies. Unwanted pregnancy occurs in multiple situations such as foetal abnormality, serious maternal health problems and severe psychological and social problems to mention a few.

If we want to discourage the termination of pregnancy, and I am sure it is clear that many of us in this place do, including me, I believe we as legislators ought to examine some of the issues that give rise to women feeling compelled to go through a termination and what we can do to help women and couples avoid unwanted pregnancies at the starting point. We need to engage in a more robust debate about the kind of assistance we give to women who go through pregnancy unsupported.

Australians have had the debate about the legal status of abortion long ago, and they have supported legislation in our states and territories to allow the termination of pregnancy under certain conditions. Indeed, to look at the public record, one study which was conducted over 30 years by K Betts and published in a paper called ‘Attitudes to abortion in Australia: 1972 to 2003’ indicates that 80 per cent of Australians support a woman’s right to choose whether she goes through this procedure or not. I think it is very important to bear that in mind. There is plenty of other evidence in terms of public opinion and public polling, but overwhelmingly it all points to the fact that most Australians want women to be able to make these decisions along with their medical practitioners and perhaps their families. To continue to ban a medical procedure that has for years provided a safe additional option to surgical termination for women in countries such as France, Great Britain, Sweden and the United States, to name a few, is to neglect our responsibility to ensure that Australian women have this choice.

I believe that my colleagues the member for Lindsay and the member for Bowman are very well intentioned in bringing forward amendments to the bill and trying to find a way through, but I personally cannot support either of the amendments as I do not believe they progress this debate or help with that process of decision making. I have confidence that testing the safety, efficacy and appropriateness of this and other drugs can be safely left to the members of the Therapeutic Goods Administration, and I intend to support the bill.

Ms ROXON (Gellibrand) (7.46 pm)—I want to speak on the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005 today because I believe that it fundamentally affects the community, particularly women in our community. It is also one of those issues where I think we have to question the appropriate role of government and how much we do or do not want government and individual politicians to interfere with our lives. I strongly believe that, just as we do not want politicians in our bedrooms, we certainly do not want them in our doctors’ consulting rooms with us either.

The idea that the Minister for Health and Ageing, on each and every occasion that the drug RU486 is sought to be used, would make an individual, informed and appropriate decision based on proper technical expertise and the particular circumstances of each
case is illogical, unrealistic and inappropriate. I am also deeply sceptical of the argument that ministerial responsibility for approving this drug adds an extra layer of scrutiny or accountability.

If only we could mandate such ministerial approval for the export of wheat, for ‘children overboard’ or for many of the other issues where the government has consistently refused to be accountable. I just cannot buy this as a legitimate argument being made by the Howard government. Even De-Anne Kelly, the former Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, who skated through the regional rorts scandal by saying that it was all the department’s fault, was out there yesterday arguing for the fundamental need for ministerial responsibility. Please! Are we really going to take these sorts of arguments seriously?

Currently the minister is only accountable to the parliament if the decision is to make the drug available. He does not have to notify the parliament if he rejects an application for importation. This is exactly the kind of partial accountability that the Howard government so likes.

But the bottom line for me is this: government has no business interfering in the legal choices that people make about their health care. Our role is to ensure that we have a system in place to ensure that the drugs that are available are medically safe. That is why the TGA was set up. There are very few people in this House who are medically qualified to make that assessment, nor should we be called upon or expected to be experts in this field. Supporting the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 will end the anomaly that has the health minister deciding on the safety and medical suitability of this particular drug.

It is not as if we are talking about some sort of ‘way out there’ drug. RU486 has been licensed for use in France since 1988, in the UK since 1991 and in the US since the year 2000. In European countries where RU486 has been available for some time, there has been no reported increase in the number of abortions performed overall, but there has been an increase in the number of early abortions. As we all know, the safety of an abortion is directly related to how early in the pregnancy it is performed, so this drug may in fact offer a better health option for some women.

So, despite claims to the contrary, this drug may prove a safer option for many women faced with a very difficult decision. But that safety assessment is for the TGA—not for me, as a non-expert politician, nor, I believe, for other politicians—to make. We are not leaving this decision in the hands of faceless bureaucrats, as some have suggested; we are putting the decision in the hands of our medical experts—an institution that was specifically designed to do this work. It will be in the hands of the TGA to decide whether this drug should be available and then in the hands of women and health practitioners as to whether it is suitable for them and whether they wish to use it.

Many of the speeches in the Senate debate focused on the morality of abortion, when really I think the onus is on those who oppose the bill to put the case as to why this drug should be treated differently to any other, given that it is a medical alternative to a currently available surgical procedure. In fact, we are not being asked to decide whether abortion should be legal or in what circumstances it should be available. It is wrong to talk about this debate in terms of whether it is supporting abortion or not. Whether we pass this bill or not, every abortion that currently occurs will be just as likely to occur in the future. We are being asked to vote on who should decide what medical methods of such a procedure will be
available to any woman who is faced with this awful decision. And, frankly, I am not comfortable or confident that a minister—particularly the current minister, but any minister—should make this decision.

Senator Brandis, in the other place, has said that this is not a women’s issue. I challenge that. Of course, I accept that a decision to abort will often very acutely affect men as well as women, but it is primarily and undeniably a health issue for women. And, most significantly, the current debate is about restricting access to a drug whose consumers are almost exclusively women.

This bill is about who decides which treatment options a woman has available to her. For me, that falls squarely in the court of being a women’s issue. Many if not most women will consult their partners, their family or friends and their doctors but the decision ultimately should be theirs and all appropriate options should be open to them. For rural women, and for women from some ethnic groups for whom privacy is particularly important, the option of a medical abortion is critical if they are to be treated equally with other Australians.

In this debate I have heard a range of arguments about the safety of this drug, the deaths it has caused, its safety relative to surgical procedures and other medical complications. What this bill is asking is that these health and safety concerns be considered on their merits, without the rhetoric, hysteria, personal beliefs or political sensitivities of any parliamentarian. If, after thorough assessment by the TGA, RU486 becomes available, I have confidence in Australian women to make the right choice for themselves without the interference of politicians in an intensely personal and difficult decision.

Like many other members of this House, I have received a large amount of correspondence on this issue, and I do respect the firmly held and passionate beliefs of those who have contacted me. I particularly value that they have engaged so much in this process and in the decision we have been making over the last couple of weeks. The majority of correspondence I have received from my electorate has urged me to support this bill, although I appreciate that many others I represent will not agree with this position. However, the bottom line in these decisions is not about my view, or the views of many in my electorate; it is about individual choice. We must remember that the legality of abortion has already been determined and that each woman has her own body, her own conscience and their own circumstances to take account of. Just as we are having a conscience vote in this parliament, we should not seek to impose our moral judgments on others. We are the keepers of our own consciences—not everybody else’s. I do not believe that parliament should be some busy-body neighbour or social policeman in our community.

As I said at the beginning, I am strongly of the view that we do not want politicians in our bedrooms or in our doctors’ consulting rooms. Provided that proper medical screening is undertaken when new drugs become available, which the TGA is perfectly placed to do, it should then be left to the women who are contemplating this procedure, with proper support and advice, to decide what is best for them. It is for this reason that I support the bill.

Ms LEY (Farrer—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (7.54 pm)—I thank the House for the opportunity to speak on the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005, which seeks to transfer the approval process for importation of RU486 from the health minister to the Therapeutic Goods
Administration. As has been stated, RU486, being an abortifacient, is no ordinary drug and there is no mistaking that this issue is a complex one—indeed, in many cases a personal one—which is invariably the case with issues that require a conscience vote.

The correspondence I have received from the electors of Farrer reflects different value systems, different philosophies and different attitudes. There is no single position that I can take on this bill that is in harmony with everyone’s conscience. I pay the greatest respect to alternative opinions, even though I may not agree with them. My own conscience allows me only one option, which is to support this bill.

Like all members of this place I have been weighing up the evidence regarding the use of RU486. I have received numerous emails and letters, both supporting and rejecting the use of this drug, and I have spent countless hours researching the arguments. As I have done so, I have concluded that this debate is about the medical options available to women within the existing framework of women’s access to terminations. This is a debate about the health of women, not a debate about abortion. I do, however, accept that it is quite reasonable for people to use this debate to air their grievances concerning the current state of abortion.

It is important to have this discussion and debate. I have great disquiet, along with all members of this House, about the numbers of abortions in this country, variously estimated at between 84,000 and 100,000 terminations a year. No-one should feel comfortable with this statistic. It is a national disgrace and something that both state governments, which set their own laws on abortion, and the Australian government, which can influence education programs in schools and can encourage good quality counselling, must turn their attention to.

RU486, when used with a second drug, prostaglandin, brings about abortion. So, for many of the people I represent, this debate is about abortion. If I do not confront this I am dodging the issue. With this in mind I therefore propose to make some remarks about abortion. From time to time, particularly as a candidate for election, I have been asked about my position on abortion. My opinions have not changed and I have never sought to hide or misrepresent them. Abortion should be safe, legal and rare. Education and counselling should be the key planks in our efforts to reduce the number of terminated pregnancies. The decision to procure an abortion should be made by a woman, in consultation with her conscience and her doctor.

Many in this debate have brought personal experiences to this place. I have no personal experience of abortion but I often used to think about what I would do if I had an unplanned pregnancy. To the best of my knowledge of myself, I would not choose a termination but I would never impose my view on another woman, either in person or through the legislature of this country. Even if we believe we are protecting a mother’s health or the potential life of the unborn, we as governments should not be allowed to intimidate women into continuing pregnancies.

Abortion raises moral and spiritual questions over which we can and probably should disagree earnestly and profoundly. There is no high moral ground in this debate. A woman who makes a decision to proceed with a pregnancy is not a better person because of her decision than one who seeks a termination. I urge those from both sides of this debate who would criticise and condemn to walk a mile in the shoes of the people whose views offend you. Amidst the sound and fury directed at me as a member of this parliament, I am reminded of a saying from the French novelist de Balzac: the more you...
judge, the less you love. How true that is. I have taken time to address the abortion question because my constituents who are opposed to the bill have couched their opposition in terms of abortion itself being a moral wrong.

May I now return to the substance of the bill: the approval process for RU486 leading to it becoming available in Australia, as opposed to maintaining the status quo. I have been asking myself, 'Is this drug safe to use for women who live in rural and regional Australia—women such as those in my electorate of Farrer who may not have immediate access to either a doctor or to surgical abortion?' Once the decision has been made to terminate a pregnancy, the safety and effectiveness of medical as opposed to surgical abortion is a question that needs answering.

So how safe is RU486? Reports vary widely, but there have been at least 10 reported cases of women dying because of complications linked to the drug. There have also been women who have needed immediate medical attention due to adverse side effects. This has to be weighed against the number of successful uses of RU486, which has been used by up to one million women worldwide over the past 18 years. I think the answer lies not in the use of the drug itself but in the way our health system and health professionals administer it and care for the patient both before and after its use. What is important for patients is to have the option of different methods of treatment, because not all patients will be responsive to, or indeed want, certain kinds of treatment.

Australia have one of the best systems of checks and balances when it comes to the approval of medication. Not only do we have the TGA to assess the safety of medications; we also have highly skilled, well-trained doctors, nurses and allied health professionals. For the most part, we have world-class hospitals and medical centres and a variety of professional organisations and standards of practice which monitor the qualifications, behaviour and conduct of our professionals. I do trust the experts to evaluate the data from overseas—including the claims of serious adverse health effects from RU486—and to come to an informed view about the risks versus the benefits. Furthermore, I trust our local medical professionals, some of whom I know are ethically opposed to this drug and will therefore not prescribe it. Doctors will decide whether they prescribe RU486 for some, all or none of their patients.

It has been argued that RU486 will make obtaining an abortion easier. I have seen no evidence that pregnancies would be terminated with RU486 which would otherwise continue. If anything, I believe the drug will mean terminations will happen earlier rather than later in the pregnancy. This is particularly applicable to rural and remote women. So I do not believe RU486 will cause more abortions. The drug was first introduced in France in 1988 without any noticeable increase in the abortion rate. Similarly, in England there was no increase in the number of abortions, and in Sweden there was a slight decrease following the approval of medical abortions.

I hope there is not an implication that a woman choosing termination should not find it too easy. I hope no-one feels that such a woman should face maximum difficulty in procuring the termination, that it should be a process that is as difficult as possible for her, or that we should accept a regime where, say, a young woman on a low income with no family support has to travel for hours—say, from northern rural Australia to Mildura or from rural Victoria to Melbourne—possibly in secrecy, to run the gauntlet of placard-wielding individuals who scream at her in protest and then, after a fairly traumatic procedure, make the trip home again alone to
deal with the aftermath. We should not wish to punish women who choose to have a termination. Are they not punished enough by their families, possibly their partner and those who would seek to pressure them into a different view, but most of all by their own conscience? I refuse to accept that anything but the smallest minority of women seeking a termination are not hugely traumatised by the process. I wish the House well with its deliberations. I support the bill as presented.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS (Canberra) (8.03 pm)—I rise tonight to address my remarks to the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005. First, I would like to thank the majority, thankfully, of speakers who have come into this debate before me tonight, particularly the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, who has just completed her words, and also the member for Jagajaga and the member for Murray. I had the pleasure in both cases of hearing most of their deliveries in this debate.

The bill is really all about the ability for the Therapeutic Goods Administration to make the determination in relation to the provision of a drug in this country rather than to have a political process do that. My one major critical comment would be that I have been really sorry to see the levels of hysteria that have been coming into the debate in part. I understand that this is a very controversial issue for some, and I respect that. But I do not believe that the injection of hysteria helps anybody. I believe it confuses the issue. It does not help those who are still attempting to deal with it within themselves. Over the last few weeks we have seen people raise issues which have had, frankly, nothing to do with the bill before us.

Most members who I have heard speak have said—and I agree—that this is not actually a debate about the right to abortion. That is a debate we had a long time ago, and that is not what we are here to discuss, although I agree with the previous speaker that many people are seeing it through that prism. The debate, in my view, is really about one thing and one thing only: who should in fact decide on the safety of the use of this medicine in that technical sense. That is where the debate basically begins and ends for me. On that basis I believe that the debate is really fairly straightforward. I strongly believe that medical experts should assess the safety of the drugs that come before us in this country, not us as politicians.

I have had the pleasure of being in this House now for almost 10 years. Over that time there has been many an occasion when people, sometimes in their tens and sometimes in their thousands, have written to people in this place, including me, seeking our assistance in lobbying hard for the provision of a medical drug of one sort or another—to get it onto the PBS, to get it accepted into the country in the first place—for particular use. Some of these treatments have been for chronic illnesses like Alzheimer’s disease and arthritis. There has been a long list of them. It is very tempting in cases like that to get bound up in the emotion of it, to want to help influence that process for the approval of those drugs into this country and to see yourself as helping people with those chronic illnesses who are desperate to find a solution to their health issues. However, I have always supported the current system in Australia, where the safety of and the access to those drugs is determined by medical experts through the Therapeutic Goods Administration and not through us in here.

When some people have written to me in the past on questions like this, I have done the right thing as a local member supporting their views and forwarded their submission on to the minister concerned at the time,
knowing full well that the minister’s response will always be: ‘This is not a determination I make but a determination for the experts to make.’ Politicians are not those medical experts. We are not given that job to do. We do not currently decide which of those drugs could be available in this country, and I do not see why this one should necessarily be treated any differently. Medical experts currently decide how safe a particular drug is and whether it should be available in this country. That process should be consistent for all drugs—and, to date, that has been the case.

Many myths have been brought into this debate. As I said a little earlier, I have been saddened and a bit frustrated by the level of hysteria that a small number of people—nevertheless, loudly—have been trying to bring into the argument, confusing many people who have very sincere and deeply held views. We have heard the comments made last night and today by the member for Hughes and I will not go over them again. We have also heard the member for Lindsay—I think it was—begin to debate the issue of adoption of children from China while asking a question about the comments of the member for Hughes and about this discussion generally.

We know, as the member for Jagajaga and other members in this House have said, that the Minister for Health and Ageing has said that the use of RU486 will lead to ‘backyard miscarriages if unscrupulous doctors prescribe these drugs for desperate women’. I find that particularly offensive. Doctors have no more reason to be irresponsible with this drug than with any other drug. I think it also reflects adversely on women, in whom we need to place some trust.

Those who want to see the authority for this drug remain with the minister—particularly some of those on the government side—have argued, in respect of the amendments, that government accountability is paramount and the only way to maintain that principle is for the Minister for Health and Ageing to maintain his role with this particular drug. I do not mind if we have factually based arguments or debates in this regard, but I do mind desperately when we start to hear what I would call nothing other than hysterically funny comments. Comments have been made about the faceless people who run the TGA, as if it is some secret society, and that the only way we can have accountability is for the Minister for Health and Ageing to have his hands on this particular process.

Here in my electorate in Canberra, we have been screaming out for government accountability to, in fact, remove some faceless people from procedure. The National Capital Authority comes to mind immediately, where the minister for territories has been absolutely hopeless in making certain decisions on behalf of this town, saying, ‘It’s the NCA who do it; the NCA has the decision’—and that is the end of the line. There is a certain hypocrisy in running an argument when it suits you and in ducking out of it when it does not. The government continually slide away from accountability, pushing everything in front of public servants—and anyone else, for that matter—but some of them still stand up and run this argument in relation to this particular question. I find that just so hypocritical.

I want to finish with two comments. I want to thank very sincerely those people from my electorate who have contacted me by email, phone and letter with their views on this issue. There have been many of them and their views have come from all different sides of the debate. I have to say that the majority have been in support of what I am about to do, but I want to thank all of them. It is part of our democratic process and to all
of those people I intend, where at all possible, to send a reply, explaining to them, regardless of their stance, the decision I have taken and why I have taken it.

I reject the two amendments that have been put forward by the member for Bowman and the member for Lindsay. I support and endorse the bill in its entirety. I hope that, at the end of this process, all in this place will continue to hold regard for each other, which will enhance the democratic process in which we find ourselves. I hope that those who decide to inject some unwanted hysteria into the debate cease to do so once the vote is taken, no matter what the outcome is, and that we can get on with doing the best we can for our communities accordingly.

Mr PYNE (Sturt—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing) (8.12 pm)—I will be voting against the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005. Much has been said in the Senate and the media regarding what this debate is about. To me, this debate is about making abortion more readily available than it is. I will not vote for a bill that could potentially make access to abortion more readily available than it is now.

The effect of the bill is to remove the capacity for the Minister for Health and Ageing to declare a product a restricted good under the Therapeutic Goods Administration Act and to repose all power in the TGA in relation to potential restricted goods. The only product currently declared a restricted good is RU486 in its application as an abortifacient. RU486 induces a miscarriage leading to an abortion in the first three months of pregnancy; therefore, this debate is about abortion.

I understand that there will be abortion in this country and I do not support a return to the dark days of backyard abortions and the like. But I do think late-term abortions are wrong. I do think it is a travesty that, in hospitals around Australia today, babies are being born and living after 21 weeks of gestation and, in other parts of the same hospital, babies of the same gestation and longer are having their lives brought to an end. I do believe that a woman having to see her doctor and go through a surgical procedure performed by a doctor gives her time to pause, reflect and change her mind.

The hope of the proponents of this bill is that it will remove to the TGA a decision that is currently in the hands of the Minister for Health and Ageing. They believe that RU486 should not be treated differently from any other drug. But the proponents of this bill are missing a vital element: RU486 is not like any other drug. It is not a therapeutic product; it is an abortifacient. It ends life. It does not assist people to get better, grow older, improve their quality of life or remove pain, like other therapeutic products. It inhibits therapy, it induces miscarriage and it leads to the death of a potential human being. For that reason alone, this power should remain with the health minister.

The people elect us to make tough decisions. We have to stand or fall by those decisions at the ballot box. The same cannot be said of the good officers of the TGA. The TGA has the remit to assess and regulate therapeutic products. It is an agency of technicians and scientists, not of ethicists. Every member of this House is many things, including an ethicist. RU486 is an abortifacient. Its use necessarily involves an ethical or moral decision. It is not aspirin or penicillin or a new surgical device. It is not like any other drug. To treat it like any other drug is to propagate a fallacy. As politicians it is our job to make these decisions. The public expects leadership from us on ethical matters.
Our opinion informs theirs and vice versa. They elect us to lead, not to dissemble.

It is worse than the ostrich with its head in the sand for us to pass off decisions of this nature to the TGA. It is irresponsible. It is worse than a crime of omission; it is a crime of commission. There are amendments being put that would both have the effect in different ways of making a decision of the health minister, in the case of the member for Lindsay, or a decision of the TGA, in the case of the member for Bowman, disallowable instruments in either house of parliament. I will support either of those amendments in turn because they are an improvement on the member for Moore’s bill. They at least contain an element of parliamentary oversight and, in the case of the member for Lindsay’s amendments, a degree of ministerial responsibility. They recognise that there is an ethical aspect to the use of abortifacients and that we have a responsibility as politicians to use our judgment and experience to decide on these matters.

We are all informed by our experiences, our upbringing, our education and our knowledge—and, in many cases, our faith. Sometimes in this debate there has been a tendency to imply that someone who has a particular viewpoint holds it because they are of a particular religious persuasion. It is an ignorant point of view. Those who do not have a particular religious faith—be they atheists, agnostics or simply lapsed Christians—do not have a monopoly on dispassion. They do not hold the holy grail of objectivity. Those people are as informed by their experiences, upbringing, education and knowledge as anyone else.

I do not hold to the view that a Christian cannot approach the issue of abortion objectively any more than I subscribe to the view that an atheist is someone who does not have a value system that places a premium on human life. Both attitudes are insulting and wrong. But I do believe that Christianity has been the single most important force for good in the history of mankind simply because its central tenet is to do to others as you would have done to yourself. That does not mean that churches that represent Christianity are not without fault, but the implication that a health minister cannot be trusted with decisions on abortifacients because they happen to be a practising Christian is shallow and false.

Incidentally, the simply truth is that there has been no application to register RU486 as an abortifacient in Australia throughout the tenure of the first two health ministers of this government. The move to take away this power began before any application was made to use RU486 as an abortifacient in this country. The power to declare an abortifacient a restricted good should remain with the minister. The longstanding Westminster principle of the executive being responsible to the parliament for their decisions will be maintained by voting to maintain the status quo—and I would urge the House to do so.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler) (8.18 pm)—I want to speak in favour of the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 and against the amendments that have been moved or foreshadowed. The debate about RU486 has not been properly represented. This debate has been corrupted and hijacked in ways that were predicted by many. Firstly, I will put what this debate is not about. It is not about abortion. That is within the control of the states. It is also not about whether RU486 should be approved. It is about the process of approval and whether it should be subject to ministerial discretion or whether it should be, like other drugs, subject to the approval of the TGA.
Egos and morals have muddied what should have been a clear debate about good governance around the process of assessing the safety of a drug and approving its use in this country. It should have been simply about correcting the politics of what is a clouded past which led to the introduction of this as an exception—about clearing away the political hangover and placing the decision about the health of Australians back in the right hands, namely the TGA. This debate should not have been nor should it continue to be about abortion.

We have had the debate on abortion in this country, and overwhelmingly the public supports a woman’s right to choose. Australian women have fought this fight before and have won. Women have fought for their right to choose and have control over their bodies in consultation with their doctors. In many ways, we are indebted to the struggle undertaken by those women. They fought long and hard to stop women having to resort to dangerous backyard abortions—because abortions will take place; they always have. The issue is whether or not they take place safely in the interests of those women.

At the moment abortion is safely and legally available in Australia. Abortion in Australia is regulated by the states. It is not the role of this parliament to interfere with state policy and law, nor is it the role of this parliament to curtail the regulatory scope of the TGA. Decisions about the health of all Australians need to be made on the basis of medical evidence by experts charged with this role of risk assessment—namely, the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

The word ‘therapeutical’ has been bandied about in this debate, used by some to further cloud what should be simply issues of process. It has been used by some to imply that the nature of the work that the TGA does is marginal. It has been implied that the TGA can only assess restorative drugs. The TGA is charged with the task of assessing the safety of every other drug used in Australia—50,000 drugs which Australians rely on every day.

One of the issues underpinning this debate has been the issue of risk and the notion of an acceptable risk to women’s health. Numerous professionals have argued that RU486 constitutes a relatively low safety risk. The AMA has argued that the drug certainly is safe and notes that over one million women have been treated worldwide. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has noted that there is a substantial body of literature establishing the safety and efficacy of mifepristone, while the World Health Organisation included RU486 on the list of essential medicines, describing abortion—surgical or medical—as one of the safest medical procedures. Indeed, RU486 is extensively used and has been approved by 35 countries, including the UK, France, the US, Spain and New Zealand. The fact remains, however, that these theses, endorsements or otherwise are best evaluated by experts, not politicians.

The TGA’s risk management role means that it is specifically charged with identifying, assessing and evaluating the risks posed by the goods which it regulates. The TGA’s own report states that it will apply any measures necessary for treating the risks posed and monitoring and reviewing the risks over time. The TGA is charged with this role by the government. It is more than qualified to evaluate the risks associated with RU486, unlike me or the Minister for Health and Ageing.

The amendment proposed by the member for Lindsay is more about staving off another split in the coalition’s ranks than about making an informed decision about this drug.
There is no need for the parliament to again consider the decisions reached by the TGA in relation to RU486. Yes, politicians are accountable to their constituents and the TGA is not, but politicians do not have the necessary expertise to assess the safety of a drug, unlike the health experts appointed by the government to do exactly that. If a woman is faced with an unwanted pregnancy, she is the best person to assess the moral implications of that pregnancy, just as the TGA is the best group of professionals to assess the safety of her various termination options. I have always advocated, and will continue to advocate, that decisions regarding women’s health issues should not be made by politicians; they should be made by women themselves in consultation with their doctors. I do not believe that any man can understand what an unfortunate, regrettable, difficult situation women can find themselves in.

I have been emailed by a number of people of various views asking that I vote for or against this legislation. This is a conscience vote, and I intend to exercise that in accordance with my own conscience. I respect the fact that some people would not agree with me, but I think it is unfortunate that some of the contributions to this debate—on both sides, it must be said—have not been constructive and have not shown respect. I think it is absurd that the minister for health has attempted to make this an issue about himself. It is not about him; it is about women in Australia and their right to choose what happens to their body at a particular point in time which is difficult for them. I do not believe that the disagreement with the minister for health is about his religion and his Catholicism. I know that people of religious views have different views here, but I do not believe that people’s objections are about the fact that Tony Abbott is a Catholic. I am half Italian and half Irish and belong to a party that has its foundations in and a great closeness over its history to Catholicism. I think it is about the fact—and if you look at the Senate vote, you will see that it has reflected this—that men, in particular, do not have the same understanding, nor can we, as women have on this issue. I am sure that, if there were a women-only vote in this House, there would be a considerably higher majority than there will be, I hope, when the vote is carried here. That dimension has been an unfortunate reality.

The comments by the member for Hughes have also been unfortunate. I find it astounding that, at a press conference supporting an amendment to this bill, she should raise the issue of Australia becoming an Islamic nation over the next 50 years. They were inflammatory comments designed to create fear and division in the community. I think the comments were very unfortunate, inaccurate and best not said.

There have also been contributions on the other side of the debate, including the wearing by Senator Nettle of a T-shirt carrying the slogan ‘Tony Abbott, keep your rosaries off my ovaries’. I believe that is highly offensive to Catholics and that it is entirely inappropriate for someone who is an elected senator in the Australian parliament to wear such a slogan. If it were a similarly offensive statement against Judaism or against Islam, it would be equally outrageous and might have provoked a greater outcry.

I really think that we have a responsibility to have a responsible debate about these issues. I commend the fact that most people on both sides of this House and on both sides of this debate have done just that. I urge the parliament to support the bill and not to be distracted by amendments that are designed to confuse the issue and have a revisiting of the bill. I urge them to reject the amendments and support the bill because, surely, the TGA is the body in Australia that should have
scrutiny of the health and medical treatments available to Australian women.

Mr LINDSAY (Herbert) (8.30 pm)—I would like to start my contribution to the debate on the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 by observing how interesting it is that in a conscience vote matter the quality of the debate in this place certainly rises above the norm. I found it interesting listening to the member for Grayndler, who is normally a left-wing communist in this place—and that is being kind.

Mr Albanese—Oh, come on!

Mr LINDSAY—I withdraw that remark—though it was said in a kindly way, Member for Grayndler. The contribution of the member for Grayndler was very thoughtful. I am actually paying him a compliment on the way that he even-handedly dealt with these particular issues. I found myself agreeing almost entirely with what he said.

I want to thank the many people who have contacted me with their contributions and assistance, as they have contacted many members of parliament. I have certainly taken note of all the correspondence that I have received, and it has been quite voluminous. However, those who have written or emailed me saying, ‘If you’re not going to vote the way I want you to vote, I’m not going to vote for you at the next election’ do themselves no good at all. When members of parliament come into this place they vote as they think they should vote, not in accordance with whether or not they are going to get another vote from somebody else. I say to those people: ‘You devalue your contributions by threatening that action.’

The contributions, help and information that I have received have come from those on both sides of the debate, and have been very passionate. It has been interesting to hear those contributions. Those who want this bill to be voted down will say things like, ‘This affects the issue of abortion and the very fabric of society’; that government is set up in this country so that parliament and its members are directly accountable to the whole community; that the government sets up consultative regulatory bodies, such as the TGA, to advise and administer on its behalf but that these bodies are not directly accountable to the community or the electorate and are not the government itself—rather they are simply the enabling machinery of government; and that the ultimate result of such undermining in allowing administrative bodies to make decisions is to weaken the institution of government and, in final effect, to begin to make a route to anarchy.

Government has many departments and many advisory bodies, and I think it is clear to the parliament that we do rely on advisory bodies and government departments to make a number of technical decisions on behalf of the government. And they do it well. It would be impossible to have the parliament review every decision of every advisory body in every government department. It just would not be possible. Parliament would be dysfunctional. So I reject that line of reasoning.

Those on the other side of the debate say that there is overwhelming evidence, based on numerous studies and clinical trials, to support the statement that RU486 is safe and efficacious for medical abortion. They go on to give all sorts of reasons why that is so. I found it fascinating to get two pieces of correspondence from two doctors, based on their experience in the Northern Territory. The first doctor was from the Darwin hospital. He said:

I write as a medical practitioner ... working in Darwin. I regularly consult in remote Aboriginal communities as part of the Surgical Outreach Program of the Royal Darwin Hospital.
I am concerned that ... RU486 has been recommended for women in rural and remote locations. In fact it has been claimed that it will fill a gap in abortion services in these areas. There are a number of reasons why such a proposal is not only ill-considered, but dangerous.

The doctor goes on to argue against what this bill proposes. Equally, I have a letter from a medical practitioner who is now living in my home city of Townsville. He has some experience with remote area medicine in northwest Queensland and the Northern Territory. He says:

I write because I believe that the drug ... RU486 ought to be available for the patients that I have looked after. I believe that it is quite anomalous that Australian women do not have the option to use ... this drug whereas therapeutic surgical termination of pregnancy is available in Australia and both the medical option using [RU486] as well as surgery is available for women in comparable countries overseas.

The specific ban on this drug seemed to me to be quite an extraordinary measure motivated by Senator Harradine. It seems that this senator wanted to inflict his minority world view in terms of abortion on the general Australian population, but could not succeed in an outright ban on the procedure, but because of the political situation at the time was able to impose a restriction on this drug which was without medical basis.

My life experience over my 56 years has shown me how devastating it can be to mother, child and society to have unwanted pregnancies which are continued to term because of the unavailability of appropriate therapeutic abortion after due counselling. I therefore strongly urge you to vote for the lifting of the ban on this drug.

So the parliament and all of its parliamentarians are faced with conflicting views from the medical profession. But I appreciate receiving those views.

Perhaps the most compelling view that I received was from the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia. All of us have received a lot of correspondence from the churches and from their parishioners. I think the Uniting Church are very even-handed in this debate. The Uniting Church start off by saying:

The Uniting Church believes that human life is God given from the beginning. We believe that all human beings are made in the image of God and that we are called to respect the sacredness of life.

We also believe Christians are called to respond to life with compassion and generosity.

When abortion is practised indiscriminately it damages respect for human life.

And I think that is true. The Uniting Church continue:

However, we live in a broken world where people face difficult decisions. Respect for the sacredness of life means advocating for the needs of women as well as the unborn child.

This is the key to their view:

We reject two extreme positions: that abortion should never be available; and that abortion should be regarded as simply another medical procedure.

It is not possible to hold one position that can be applied in every case because people's circumstances will always be unique.

It is important that women have the space they need to make an appropriate decision after careful consideration. The current abortion laws allow women to do this in whatever circumstances they face.

The Uniting Church go on to say:

Women must be free to discuss their situation before they make a decision. The Church needs to be a place where such discussions can happen. We can offer spiritual, moral and pastoral support to a woman at this time.

Whilst we encourage our Ministers to remind people of the sacredness of life, the Church's role should be to offer care and support leading up to and following a decision, not stand in judgment.

The church then conclude by saying:

The decision to have an abortion is not just a moral issue but a social one. While the current debate attempts to pass moral judgment on the act itself, it ignores the many emotional, physical,
The Uniting Church hopes that those engaged in this debate do not lose sight of the complexity of the issues.

I can assure the church that I have not lost sight of those particular issues. My decision on this bill is clear cut. I believe that there should not be a situation where just one drug comes up for the approval of the minister. We should have consistent policy. All drugs needing to be available in Australia should go through the TGA. I leave it to the TGA, the professionals and the health professionals to decide whether they should be prescribed.

I note that RU486 is also used in the treatment of brain tumours and prostate cancer. It would be a shame if those people who had brain tumours and prostate cancer could not have access to a drug that may help them enjoy a better quality of life.

So I leave it to the medical profession and to the women of this country to make decisions as needed. I mightily respect the Uniting Church for their even-handed view on this particular issue in such difficult circumstances. I will be supporting the bill when it goes to a vote.

Ms CORCORAN (Isaacs) (8.41 pm)—The Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005 is about whether or not the health minister should have the authority to stop the use of a particular group of drugs in this country. Before any drugs can be used in Australia they must be assessed by the Therapeutic Goods Administration. If the TGA is satisfied that the drug meets standards for quality, safety, efficacy and timely availability, it approves the use of the drug within this country. Part of the TGA’s assessment process is an evaluation of the risk associated with the drug—that is, the potential of the drug to do harm to those it is intended to help and to others who may come into contact with it. The assessed risk of the drug then determines whether the drug is registered or listed. Registered drugs must be used under a doctor’s supervision; listed drugs do not require a doctor’s supervision.

At present a certain group of drugs—ones that are intended to induce an abortion—are treated differently from all other drugs in Australia. Drugs in this group, of which RU486 is the one most commonly talked about, may not be evaluated, registered, listed or imported without the specific approval of the health minister of the day. The minister must notify parliament of any decision he or she makes to approve an application for a drug in this category to be evaluated by the TGA. The minister does not have to report any decision he or she makes not to approve an application for evaluation.

It should be noted that under current arrangements there is no technical reason why someone—a doctor or a sponsor—cannot apply for permission for the drug to be used in Australia for circumstances other than abortion. In fact, no-one has applied—until, I understand, very recently. It is thought that the reason for this is that no-one is prepared to go to the significant costs and effort involved in an application to the TGA when the minister can just dismiss the application. The effect of the added step of gaining ministerial approval has effectively been a ban on these drugs since 1996.

The object of this legislation we are debating today is to bring this group of drugs into line with all other drugs in the country in terms of the process for approving or not approving the availability of these drugs within Australia. The discussion within the community about this bill has been broadened beyond the technical object of the bill to include discussion about abortion and
whether or not we ought to allow abortion in this country. It is understandable that the debate has broadened because of the nature of these drugs—they are, after all, intended to bring on an abortion, and this is a very controversial issue.

I, and no doubt most other MPs in this place, have been lobbied by a number of people on both sides of the abortion debate. Some people want us to pass this bill; others want us to vote it down. The people who are asking us to vote this bill down do so because of their strong views that abortion is wrong. One argument for voting against this bill is that we—that is, this parliament—should not pass responsibility for decision making about abortion to unelected officials. It is worth noting in passing that abortion is a state issue, but I do not want to get technical about it, because the principle of the thing is what is important.

Let me deal with that side of the discussion right now. It can be dealt with very simply. This bill is just not about whether or not abortion should be allowed. It is important to understand that this bill does not change any current laws about abortion. This bill does not make an abortion easier to get or more difficult to get. This bill does not change the existing laws that govern abortion. It is also important to make the point that passage of this bill does not mean that RU486 will be immediately available or that it will be rammed down the throats of unwilling women, which are some of the things we have heard. What this bill will do, if passed, is simply put the decision about whether or not a group of drugs which are designed to induce an abortion are to be made available to people in Australia.

By passing this bill parliament is not abrogating its responsibility to make decisions about important matters—abortion in this case. The decision about whether or not we as a society approve of abortion is not part of this bill. This bill simply allows the TGA to decide whether or not a drug that brings on an abortion is safe to use. It does not alter how the decision to abort or not to abort is taken.

If this bill is passed by parliament, the question of whether or not people in Australia have access to the drug RU486 and other like drugs will be decided by the TGA. It will be decided by scientists and experts, and the decision will be based on the grounds of safety. Access to the drug will no longer require the approval of the present or indeed any future health minister. If this drug passes the strict tests of the TGA, it will mean that women—with their doctor’s guidance and advice—may be able to choose to have a medical abortion instead of a surgical abortion. I want to stress again that the medical abortion will be available only if the TGA judges that the drug meets Australian standards for quality and safety. The effects of this bill can come into being only when and if a decision to undergo an abortion is taken. Once a decision is taken to undergo an abortion, this bill if passed may broaden the options available to that woman and her doctor.

An argument has been put to me by some people that this bill ought to be rejected on the grounds that the drug is unproven or unsafe. The assessment of the safety of this drug is actually the point of the bill. The bill will allow experts in the field to make knowledgeable and scientifically based assessments of the safety of the drug. The argument that passage of this bill will increase the number of abortions in Australia is hard to counter because by definition we have no Australian data to consider. However, experience in countries where medical abortion is available suggests that the availability of medical abortion does not increase the overall rate of abortion.
I would like to point out another matter which is not often raised. RU486 can be used in the treatment of a range of conditions, including inoperable meningiomas, endometriosis, fibroids, metastatic breast cancers and bipolar disorder. This is a side of the current laws which is not often highlighted. The effective ban on RU486 has denied this drug to people who may want to use it for purposes other than bringing on an abortion. One constituent has contacted me because she has severe endometriosis. Her doctor advises her that RU486 is probably the only option she has available to her now. In her case the disease has progressed beyond the point of being able to be operated on. She is very keen to see this drug made available to her and to others in her situation.

I would like to thank all those people in Isaacs who have contacted me about this bill. I know that by supporting this bill I have not followed the wishes of some of my constituents but that I have followed the wishes of others. I know that there are strong and genuinely held views on both sides of this debate. I have read and responded to all the emails and letters from those in Isaacs. I have had a number of telephone conversations with constituents who hold views on both sides of this debate, and I hope and I am sure that these conversations will continue. No-one has the monopoly on wisdom and we all have to weigh up the arguments and come to a decision. I have tried to make my decision carefully and honestly and after listening to the arguments for and against. I will be rejecting the amendments that have been proposed and moved to this bill, and I will be supporting this bill.

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (8.48 pm)—At the outset, let me say that I am opposed to the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU486) Bill 2005. I see the current situation as being the most desirable situation. However, I would be prepared to support the amendment moved by the honourable member for Lindsay and, were that to fail, I would support the amendment proposed by the honourable member for Bowman.

I oppose this bill on a number of grounds. Firstly, I believe that the drug RU486 is medically unsafe and unproven. Secondly, I believe that as elected representatives we do have an obligation to play a role in making decisions on issues of great moral importance. Thirdly, on a personal note, I am opposed to abortion.

I congratulate all of those honourable members who are participating in this debate, regardless of the position they are individually taking, because by having a conscience vote on an important issue such as this we are proving that the parliament of Australia is working and that we are able to come along here and think through the issues. While we might on occasions—and undoubtedly we will on this occasion—reach differing views, I think we are all being honest. The Australian community would expect each of us to be honest, to think through the various issues and the ramifications of our vote and to make a decision accordingly.

The issue of RU486 has been described as a number of things. It has been described as a moral issue, as a religious issue and as a policy issue. At this stage in the debate I have been extraordinarily disappointed by how some members have been targeted because of their religious faith. The Minister for Health and Ageing is a person of very high principle, as are others on both sides of the House. I do not believe that contributions to this debate or how one is going to vote ought to be publicly based on whether or not one is a member of the Roman Catholic Church. This drug, RU486, is a life and death issue and for that reason the power to approve the drug in Australia in my view
should remain with the minister for health. It has been this way since 1996 and no-one objected when Minister Wooldridge had that responsibility nor when Minister Patterson had it.

Statistics from those countries that already allow the use of RU486 show that between one in 20 and one in 12 women who are administered the drug will require urgent post-abortion care. Common side effects include considerable bleeding, surgery and, in some cases, the need for blood transfusions.

But there should be more concern over the number of deaths of women as a direct result of taking RU486. There has been a figure mentioned of five fatalities around the world as a direct result of taking RU486. From research on the internet, it appears that there have been deaths in Britain, France and the United States since the drug first became available some years ago. Personally, I wonder if the actual death rate could be higher.

Once taken, RU486 must be followed up two days later with a second drug, Cytotec, commonly known in Australia as misoprostol, which is the clean-up drug. A story under the headline ‘No Magic Pill’ on the US website National Review Online noted:

... when taken alone, RU-486 causes a complete abortion only about 60 percent of the time, leaving a patient vulnerable to serious infection and hemorrhaging.

The follow-up drug, misoprostol, triggers contractions in the uterus, with the specific purpose of expelling the baby to be aborted, thereby reducing the chance of deadly infections. But this drug also comes with a significant risk of complications. This drug was never designed to be part of a ‘killer couple’ in chemical abortions. This drug was actually designed to treat stomach ulcers. Side effects of misoprostol can include reduced blood flow to the uterus, possible rupture of the uterus—requiring surgery to repair the damage or even a hysterectomy—severe pelvic pain, retained placenta, severe genital bleeding, shock and, in the worst cases, death. It is no wonder that the silent partner of RU486 in this debate comes with the following warning from its manufacturer, Pfizer:

We would not recommend use outside TGA-endorsed indication and at this stage that involves stomach ulcers.

That is a quote from the *Australian* of 31 January this year. Perhaps there should be an investigation into the availability of this drug to aid the abortion of unwanted babies. With regard to the deaths resulting from infection caused by the unsuccessful use of RU486, one commentator noted that they may go down in the records as being unrelated to the drug itself. I quote nationalreview.com of 26 September 2003:

... RU-486 did not cause the septic shock which killed a woman taking part in Canadian drug trials. And that’s technically true, of course. The infections are caused by dead human embryos or parts thereof which are not fully expelled.

It is difficult to ignore the emotion associated with this issue, because it involves the termination of life. I personally believe that life begins at conception. That is a personal view that I have. The predominant argument by those supporting the provisions of this bill has been that the approval of such a drug should not be left in the hands of a politician—that the decision on what is essentially a medical issue should be left up to those with medical expertise, such as those in the Therapeutic Goods Administration. The opposing view—the view I hold and that I enunciated a moment ago—is that those who are elected to parliament are thereby given a mandate to make tough decisions. This is particularly important given the type of risk documented in chemical abortions using RU486 and misoprostol in combination.

The minister for health does not make decisions based on whim. He would receive
advice from the professionals involved in the Therapeutic Goods Administration and other sources before he would ultimately come to a decision. It is wrong to say that the minister is not qualified and that he does not act on advice. He certainly would never make a decision without taking into account all the advice before him.

It is important that elected members listen to their constituents and take the public’s views on board before making a decision on how they will vote. This is a very interesting issue. Like other honourable members, I have received a number of letters and phone calls at my electorate office regarding this issue, and overwhelmingly people have expressed their views against the legalisation of the RU486 drug. The people in my electorate office tell me—and I scrutinised and questioned them very closely—that we have not received one letter, email or phone call from a constituent in support of this bill. I find that amazing but it is actually the case. We have received no indications of support from people in the community. The majority of constituents express their stance based on moral grounds; others base their reasoning on both moral and medical grounds.

If I were to base my vote solely on the opinions of those constituents who have taken the time to contact my office about this issue, I would have no choice but to vote against this bill, because this bill would work towards the legalisation of RU486 in Australia. As I said, however, I have looked very carefully through the provisions of this bill. I have looked at the two amendments before the House. RU486 is a matter of life and death. The final decisions should be left in the hands of those who are in a position to balance the many varying opinions with the scientific facts, in order to come up with the right decision. I believe that the current situation is the ideal one, but I see the position advocated by the honourable member for Lindsay as being an acceptable compromise. The minister would make the decision; he would continue to receive advice from the Therapeutic Goods Administration; he would have to receive written advice from that administration prior to giving approval or refusal; and his decision would be subject to disallowance by each house of the parliament.

I respect everyone who has expressed views similar to mine and in opposition to mine. This is a very healthy debate. I plead with my colleagues in the chamber to either reject the bill or support the amendment moved by the honourable member for Lindsay.

**QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER**

**Deputy Speaker’s Rulings**

The SPEAKER (8.59 pm)—I would like to clarify the final comment that I made in relation to the first part of the question from the member for Wills this afternoon. It is a longstanding practice that Speakers do not comment on the interpretation of standing orders as applied by other occupants of the chair.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The SPEAKER—Order! It being almost 9.00 pm, I propose the question:

That the House do now adjourn.

**Abortion**

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (8.59 pm)—Tonight and over the next few days the House will be debating the repeal of ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486. I do not want to speak on the bill itself in this adjournment debate, but I do want to put on record the content of a number of discussions I have had with people from my electorate, not specifically about RU486 or even the rights and wrongs of having an abortion but on the extraordinary pressure on families that
make it harder and harder each year for women to decide to have a child.

I spent much of this week phoning people in my electorate, both for and against the bill, who have contacted my office. Because I have publicly stated that I am likely to vote for the bill, I thought it was appropriate to spend most of my time talking to those who oppose my position and telling them personally of my intention to vote for the bill. My concern mostly was with those whose opposition to the bill stems from their opposition to abortion and from a profound belief that life begins at conception. For them, the Senate decision, the possible decision of this House on Thursday and my likely support for the bill are profoundly morally offensive. While likely to vote for the bill, I deeply regret the hurt and grief that will result among a group of very good people I represent in this place whose strong opposition stems from good human qualities and in many cases a profound religious faith. This faith is not limited to one religion. This is not just a Catholic issue but extends also through the Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim communities.

While there is an abyss between us on the rights and wrongs of abortion itself, there is considerable common ground about the seriousness of the decision that a woman makes to abort a child and the need for us as a community to consider the growing pressure on women and the circumstances that they find themselves in that make it so difficult for them to proceed with a pregnancy and to choose instead the option of abortion. Even if we do not agree on making abortion illegal, we do agree that we would like to see a reduction in the number of abortions by finding ways to make child raising a real option for a greater number of women, and men for that matter.

My phone conversations this week quickly moved from the specifics of the bill itself to the character of a society that does not value the role of the mother sufficiently and a working world that does not value the role of the father or the mother—a society that year by year makes it harder for families to balance their roles as parents and workers and to commit to a second or third child, or even a first child.

In my first year in this place I have seen bill after bill that increases pressure on parents and I have seen failure to act on issues that create sometimes insurmountable barriers to families trying to balance their lives. Australians are working longer hours, the longest in the OECD. Around 35 per cent of Sydney fathers spend more time commuting than they spend with their children. In June last year the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission revealed that the hours of paid and unpaid work parents do each day causes an alarming level of exhaustion, with the majority of parents reporting feeling ‘always’ or ‘nearly always’ stressed. Child-care costs have risen five times faster than the consumer price index in the last financial year. Parents are reporting incredibly long child-care waiting lists, particularly for long day-care for children from zero to two. Almost 98,000 mothers who want to work are unable to start within four weeks because child care and family factors prevent them from doing so. Another 160,500 women who want to work or work more hours are not looking for work due to child-care and family factors. A lack of jobs with suitable conditions was the reason another 80,000 have difficulty obtaining work or more hours, leaving the ABS to note the obvious, that this ‘may reflect the need for more flexible working arrangements’.

The Howard government has presided over massive casualisation of the workforce, with one in three women working as casuals
with no access to paid sick leave, annual holidays, public holidays or family leave. The new IR laws will drive more women into irregular low-paid employment. Yet, across Australia, there are only eight childcare centres open Saturday and Sunday and only two that are open 24 hours. Regular part-time work with family-friendly hours is hard to get. Around 60 per cent of women working full time would cut back to part time if part-time work were available.

Women and their partners consider these and many more matters when they make the decisions for their families—the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In the report It’s not for lack of wanting kids... from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the figures are stark. The vast majority of people wanted more children than they expected to have and expected to have more than they actually had. There is a stark difference between the ideal, the expectation and reality. The decisions men and women make on whether to become parents for the first time or one more time is increasingly more about the harsh realities of modern family life than their dreams of family. The sooner we start getting serious about family the better.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation: Heywire

Mr FORREST (Mallee) (9.04 pm)—I would like to highlight the achievements of two young Aussies in my electorate. They were here last week and I was really thrilled that you, Mr Speaker, drew attention to the presence of members of the ABC’s Heywire program. I want to highlight two stories presented by two of my constituents who came along. Heywire is a wonderful program organised by the ABC. I think they ought to be commended. They are often under attack, the old ABC, but they do this program extremely well, assisted by a large number of sponsors and supporters, including the Australian government.

The first of my young constituents was Jessica Grimble. She comes from Brimpaen. You would know where that part of the world is, Mr Speaker—it is not far from your part of the world. Her parents are fine-wool growers at the foothills of the Grampians. The students are required to present a story of an issue that is important to them. Jessica’s story was quite timely. She recalled bushfires, at the age of six. Given what the Grampians mountains have just experienced with horrific bushfires recently, her story brings home a lot of memories to many of the people down that way. Her story started:

Like a scene off Mars, the blood-red sky loomed menacingly over the entire western Grampians region. Threatening. Intimidating. Horrifying.

For those people who have never had the horrifying experience of being in a bushfire with the kind of ferocity and tenacity that these fires have, that says it all. She finished her story by talking about the country’s harshness and unpredictability. But it is ‘in my genes’ she said. Further:

A part of me will always remain here. No matter where I go or what I do, I will always be a country girl at heart.

This is typical of many of the stories that the young people present.

The second of the young people—and it was a delight to meet with them and spend some time with them last week—was Rosalie Kelly. Rosalie hails from Quambatook. Quambatook is the home of the singer-songwriter of some note, John Williamson, who wrote that great song Mallee Boy. Rosalie wrote an interesting story about Mick’s chips. This was a fish and chip shop in Quambatook—long since gone now if you visit Quambatook today; it is typical of so many country towns which have suffered a great decline. She wrote, accordingly:
You can search near and far, but you will never find a serving of chips that taste as good as Mick Barry’s chips. The taste is unbelievable. It is quite a comical rendition she made as she remembered fondly Mick’s chips. She finished her story by saying:

It has been a few months since that miserable day that the cafe closed down, but still the cravings are alive in my taste buds. For years I will continue to search, but I doubt that I will ever find a serving of chips that are even close to the taste of Quamby’s famous ‘Mick’s chips’. I think she reflects the sad sentiments of many country people in small rural towns who see business after business disappear, the people who run them moving into the stronger and more provincial centres. She highlights the great challenge we have in this parliament to deliver policy that can favour and encourage far better economic outcomes for our small rural communities. I am delighted to commend Jessica and Rosalie. I wish them well with their ongoing studies. Rosalie is studying in Kerang and Jessica is studying in Horsham. They have great aspirations about where they would like to take their future careers, and I wish them well. I am grateful for the opportunity to bring those stories to the attention of the House.

Adelaide Airport

Mr GEORGANAS (Hindmarsh) (9.09 pm)—I have raised issues associated with the Adelaide airport on many, many occasions now. I am very pleased to see that the Minister for Transport and Regional Services is in the House to hear first-hand what I have got to say. I am sure that some of my colleagues are growing tired of the noise I have been making about it, but they would certainly be more tired of the noise if they lived under the flight path or next to the new developments being built on airport land, with no jurisdiction from local or state planning authorities.

Residents contact me on a daily basis regarding the airport. Without a doubt it is one of the single biggest issues affecting residents in the electorate of Hindmarsh. With the Adelaide airport right in the middle of the electorate of Hindmarsh, aircraft noise has always been a big issue for people living in the surrounding suburbs. Residents are tired of their children being woken up late at night and early in the morning and of not being able to hold a conversation every time a plane flies overhead.

For years I and the residents campaigned for a curfew and a noise insulation program, which we got. That was through our hard work on a residents group called the Adelaide Airport Action Group—

Mr Truss—And Chris Gallus!

Mr GEORGANAS—which I was proud to be the chair of for many, many years—well before Chris Gallus was the member for Hindmarsh and well before the curfew was brought in with enormous pressure from the Adelaide Airport Action Group.

These days we have the added concern of development on federal airport land. The Netley Residents Association and the Southern Lockleys Residents Association represent the areas that are most affected by the new airport developments. And by the new airport developments, I do not mean the new airport terminal that everyone is very keen to see open very soon. I do what I can to address residents’ concerns, as we all do in this House. I work closely with Adelaide Airport Ltd, I contact the minister—as I said, I am pleased he is in the chamber to hear what I have to say first-hand—and I support grassroots action by the residents to reduce the effect of airport noise and airport development on the local residents.

But in each case it is a David and Goliath battle. Residents have no real way of resolving their concerns or being heard by an inde-
ependent body. Take the Southern Lockleys Residents Association, for example. Members there, especially Mr Barry Sprecht, have tirelessly watched over the new developments on airport land. He has been horrified that, time after time, developments have gone up which appear to go against the development rules outlined in the Adelaide airport master plan. Now he is worried that the Airports Act review will lead to even less community consultation, with a suggestion that the major projects limit could be lifted from the current $10 million to $20 million.

Previously I have mentioned the residents who live next to the LG warehouse at Netley. They have complained about being woken at all hours of the night by activity at the warehouse. LG, on the other hand, say they do not operate through the night, as I was informed by LG warehouse management recently at a meeting. This is exactly the kind of issue that could be mediated by an independent body like an ombudsman.

Just last week I raised the ongoing concerns of residents in the Brooklyn Park and West Richmond areas, where homes right next to the airport are not insulated while homes further away are. These people in Brooklyn Park and West Richmond obviously feel hard done by. And why wouldn’t they? Homes further away from the airport have been insulated and yet their homes, which are bordering the airport, did not get consideration. The noise level is exactly the same as for the people in the street next to them. They are told that the decision not to insulate is based on scientific noise testing and flight paths, but they simply have to trust the authorities on that. Yet some of these same people have been told to cut down trees in their backyards because they are under the flight path. Again this is an area that an independent body like an ombudsman could look at and come up with a determination as to whether they are or are not.

Other more complex situations, like whether or not a development should even go ahead, could even be investigated. We could all rest easy that the ombudsman would be making independent decisions that properly balance the needs of residents and the need for economic development. For these reasons I am proposing that an independent authority be able to look into these issues. An airport ombudsman would be able to investigate complaints and make considered, reasonable decisions regarding airport activities. This is not a situation unique to Adelaide and I have no doubt that an airport ombudsman would be kept very, very busy with work throughout Australia. Certainly residents around the Brisbane, Perth and Sydney airports would put an airport ombudsman to very good use.

Given that there is no real legal obligation for airports that have been privatised on federal land to take any notice of local or state government planning requirements, it is clear that some other process of appeal or review needs to be made available to local residents. I have spoken with residents, and I have consulted with them about the idea of an airport ombudsman. (Time expired)

Ryan Electorate: Roads

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (9.14 pm)—In parliament today, on Valentine’s Day, I speak with great pride as the federal member for Ryan. One of the issues that crop up in my electorate, which of course I have the great privilege to represent in the Australian parliament, is Moggill Road—the heavily congested road that it is. Moggill Road is the lifeblood of the western suburbs in the Ryan electorate. It is a vital corridor in the daily lives of thousands of Ryan men and women. It is a vital corridor in the lives of thousands of mums and dads as they take their kids to school. It is a vital corridor in the lives of thousands of professionals heading into the
city and academics heading to the St Lucia campus of the University of Queensland.

Moggill Road is also in desperate need of heavy investment by the Queensland state Labor government. Since 1989, the state government of Queensland has been held by the Labor Party, with the exception of two years of the Borbidge coalition government. Queenslanders deserve better. The people of Ryan deserve better. The people of the state seat of Moggill deserve better than what they are getting from the Queensland government, which is falling down and falling apart. The people of the state seat of Indooroopilly deserve better. I call on the Labor state member for Indooroopilly, Ronan Lee, to get off his backside and call upon his colleagues and the Premier of Queensland to invest funds in Moggill Road, which is heavily congested.

In the parliament today I again totally reject and repudiate the call of the federal Labor member for Oxley, Mr Ripoll, to construct a bridge across the Brisbane River at Priors Pocket. Last year he called for a bridge to be built between his side of the river and the Ryan side of the river. I can certainly assure him that the people of Moggill, Pullenvale, Bellbowrie and indeed all of the suburbs from Chapel Hill and Kenmore right though to Indooroopilly, Taringa and Toowong would stand shoulder to shoulder with me in saying to the member for Oxley that he should consider his own electorate and invest his time in his affairs rather than trying to watch over the suburbs and lifestyle of Ryan.

Queensland roads are in desperate need of infrastructure. The Queensland government receives an enormous amount of money. It is important for the lifestyle of the people of Ryan, for the economy of the Ryan electorate and for those who go about their daily lives in Ryan—whether it is going to work, taking their kids to school or enjoying all the amenities of Brisbane—that Moggill Road is as free as possible. Queensland is a growing state, and it is high time that the Queensland government invested in the western suburbs of Brisbane. (Time expired)

Holt Electorate: Fountain Gate Centrelink Office

Healthy School Communities Program

Mr Byrne (Holt) (9.19 pm) I would like to speak about funding as well, but this
is actually federal government funding rather than some brawl between the states and feds about road funding. This is about federal government funding for a much-needed service that is accessed by many families in my electorate—that is, the Centrelink office at Fountain Gate. Fountain Gate may be familiar to some within this chamber. It is very famous for Kath and Kim. But it is also very famous for the number of families that live in the area. It has the highest rate of couples with dependent children in Australia, so there is much need for a Centrelink office where you can come into the office and access a service very quickly.

But I regret to inform this House that that is not the case at the Fountain Gate Centrelink office. In fact, I would like to speak of four instances where my constituents have had to wait unacceptable times for a service which they have paid their taxes for. The first example is that of Ms B, shall we say, who lives in Hampton Park. She specifically asked that I raise this matter in parliament. She personally waited in a queue at the Centrelink Fountain Gate family assistance office with her 78-year-old mother for 45 minutes. She saw an elderly gentleman struggle to remain standing after recent surgery. She also witnessed young mothers leaving with distressed children. More recently, she observed an elderly couple taking turns standing in a queue whilst the other took a rest. This is in a Centrelink office.

The complaints I have had from other members of the community show that this is not an isolated problem; it is in fact a widespread problem. I can give you another example, that of Ms V, shall we say, of Narre Warren. On Tuesday, 30 August 2005, Ms V went to the Centrelink family assistance office in Fountain Gate. She had been queuing for 45 minutes with her three-year-old son and was still not at the reception desk. Her son needed to use a bathroom. She had to leave the line and find a public toilet. She was told by Centrelink staff that, if nobody minded her spot, she would have to rejoin the queue at the back of the Centrelink office. This was a lady with a three-year-old son who had waited 45 minutes to lodge a form.

Another example is Mr H, shall we say, who spent an hour in the queue to get to the reception desk to drop off some forms about his disability support pension. The fourth instance that I cite to this House tonight is that of Mr W, who lives in Narre Warren South. Mr W came into my office on 29 July and told me that he had waited between 40 and 45 minutes in the queue to get to the Centrelink reception desk to provide information that his wife was going overseas for a period of time. He was a fairly fit man of 65, but the gentleman behind him in that queue was in his 70s and struggling to wait for such a period of time. I think everyone in this place would agree that anybody having to wait from 45 minutes to an hour to get access to a service that they pay taxes for is unacceptable.

Today the minister was making much of the fact that the government had improved services in this area, but there is clear evidence in this House tonight that that is not the case. Families in my electorate pay their taxes and, when they line up in a queue in a Centrelink office, they should not have to wait for one hour. A mother should not have to wait 45 minutes with her three-year-old son to be told she will have to join the back of the queue because Centrelink does not have a toilet. It is unacceptable. I call upon the responsible minister to do his job—he will be aware of this set of circumstances—and put appropriate funding into the area.

On a more positive note, I would like to speak about a fantastic local program which relates to healthy eating in schools. I will
give a brief background in the time that is left. Late last year, local food retailer Mr Anthony Cheeseman approached Maranatha Christian College in Endeavour Hills about managing and operating their canteen as a commercial venture that provides healthy food to students. The school agreed to the proposal and the 2006 school year has marked the beginning of this innovative program. On 2 February, I visited the school to see the program in action first hand. What I found was a canteen full of healthy foods for kids—no pies, chips or hotdogs. Most encouraging was the overwhelmingly positive response from the students to this change, which is a very good initiative.

The school community at Maranatha—in particular its principal, Andrew McKenzie—should be commended for making this decision and for getting more healthy food into the canteen. They are giving kids the best start in life so they can live better, learn better and grow up to be healthy adults. According to recent figures, around one in four Australian children aged between two and 17 is overweight or obese—double the prevalence recorded in 1986. This is a great local program that employs locals to provide a much needed service to the community. This program should be commended. The federal government has continued its Healthy School Communities program, and I urge it to continue to fund this worthwhile program. I congratulate Maranatha on its initiative.

Overseas Adoption

Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (9.24 pm)—I rise tonight to highlight a report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Services inquiry into the adoption of overseas children, which highlights some systematic problems in all states and territories that Australian couples are having when adopting children from overseas. It is not my normal practice to read all the reports that come out—unfortunately we do not have the time for that—and I did not sit on this particular inquiry, but the report was recommended to me and I am very glad that I did take the time to read it. I would urge other members in this place to do so also. It is a very timely piece of work. The chair of the inquiry, the member for Mackellar, has highlighted a general lack of support for adoption both local and intercountry in most of the state and territory welfare departments which are responsible for processing all adoption applications.

The chair added the lack of support ranged from indifference to hostility, which is further compounded by state and territory intercountry adoption units being generally underresourced. Ultimately this sad state of affairs has led to very lengthy processing periods and exhaustive queues for those people who wish to adopt children internationally. It is unfortunate to have to say that this state of affairs is of no great surprise. Historically, adoption became unfashionable in the fifties and the sixties, and it was subsequently frowned upon from a policy perspective. This has led to adoption practices in states and territories that are unsympathetic at best and obstructionist at worst.

It was argued at the time that the biological link between a parent and a child should be maintained irrespective of the circumstances. This overwhelming ethos resulted in children being preferentially placed in foster care over adoption when the child-parent biological relationship became untenable, as sadly it sometimes does. This also does not take into account the fact that, sadly to say, in some cultures some children are just not wanted by their biological parents. This often occurs in cultures that are particularly disdainful of single mothers.

When reading this report, I found it pretty concerning to note that many parents were
apprehensive about giving evidence to the committee. They feared that, if they did give evidence to the committee that was critical of the department in their state or territory, this would prejudice their application for adoption. For these potential adopting parents to be so concerned about the negative consequences of talking to a parliamentary committee shows that the system that they use to try to adopt a child not only is severely flawed but also is so adversarial that they would be concerned about the consequences of talking about their state or territory department.

I will not go through all of the recommendations of the committee, because time prevents me. However, I would like to highlight a couple. Recommendation 3 proposes that, in renegotiating the Commonwealth-state agreement, the Commonwealth ensures a greater harmonisation of laws, fees and assessment practices. This harmonisation should be done in consultation with key stakeholders, such as adoption support groups and adopted children and their adoptive parents. I cannot stress how important that is. It is very important that the government consult the key stakeholders, and they are the people who have actually been through this system—the parents and the adopted children.

Recommendation 12 calls on the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to amend the Australian Citizenship Act so that children that are either adopted or born overseas to Australian citizens are granted rights equivalent to those born in this country to their natural parents. Mr Speaker, I think you can see why that would be vitally important. I do not believe that adopted children are loved any less by their parents, and they should be granted the same citizenship rights as natural born children.

I am about to run out of time. I think this is a very important report. I hope that members take the time to read it and that the state and territory governments take the time to have a look at its findings and create a system for people who are seeking to adopt babies from overseas that is far more conducive to doing so. (Time expired)

Question agreed to.

House adjourned at 9.29 pm

NOTICES

The following notice was given:

Mr Georganas to present a bill for an act to establish an Airport Development and Aviation Noise Ombudsman, and for related purposes. (Airport Development and Aviation Noise Ombudsman Bill 2006)
The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins) took the chair at 4.00 pm.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Rodeos

Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (4.00 pm)—I take this opportunity to defend a sporting event that is part of our cultural heritage. In recent times there has been some sort of furore around the holding of rodeos. This is in the wake of a couple of incidents involving a bull and a horse, which became injured during events in Tasmania and had to be put down. In one instance, the organisers attempted to move the injured animal away from the crowd in order to put it down. This led to cries of cruelty. In the other instance, the animal was surrounded by screens and the crowd was distracted while euthanasia took place on the spot.

Now we have the RSPCA and Against Animal Cruelty Tasmania calling for rodeos to be banned. Rodeo organisers have been running rodeos, which are a part of the Tasmanian summer season, for at least 60 years. They are concerned that a popular event for country people—and, of course, some city people—will be stopped because of yet another city perception. As the Hobart Mercury editorial put it so poetically:

Sons have followed fathers into the corral to take the bruises and eat the dust in their challenge of man and beast.

You can see the Roman gladiators there, though this fight is not to the death but for a mere eight seconds or so of pure strength and skill. The typical competitor will have come from a rural background and be familiar with many techniques of animal control, which are necessary on the farm and are refined into rodeo entertainment, including cow roping and sheep tying. At the Steppes Rodeo, they have a ‘polly sheep-tying competition’ in which I have taken part, and with me the sheep mostly gets the upper hand.

I do not believe that rodeos are necessarily cruel to animals; in fact, many of the animals are not averse to performing. However, I do believe that some proper guidelines should be laid down to ensure that animals injured in rodeos—and, indeed, in any other sport—are properly cared for and euthanised, if necessary, in a humane manner. This does happen now, but it is mainly self-regulating. For the odd incident that might not be as carefully looked after as it should be I have no problem in applying legislation. I believe there are appropriate guidelines for the racing industry, but I do not know of any applying specifically to rodeos. I support the state minister in bringing in some regulations to deal with this matter, and I continue to support the sport of rodeo throughout the Lyons electorate and Tasmania during the summer festival season.

Transport Infrastructure

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (4.03 pm)—Last December the federal Labor member for Oxley, Mr Ripoll, called for a bridge to be constructed across the Brisbane River between his electorate and my electorate of Ryan. I again absolutely reject this idea and repudiate the suggestion that the member for Oxley put forward. There is no place in the infrastructure capacity of the Ryan electorate to accommodate the thousands and thousands of vehicles that would flow into Ryan as a consequence of a bridge being constructed between Oxley and Ryan. The bridge that the member for Oxley proposes to have built would result in the Moggill ferry ceasing
activity. This is a ferry that has traditionally served the area well. It serves the needs that currently exist on both sides of the river, and there is no desire whatsoever by those who live in the nearby suburbs to have this bridge constructed.

There is an infrastructure deficit in Queensland: Moggill Road. Moggill Road is the responsibility of the Queensland state government. All Queenslanders know that the political colour of the state government is very much red and of a Labor persuasion. I want to remind constituents in Moggill, Indooroopilly and Mount Ommaney that the Labor Party has been in office in Queensland since 1989, bar two years of the Borbidge government, and that Queenslanders deserve better. The people of Ryan deserve better. The people of Moggill, Pullenvale and Brookfield deserve better than a Queensland Labor government. The people of Taringa, Indooroopilly, Toowong, Mount Ommaney and Riverhills and all the voters in and residents of the suburbs of Westlake and Middle Park absolutely deserve better than a Queensland Labor government. I call on Ronan Lee, the state Labor member for Indooroopilly, and Ms Julie Atwood, the state Labor member for Mount Ommaney, to get their acts together and call upon the state Labor government to invest funds in Queensland roads, which are their responsibility. The GST provides the Queensland government with some $7.7 billion. As the Treasurer said in parliament yesterday, the Western Australian Premier, Mr Alan Carpenter, has said that the GST is in the national interest—so I call upon the Queensland government to invest in roads. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—Before calling the honourable member for Charlton, I remind the honourable member for Batman that, even though his next gig is more than 15 minutes away, he would not want sessional order 187 to become the Ferguson sessional order.

Charlton Electorate: Centennial Coal

Ms HOARE (Charlton) (4.06 pm)—I rise to express my opposition to a proposal for an open-cut coal mine in my electorate of Charlton. Centennial Coal proposes to extend its underground operations at Awaba by open-cut mining methods. There are many reasons to oppose this open-cut mine. The majority of them include environmental and health risks. The health risks include airborne dust particles, which come from exposed soils, blasting and machine operations, which affect asthma sufferers as well as the young, the frail and the elderly. Indeed, one constituent recently moved his young family from Killingworth to Awaba to escape the health risks that an open-cut mine poses. The area is also part of a wildlife corridor and is a bushland habitat for many species of flora and fauna, some of which are endangered.

To provide a picture for members, this mine is proposed for a pristine area located between the foot of the Watagan Mountains and Lake Macquarie. It will be located within 800 metres of the Awaba Public School, with many other schools in the area being affected. There are also concerns about the impact that a hole in the ground of this size will have on our lifestyle and tourism industry. Our community has been experiencing population growth, which will not continue if we do not retain all the lifestyle and environmental facets that our community has to offer. I support my state colleague, Jeff Hunter, the member for Lake Macquarie, in putting the case for opposing this mine to the New South Wales government, in particular the Minister for Planning, Frank Sartor. I attended with Jeff a public meeting at Cooranbong on 29 January, which was also attended by nearly 1,000 community members expressing their
angry opposition to this proposal. A statement of intent was unanimously supported at that meeting. I seek leave to incorporate that statement into my speech.

Leave granted.

The document read as follows—

Statement of Intent

for rally held at Cooranbong Park, Sunday 29 January 2006

We, concerned citizens of the City of Lake Macquarie, and others directly affected, call on the NSW State Government to stop Centennial Coal Company’s proposal to use open-cut mining methods in the Westlake area of Lake Macquarie which they have included in their submission for their Newstan-Awaba Mines Extension Project.

Further, we call on Mr Frank Sartor, Minister for Planning, to reject Centennial Coal’s whole proposal for this project on the grounds that it is NOT an extension of any current project, but a NEW and SEPARATE project

We already have a railway line, the F3 Freeway, two power stations, an extensive network of long-wall mines beneath us and proposed urban expansion in the Westlake area of Lake Macquarie. We will not accept an open-cut mine as well.

• We will not have our land de-valued by proximity to an open-cut mine.
• We will not condone an enterprise that causes our vital tourism prospects to be diminished.
• We will not stand by while our last wildlife corridors are destroyed.
• We will not have our creeks artificially diverted from their natural paths.
• We will not tolerate our waterways and Lake being polluted.
• We will not put up with our air being polluted by dust particles that can harm us and everything they fall on.
• We will not allow open-cut mining to impact on the quality of life in future housing developments.
• We will not accept processes in our area that can damage our health both mentally and physically.
• We will not tolerate the disruption of sound and vibration from explosions for 15 years.
• We will not have our views from the Watagan Mountains spoiled any further.
• We will not stand by and watch the destruction of endangered and vulnerable species that exist in the proposed mine area.
• We will not tolerate a government that destroys what we hand on to our children.
• We will not accept compromises.
• We will not accept an open-cut mine in the Westlake area of Lake Macquarie.

Ms HOARE—I congratulate the two organisations which have been formed to oppose this mine: No Open Cut Mine for Awaba, NOCMFA, and Southlakes Communities Against Mines, SCAM. While we have a strong and proud tradition of mining in our area and will continue to support underground operations and the workers who are employed in the mining industry and their families, there is no way that we will support this new mine proposal. I encourage the community to continue to express its opposition to this mine. All members of the community know that they have my full support as well as that of the member for Lake Macquarie. I have received much considered correspondence from concerned and angry constituents regarding this proposal. This community anger and opposition must continue, and I believe that our opposition will kill this proposal just as it did over 20 years ago when a similar
mine was proposed for the same place. There have been no letters of support for this project. Strong public and community opposition to this proposal can defeat Centennial Coal’s plans to extend the mine and create this eyesore in my electorate of Charlton. *(Time expired)*

**Australian Unity Wellbeing Index**

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (4.09 pm)—The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index was released early this week. Compiled by Professor Robert Cummins of Deakin University and sponsored by Australian Unity, the index seeks to rate life satisfaction in seven areas: standard of living, health, relationships, achievement in life, safety, community connection and future security. The results of the surveys were broken down into federal electorate divisions. My own division of Cook—which runs from Cronulla in the east to Sutherland in the north and is bordered to the north and the south respectively by Georges River and Port Hacking—rated very highly in terms of overall wellbeing.

Mr Slipper—And happiness as a member?

Mr BAIRD—That, too. Cook has a satisfaction rating of almost 77 and has the highest overall satisfaction level of any seat in the southern metropolitan area. In fact, Cook was beaten only by Eden-Monaro, with a rating of 77.71; Richmond, 77.72; and the division of Riverina, 77.31. On the issue of standard of living, Cook was rated No. 1 in the state. Why are residents in my electorate so happy?

Mr Martin Ferguson—It’s all those Qantas employees.

Mr BAIRD—That, too. According to Adele Horin in the *Sydney Morning Herald* today:

It shows the happiest electorates tend to have a lower population density, a higher proportion of people over 55, more females, more married people, and less income inequality.

Mr Slipper—It has good members and good members like you!

Mr BAIRD—It certainly has good members. There is no doubt that the Sutherland shire is a fantastic place to live. As I look through the study’s criteria, in response to, ‘What makes for a happy electorate?’ I see that the shire ranks well on all counts. In spite of the best efforts of the pro-development New South Wales Labor government, the Sutherland shire still has a comparatively low population density when compared to adjacent areas such as Hurstville, Kogarah and Rockdale. Cook has one of the highest proportions of over-55s in the nation, with some 18.5 per cent of residents older than 55.

Mr Danby—Do they all surf?

Mr BAIRD—Some do. While I cannot comment on the proportion of females in the electorate with any authority I can certainly attest, at least anecdotally, to a high proportion of married couples in the Sutherland shire. Finally, in terms of income equality, there are great variations in wealth within Cook, as with other divisions. However, the Sutherland shire tends to be a place of social equality, with millionaires rubbing shoulders with average Australian workers on our beaches, in our surf clubs, on our golf courses and so on. One of the greatest reasons that people in the Sutherland shire are so happy—above and beyond their marital status and income et cetera—is that the Sutherland shire is a wonderful place to live.

As I have already mentioned, we are bordered to the north by Botany Bay and Georges River, to the east by the Pacific Ocean and to the south by beautiful Port Hacking. We have beaches that are the envy of the remainder of Sydney and fantastic restaurants, cafes and en-
tertainment venues. The quality of life in the Sutherland shire for most residents is very high. We have strong sporting associations, volunteer groups, strong participation in church and faith based groups and a strong focus on aquatic sports such as ocean swimming, surfing, sailing—(Time expired)

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (4.12 pm)—Sydney airport’s aircraft noise problems just get worse for the people whom I represent. The reason is the failed aviation policies of the Howard government. Media reports over the last two weeks alone are flooding in over the continued development frenzy of Sydney airport, in particular the conduct of Mr Max Moore-Wilton, once adviser to the Prime Minister, then Chief Executive Officer and General Manager of Sydney Airport Corporation Ltd and now a director within a Macquarie Bank subsidiary.

The conflict of interest could not be more obvious, as I pointed out in the House yesterday and today. In the Sydney Morning Herald on 4 February 2006, Ms Sherrill Nixon reported in an article entitled ‘Airport retail plan turns a deaf ear to noise limits’. The report stated:

A noise map in the Sydney Airport master plan showed the site earmarked for the 60,000-square-metre shopping centre was not suitable for a commercial building …

The map shows that by 2023, when 68.3 million passengers and 412,000 aircraft are expected to use the airport, the site would be exposed to noise levels between 35 and 40 AENF—

which are unacceptable—

for public buildings.

An article by Paddy Manning in the Weekend Australian of 11 February entitled ‘Developers take off’, reported:

The furore—

that is, over the expansion of Sydney airport and other designated airports—

is only going to worsen as Transport Minister Warren Truss moves to amend the Airports Act to put beyond dispute that airports are free to develop all manner of non-aviation facilities on their 99-year leaseholds.

The condoning by this government of the expansion of Sydney airport takes to a new level the betrayal of the people of Sydney. This government has turned Sydney airport into 900 acres of greedy, profit-feeding frenzy and totally unregulated works on land which, if it were state government regulated land, would in all likelihood fail basic environmental planning laws and would be refused consent. This government is shamelessly pandering to its mates at Sydney Airport Corporation Ltd.

The Weekend Australian notes that these developments are permitted to occur with no approvals at all and that there is a rising tide of anger over the minister for transport’s arrogance and flagrant disregard for the public interest. A further report by Sherrill Nixon in the Sydney Morning Herald of 4 February, titled ‘The sky’s the limit’, notes that Sydney airport is being billed as a playground where everything from shopping to a cinema complex is being proposed. A cinema complex at an airport? This is pure madness. The Sydney Morning Herald also reports that there is even a proposal for a waterfront leisure centre. I agree with the comments of the New South Wales Minister for Planning that the ethic of Sydney airport and Max Moore-Wilton is a ‘willy-nilly, stuff-you attitude’.

MAIN COMMITTEE
The patience of Sydney has run out with Macquarie Bank, who rip us off with their tolls to
and from the airport, then rip us off again and again when we are at the airport. It is time
Macquarie Bank, the millionaires factory, realised that it has moral responsibilities. It is a dis-
grace, and this government is fully responsible for the self-serving conduct of Macquarie
Bank on Sydney airport land at the expense of the public interest and the people I represent. I
do not resile from anything I said in the House yesterday or today in relation to Mr Max
Moore-Wilton and the venal behaviour in relation to this issue. (Time expired)

Bloomhill Cancer Help

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (4.15 pm)—I rise in the chamber today to recognise Bloomhill
Cancer Help, a self-funded charity on the Sunshine Coast with public benevolence status
which was founded in 1997 by Margaret Gargan, a registered nurse who was in charge of a
cancer ward at the Prince Charles Hospital in Brisbane. She also worked on the Sunshine
Coast. In 1987 Margaret personally experienced a diagnosis of breast cancer and vowed at
that time that one day she would set up an organisation that really supported people in the way
they need to be supported—that is, from the time of diagnosis onwards. Bloomhill is situated
on a 10-acre property. The property is owned by a charitable trust and is run by a management
committee. The patron is Raelene Boyle MBE, the president is retired naval Commodore
Geoff Morton AM, and the immediate past president is Bob Brennan, a well-known Sunshine
Coast businessman.

The reason for developing the Bloomhill model was to fill in the gaps and complement all
of the other agencies providing care for people diagnosed with cancer as well as to provide
support to their families. Bloomhill is an orthodox medical model that provides complemen-
tary therapies and support groups. Bloomhill provides professional care and support from the
time of diagnosis onwards. Its professional team is made up of three nurses, including the
founder, Margaret Gargan; a counsellor; a volunteer coordinator; and various professional
therapists who conduct art therapy, music therapy, massage, reiki and reflexology. It has a
general manager who is a professional businesswoman.

An additional assessment is made by one of the three major registered nurses and then re-
ferrals are made to appropriate modalities. They care for the whole family, not just for the
person with the disease, and strongly recommend the mediation classes and support group,
carers group retreats, a fun and friendship club and art classes. They keep their fees very low
at all times. They ask for people to become members, which is $25 for a single person or $40
for a family. This then entitles them to a free massage. If they are caring for children, whether
a child with cancer or one who has a parent with cancer, they are automatically sponsored.

They are primarily a volunteer based organisation and have an extensive volunteer pro-
gram, with over 250 volunteers fulfilling several roles such as management committee mem-
ers, transport, palliative care, respite during the day or overnight, special buddies for indi-
viduals, administration, fundraising and workers in their op shops. Bloomhill’s operating ex-
penses are largely funded through their five op shops and a warehouse, fundraising events,
donations and bequests.

The property being purchased in the heart of Buderim is now the permanent home. To date,
$325,000 has been paid off the purchase price and now only $75,000 is owed. Once the debt
on the property is discharged, services will be increased dramatically. Bloomhill is doing
amazing work, and I want to compliment all of those people who have been involved with
Bloomhill since 1997, when it was established. Being almost nine years old, it has cared for 2,132 people and is currently involved in the support of 577 people. The average number of new clients per year is 400 people. It is a well-known, respected and highly valued organisation within the Sunshine Coast community, having 650 members. I salute them all. **(Time expired)**

**Australian War Memorial**

Mr Griffin (Bruce) (4.18 pm)—I rise today to speak on the work currently under way at the Australian War Memorial on the Post-1945 Conflict Gallery. The Australian War Memorial was founded by Charles Bean, the famous Australian World War I historian. Bean’s idea was to set aside a place in Australia where families and friends could grieve for those buried in places far away and difficult to visit—a place that would also contribute to the understanding of war itself.

The War Memorial has flourished since its opening in 1941 and has become the most popular museum in Australia. With annual visitors numbering over 840,000 last year, the memorial provides more than just a tourist attraction. It is a place of commemoration and reflection and, most importantly, a place of learning where Australians can come to better understand our military history and the sacrifices made by earlier generations of Australians.

While the Australian War Memorial generally provides an excellent level of representation of Australia’s military history, there have been some concerns expressed recently on the adequacy of the post-1945 exhibitions. It was these concerns that have prompted the current remodelling which is set to begin in March 2006 and conclude in October 2007. The new Post-1945 Conflicts Gallery will be arranged in chronological structure to reflect six decades of involvement from 1945 and will cover the Cold War, the Korean War, the Malayan Emergency, the Indonesian Confrontation, the Vietnam War, peacekeeping, and post-Cold War conflicts.

Some of the larger feature attractions of the new gallery—which are representative of the three services—will include the bridge of the HMAS Brisbane, an Iroquois helicopter and a M113 personnel carrier. The HMAS Brisbane, nicknamed ‘The Steel Cat’, was a Charles F Adams class guided missile destroyer. The ship was launched on 5 May 1966 and commissioned on 16 December 1967. The HMAS Brisbane undertook two tours of duty in Vietnam, the first from 20 March to 13 October 1969, and the second from 16 March to 11 October 1971.

The HMAS Brisbane was also one of four Australian warships to serve in the first Gulf War, operating in the Persian Gulf between 20 November 1990 and 26 March 1991. Her duties included providing anti-aircraft and anti-surface ship protection, plane guard duties, intercepting merchant vessels and escorting replenishment vessels. The Brisbane not only provides an impressive visual attraction but also represents two very distinct generations of post-1945 operations. The new gallery will open in October 2007 and will coincide with the 60th anniversary of the first peacekeeping mission to Indonesia in 1947, the anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan in Vietnam, and the battles of Kapyong, Maryang San and the Hook in Korea.

Today’s generation have not known war in the traditional sense of World War I and World War II. They are, however, attuned to the role of peacekeepers and peacemakers and their efforts in the more localised operations which Australia has been involved in since the end of
World War II. The efforts of the thousands of Australians who served in Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia and in a number of other conflicts—to name just a few examples—deserve to be recognised and to be better portrayed so as to help in our understanding of their sacrifices and achievements over the past 60 years.

**Flinders Electorate**

**Mr HUNT** (Flinders—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage) (4.21 pm)—Today I want to outline a three-point package for the towns of Rosebud, Rye and Dromana on the southern peninsula within my electorate of Flinders. What characterises these towns is that as well as having a spread of people—whether they be families, younger singles, older retirees or business people—they also have a very high concentration, arguably the highest concentration in Victoria, of over 60s. When you look at any major demographic area you find that this area has the highest concentration of over 60s. So the care and assistance that needs to be provided is of a special nature.

On that basis I am delighted to announce three things. The first is that the Australian government will be providing respite funding of $38,400 for carers of the Southern Peninsula Community Care. What this means in practice is that three new carers per week will be provided for centre based respite for up to 24 hours per week. That is a tremendous initiative for local carers. This service is not just confined to the elderly; it could be for the family of someone with a disability, whether that be a child or an adult. I recognise that this need for care extends further and that is why I am absolutely delighted—and I will categorically defend it—at the inclusion of a carer’s component for respite as part of the final solution being prepared at Point Nepean.

The second announcement which I wish to present to the House today is a grant of $21,000 under the Australian government’s recreational fishing community grants program to help the Rosebud Motor Boat Squadron build a jetty to assist people with a disability. This jetty, to be built by the Rosebud Motor Boat Squadron in conjunction with Wongabeena Association or, as it is now known, Disability Opportunities Victoria, is a great step forward for both the elderly and those with disabilities in the electorate of Flinders, particularly in that stretch from Dromana to Rosebud to Rye, who often have difficulty accessing pleasure water craft. Access to these boats is a wonderful way of giving them therapy as well as personal joy.

The third announcement I want to discuss very briefly is to reaffirm my absolute commitment to work with the council, the community and the state in finding every possible source of funding for a Rosebud aquatic centre—a great initiative. It will help families, young people and the elderly within our community.

**Workplace Relations**

**Ms GRIERSON** (Newcastle) (4.24 pm)—I rise today to once again draw the attention of the House to the Boeing dispute where 27 highly skilled aircraft maintenance workers remain locked out simply because they are seeking a collective agreement. It is now 259 days since they received their last pay cheque. As highly skilled workers who maintain our Air Force jets, they want to go back to work but they want the right to negotiate a collective agreement, which Boeing, their employer, stubbornly refuses. Christmas has come and gone for these workers and still not one member of the federal government has lifted a finger to help them. The local Liberal Party member, the member for Paterson, representing a lot of those workers...
and representing Williamtown RAAF base where the Boeing site is located, certainly has done nothing. In November, he said, ‘It is very disappointing to see Labor and the unions using striking workers as political pawns.’

I do not think the member for Paterson has a very good grasp of the issues if he believes that this group of workers has somehow been duped into this industrial action. They are very sincere. What an insult to these men and women who have just spent Christmas on a picket line and have been put in a position of tremendous financial hardship. Their families are doing it tough. That the only action their local member of parliament can take is to ridicule them is certainly disgraceful.

With the Work Choices $55 million propaganda campaign, ‘guaranteed by law to preserve the rights of workers to have a union negotiate a collective agreement’, it is apparent that the government’s real purpose is to drive down wages and conditions and strip away the rights of workers built up over 100 years. That is indeed why the government made sure that employers like Boeing can refuse a collective agreement. ‘Let them rot on the picket line,’ seems to be the attitude of the member for Paterson and the government. Sadly, that attitude was also very apparent in Tasmania where I visited this month with Labor’s industrial relations task force. In Launceston, we had the great privilege of meeting with Laurie Lewis, a meatworker who, with his workmates, has been in dispute with their employer, Blue Ribbon, now the Australian Food Group, for almost three years. After working for this company for 10 years, the company made management changes and asked the workers to cooperate and go on traineeships, even if you had worked there for 10 years. The workers agreed to help the company, but on the last day of their traineeship, many of them had their employment terminated. This was a brutal selection process exercised by the bosses.

Later that firm went into liquidation and then offered individual contracts, which the workers refused to sign. Those workers have won two cases in the Tasmanian Supreme Court and one in the Tasmanian Industrial Relations Commission, but they have remained locked out since April 2003. I applaud their commitment. Instead of there being a law against such unscrupulous corporate behaviour, this government—the Howard government—has made it lawful. Shame!

I thank all the participants in the Tasmanian presentations to Labor’s task force on industrial relations. Clearly Tasmanians are very vulnerable because of their labour market being so thin. They have our complete support. Unlike the Howard government, Labor will continue to listen and to champion the needs of Australian workers and their families.

Ms Kathryn McKay
Mr Greg Hosa

Mrs GASH (Gilmore) (4.27 pm)—Yesterday I attended the funeral of Kathryn McKay and Greg Hosa, well-known local identities in the electorate of Gilmore. We have had some unwanted headlines. You might recall that these are the people who were murdered and their bodies found in the state forest burning in barrels. Some 800 people attended the funeral yesterday. They came from all walks of life and different backgrounds, which just goes to show how well-respected in the community this family was. Greg and Kathryn left behind a 10-year-old son, Damon. Greg left behind another two children from a previous marriage. I point out to the parliament that these people were very big community workers. Both worked for
the Nowra show. John Bennett, the president of the Nowra show, spoke about the work they had done within the society. Kathryn was a nurse at Shoalhaven hospital. The whole of the hospital were in mourning for the sad loss of Kathryn and the work that she had done. The staff were extremely upset and through Monica Taylor and Wally de Ruyter, both of whom were devastated and were at the funeral, I express my condolences to the staff.

Damon, their son, went to the Nowra Christian School, and the family were very close-knit and attended the Baptist church. The community is still in shock and disbelief at the deaths, and to think that the murders were actually performed by those of our own community. I also want to thank Commander Kyle Stewart, of the Nowra police, for the outstanding work he and his team have done in bringing the murderers to account.

To the family I say that I share their grief. I certainly join with the community in hoping that the perpetrators of these awful murders are soon brought to justice. As I said, our thoughts are with Greg’s and Kathryn’s families. The size of the attendance at the funeral is an indication of just how well this family was respected. I cannot begin to tell you the grief that will be felt throughout the Gilmore electorate with the loss of these people.

**APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 3) 2005-2006**

Cognate bill:

**APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 4) 2005-2006**

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 13 February, on motion by Mr Nairn:

That this bill be now read a second time.

upon which Mr Tanner moved by way of amendment:

That all words after “That” be omitted with a view to substituting the following words:

“whilst not declining to give the bill a second reading, the House is of the view that:

(1) despite record high commodity prices the Government has failed to secure Australia’s long term economic fundamentals and that it should be condemned for its failure to:

(a) stem the widening current account deficit and trade deficits;
(b) reverse the reduction in public education and training investment;
(c) address critical structural weaknesses in health such as workforce shortages and rising costs;
(d) expand and encourage research and development to move Australian industry and exports up the value-chain; and
(e) address falling levels of workplace productivity; and

(2) the Government’s extreme industrial relations laws will lower wages and conditions for many workers and do nothing to enhance productivity or economic growth; and

(3) the Government’s Budget documents fail the test of transparency and accountability”.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (4.31 pm)—I am grateful for the opportunity to continue my contribution to this important debate on the Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and the Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2005-2006. Yesterday evening in the House, I was dealing with the outcome of the recent COAG process. In doing so, I indicated that I welcomed the long overdue initiative from the state and territory governments in association with the Commonwealth government to actually try and pool their resources to do something of
substance on the very important issue of mental health. I indicated that from my point of view—and not only from the point of view of the constituents of my electorate but, I believe, that of the community at large—we as a community are sick and tired of delays with respect to the failure of government action at all levels on the need to do something on the issue of mental health.

It is well understood that Australians believe that mental health is a very serious problem. We need to do something more seriously to try and come to terms with how we assist people who are doing it very tough and with respect to how they handle this issue in the broader community and at a local family and service level. The record shows that these people are sick of the de-institutionalisation experiment and the results it has had in lowering the quality of life for many with mental illness, pushing them into the prison system and straining families to breaking point. On that note, I refer to the fact that the Prime Minister, in association with the premiers and chief ministers, said at the conclusion of the COAG meeting that they hope this new mental health agreement represents a partnership blueprint to actually help tackle the issues of intervention, counselling and residential care.

I simply want to stress that from my point of view no one level of government can continue to escape their responsibilities on the issue of mental health. They should stop seeking to blame one another and should stop duck shoving with respect to the responsibility for this issue. It is a combined responsibility. We need coordinated government action at all levels of government to actually make progress in the way we provide assistance and increased support for those in the community who require assistance with respect to access for people, mental health carers and families.

It is in that context that I simply want to remind the committee of the joint media release of 19 October 2005 of the Brain and Mind Research Institute, the Mental Health Council of Australia and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to reinforce that this has got to be an outcome that is pursued at all costs by the COAG process. That media release states: After more than 12 years of so-called reform we have a broken and failing mental health care system. Referring to the report prepared by these organisations, it calls for leadership, accountability and investment. It also stresses:

Australia urgently needs all governments to commit to a process of genuine and well-resourced mental health reform.

Finally, it correctly points out to the Australian community:

Our services are failing to meet community expectations of reasonable emergency and ongoing care on a daily basis.

I stress these issues because they raise serious questions about the accountability and performance of the COAG process. If the recent performance of COAG is anything to go by, some people might be waiting a long time before they see the results of reviews of mental health, transport, energy or skills and training translated into real funding or real progress in appropriation bills like this.

My concerns are about the lack of focus in these bills on the big issues facing Australia—issues like skills and training for our future economic wellbeing and other serious social issues like mental health. I support the second reading amendment standing in the name of my colleague the member for Melbourne and join him in reminding the House of this govern-
ment’s long list of failures, including in a range of areas of major national and international consequence for the future economic and social wellbeing of Australia. These include—and these points are underscored by yesterday’s Reserve Bank monetary report, which clearly raises some of these challenges—our need as a community to, firstly, stem the widening current account and trade deficits; secondly, reverse the reduction in public education and training investment; thirdly, address critical weaknesses in health, including mental health; fourthly, expand research and development; and, fifthly, address workplace productivity, which is falling.

I join the member for Melbourne in support of the second reading amendment and in his condemnation of the government’s draconian industrial relations laws that will do nothing for productivity or economic growth. The amendment moved by the member for Melbourne clearly puts on the table some priorities for government action, going to issues such as the current account deficit and structural weaknesses in the economy in training and infrastructure. With respect to the outcome of the COAG processes and the appropriation bills before this House, the government will be judged on whether or not actual outcomes occur rather than report after report and committee after committee. We want action, not further reports and committees. I commend the second reading amendment to the House.

Mr RANDALL (Canning) (4.38 pm)—I would like to speak on the appropriation bills before this House and raise an issue of extreme importance not only to my electorate of Canning but to the people of Western Australia in general. There is gross mismanagement of two major infrastructure projects in Western Australia, and the fact is that this mismanagement has caused a great deal of angst in the community because the responsible minister is very much involved in a game of nastiness and spite through a vindictive campaign because she cannot get her own way with certain people she is dealing with. My concerns go to her competence to fulfil the role of planning and infrastructure minister in Western Australia. I am referring to Alannah MacTiernan, the state Minister for Planning and Infrastructure. It is serious to the extent that the new Premier, Alan Carpenter, who is currently defending her in her role, may wish to have a close look because it is about to cost the people of Western Australia many millions of dollars through mishandling and misappropriation of public funds. Minister Mac-Tiernan thinks that public moneys are almost her slush fund to do with as she wishes. She wantonly spends public funds irresponsibly so that, ultimately, she gets her own way, but the people of Western Australia suffer because she has not been able to deliver projects under her jurisdiction as planning and infrastructure minister.

The issue I am talking about is to do with the building of the Perth to Bunbury highway, of which I have often spoken in this House. In fact, it is also called the Mandurah bypass or the Peel deviation. I need to set out some of the background here because this is the strongest issue for people not only in my electorate but also in the Peel region. They want the highway delivered on time and on budget. Both since and before I became the member for Canning this issue has continuously been on the radar because there is a huge bottleneck in the city of Mandurah which not only is dangerous as a result of the number of road accidents—and there have been many road accidents in which people have been killed, particularly around Lake Clifton, recently—but causes a lot of environmental concerns due to the number of people stuck in their cars at traffic lights, pouring out fumes when they could be running in a seam-
less fashion on the highway. I am very concerned that the longer this is delayed the more people will be maimed or killed on this bit of road.

Before the federal election in 2004 the government committed $150 million which had been asked for by the state Labor government. It then said it needed an extra $20 million, so it was increased to $170 million. We agreed on a total package of $340 million. We were going to fund it fifty-fifty. But, surprise, surprise, the minister then came out and said that it was going to cost more than $340 million and that it was now going to cost $450 million or even more. She put the AusLink funds at risk for Western Australia, but the federal government held its line and was determined to see the AusLink money spent in a responsible way—that being that the Kwinana Freeway and the Mandurah bypass would be finished as a single build with a set finish date. We said that construction had to start by 2006—this year—and that traffic had to be running on the road by 2009. So we put a start date and a finish date on it and agreed that any future blowouts, for which the minister is well known, would be absorbed by the state government. After saying many times that she would not sign the AusLink agreement, she eventually signed it, as everyone expected her to do. Her Premier, the Treasury and her cabinet were never going to let her throw away $170 million and put in jeopardy the rest of the AusLink funding for Western Australia.

Earlier this year everything seemed to be going along very well with the continuous build of the Perth to Bunbury highway. It was announced in early January that a preferred tenderer had been notified by the minister and the roads department. The successful tenderer was the Southern Gateway consortium headed by Leighton Contractors in alliance with WA Lime- stone. That company in the last month has been recruiting staff and has started to put together its bid as the preferred tenderer. In an absolute surprise, in an article in the West Australian newspaper last Friday headed ‘Alannah wallops Leighton—MacTiernan deals contractor huge blow in its bid to win $450m road contract’, she suddenly announced that she was going to pull preferred tender status off Leightons.

That announcement, first of all, is a breach of faith with the company that had been named as the preferred tenderer. There are also the costs involved. But the most alarming part of this is that, if this bid is delayed any further and the work does not start in 2006, the minister gives up $20 million in funding for this road, because the condition that this government—and the Prime Minister in particular—put on when this funding was announced was that the work had to begin by 2006 for the state government to receive the extra $20 million. If the minister thinks we are not serious about the fact that if this work is not begun by 2006 the $20 million will be put in jeopardy, she should remember that we are not going to be stared down by her in her game of trying to have this road declared a disagreed item before the AusLink proposal was signed.

That was the first alarming thing the minister did. But it gets worse. The minister has acted out of both spitefulness and vindictiveness. This is not the only occasion on which the minister has displayed spiteful and vindictive behaviour. I will refer to the announcement of a measure before Christmas last year. An article that ran in the West Australian newspaper for some time stated that planning minister Alannah MacTiernan had decided to withdraw planning approval over a large development in an area called Gin Gin against a family company called Plunketts. This approval had been granted by the previous government in 1995. The
then planning minister, Richard Lewis, quite properly went through the process of checking
that the application had gone through the correct procedures and gave it planning approval.

People might ask why, 10 years later, a minister would withdraw this planning approval on
a matter that had been in the pipeline for 10 years. It is very simple. The minister lives near
the Plunketts in Highgate and she had a neighbourhood dispute with the Plunkett family many
years ago. She threatened that she would square up with them eventually and would deal them
some sort of blow for having a neighbourhood dispute about an overshadowing planning issue
when she was in opposition. When she became planning minister it gave her a great opportu-
nity to come back in a vengeful way and deal with the Plunkett family by withdrawing the
planning approval.

I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the Plunketts are not going to take this lying
down. This matter will go to court. We are talking about approval for a development of 557
hectares. The Plunketts intend to engage the best possible legal advice to fight this. This inci-
dent demonstrates that the minister will do anything to square up with her enemies, whether
they be political or, as in this case, neighbourhood enemies.

In addition to that, the minister, at a local level, shares the electorate of Armadale with me.
I speak about facts when I say that the minister has attacked me in the state parliament a num-
ber of times over the Mandurah bypass issue. She has attacked me in a scurrilous way, calling
me a great many names. I have been called worse names by better people, so that does not
worry me. I will not be in name calling; I am just giving the facts. For example, Minnawarra
House, which provides training for those with disabilities et cetera in the electorate of Ar-
madale, is run by a woman called Sandra Leeder and her group. But because she is opposed to
Alannah MacTiernan’s decision to alter the planning approval through the Armadale Redevel-
opment Authority, which she essentially controls, she has made it known that she is going to
deal with Sandra Leeder and make sure she gets turfed out. She will even drill down to a local
level like this by dealing with a woman in the electorate who has offended her.

Another case in point—and this is getting down to the grubbiest tintacks—is that a local
government councillor decided that she would not support everything the minister did, so
what did Minister MacTiernan do? She set about running a campaign to dislodge her from the
council at the last local government elections. She was successful and bragged about having
done that. Here is a minister who decides that when she is taken on by somebody she is going
to pay them back. This is all about payback.

How does the payback come to Leightons? Leightons won the contract to build the Perth to
Mandurah rail. The Perth to Mandurah rail is a small railway line. It runs for only 80 kilome-
tres. Yet when the minister first took it over and changed the route the cost went from $900
million-odd—and that was the previous Kenwick route; the current route goes straight up the
freeway and is the least efficient route—to $1.2 billion. The minister kept assuring everybody
that it was on track, on budget, and there were no cost blowouts. In this time the cost has gone
from $1.2 billion to $1.56 billion. It is blowing out all the time, yet she tells the public, people
on air and the parliament that it is going to be delivered on time and on budget.

Minister MacTiernan decided the rail line would take the most dangerous route by tunnel-
ling through West Perth, when that was not necessary, again because she wanted to put her
own stamp on the route and change it from that decided by the former Richard Court govern-
ment. This is the same minister who bagged the duplication of the Narrows Bridge and then
opened it when she became minister. This is the minister who spoke against what is called the ‘Polly pipe’ tunnel in East Perth, and was then a great barracker for it. She changes her stance all the time. Leightons won the contract to build this rail line, but more particularly, the Leightons Kumagai Joint Venture won the contract for tunnelling through the West Perth end.

This project has been beset by industrial and planning delays—all sorts of problems. It is no accident that the CFMEU have had a real input to the delays on this project. Leightons have decided that they are sick and tired of this and they are going to sue the CFMEU. Currently Leightons have a claim lodged against the CFMEU. Minister MacTiernan says that Leightons have been monstered by the CFMEU, so she agrees with the claim, but they are going to sue her. I would be surprised, having lost one day in every fortnight as a result of industrial action, if Leightons do not have some sort of claim. This includes behaviour such as the ‘blue flu’. I understand John Holland is going to sue the CFMEU as well, also claiming that they have been sabotaged by the blue flu.

The problem is that the start date could be affected by the minister in her efforts to delay the bidding and the awarding of this project to one of the consortia. The Leightons Kumagai Group are currently in dispute with Alannah MacTiernan and the state government for something like an extra $300 million, which would take the project cost to nearly $1.9 billion. So we are heading towards the $2 billion price tag which Mr Clough said he would have to bid for the project initially. Minister MacTiernan has taken it very personally. In fact, she would not go on ABC Stateline last Friday night because she refused to talk about the issue any more.

When the new Premier, Alan Carpenter, was asked on Stateline if it was going to cost $2 billion, his only assurance was that he hoped not. So this project has gone from a budget of just over $1 billion to be now heading towards $2 billion. Ultimately, the minister has decided that the best way to do this is to form an alliance. We know that alliances are quite often fraught with danger. At the end of the day, if a company like Henry Walker Eltin could go broke—as they did—that would expose the Western Australian public. That prospect is quite alarming.

I go back to the fact that this minister has personally intervened to take this project from Leightons. The article in the West Australian by Gareth Parker and Mark Drummond on 10 February 2006 says:

Ms MacTiernan revealed yesterday that she had stripped the Leighton-led consortium of its so-called preferred tender status to build the road ... compete with another contracting group for the States largest single contract.

Ms MacTiernan denied any link between her ferocious battle with Leighton over the railway and her decision to revise the tender program.

You do not have to be too bright to figure out that she is absolutely furious over Leightons suing her for $300 million when she suddenly reverses the announcement of Main Roads of a month or so ago that Leightons were to receive this contract and then decides to blame Main Roads Western Australia for having announced it without her authority and has decided she is going to take on Leightons and get them for having decided to sue her over the Mandurah rail issue. She is in the blame game. She is never, ever wrong. It is always everyone else’s fault. The article says:
Ms MacTiernan last night blamed Main Roads for her having to strip Leighton of its superior status saying the department had acted against her instructions by awarding the Leighton consortium the preferred bidder position in the first place. They have got four months now to get involved in the next stage of the bidding process. We are in February. If it takes four months to put in another preferred tenderer, and then they form an alliance, we are heading towards the end of the year—you do not start digging the day after—and this $20 million of federal money is in jeopardy as a result. I believe that Main Roads and the minister herself may be looking at another legal case. If Leighton have put this month’s worth of time and effort into preparing their bid under preferred tender status, I would say that they have got a claim because they were told in writing by Main Roads that they were the preferred tenderer.

Let me bring this to a conclusion by saying that at the end of the day the minister has put this project in jeopardy not only at the expense of the people in the Peel region but also at the risk of the lives of people driving on this road. Why has it been put in jeopardy? It has been put in jeopardy because the minister has had a hissy fit with Leighton Contractors and has decided that she will deal with them, that she will pay them back. Everybody in the industry knows that this is the way she operates.

Her stamping of the feet and her nastiness towards somebody who has decided to take her on will cost Western Australian taxpayers, Western Australian motorists and all the good people who drive on that road dearly. Ultimately, they will have to face this delay and this problem because Minister MacTiernan has decided that she has an axe to grind with Leightons. I think it is disgraceful. I think Carpenter should do something about it. He should take her off this project like he took her off the Plunkett project and give it to somebody who can competently manage it rather than somebody who has decided that she is going to square up not in this case with a political enemy but with an enemy in the business community. She is a disgrace.

(Time expired)

Dr Emerson (Rankin) (4.58 pm)—My contribution to this appropriations debate is probably best organised by reference to the statement of monetary policy of the Reserve Bank of Australia that was released on 13 February—just yesterday. It gives a snapshot of where the economy is and, importantly, where it is likely to be headed. It also reveals some structural weaknesses in the economy, about which I have said quite a bit in the past and about which I will continue to say a lot in the future. But the backdrop is one of very strong global economic growth. The statement indicates that growth in world GDP is estimated to have been well above average in 2005. Remember that growth in world GDP has been very strong over the last few years. The Reserve Bank points out:

This has contributed to a substantial lift in Australia’s terms of trade, which have increased by around 30 per cent over the past three years, their largest cumulative increase since the 1970s.

We have been blessed with the good fortune of very high mineral prices, driven most particularly by the phenomenal growth of China and its voracious appetite for raw materials to produce the infrastructure and the housing so necessary to sustain Chinese growth of around nine per cent per annum.

In spite of that fantastic good fortune, the Reserve Bank points to a very unfortunate outlook for Australian exports. It says:
Australia’s export performance over recent years has been disappointing, despite the generally favourable international conditions.

The trade minister is in enough trouble as it is, but every couple of days in the parliament he makes statements about how fantastically strong our export performance is, personally taking credit for the very high mineral prices created by the very strong growth of China. These people will take credit for anything if they can get away with it.

I do not see how the Howard government can claim responsibility for high global mineral prices, but it can accept responsibility for the very poor response in terms of the growth in volumes of Australian exports. The Reserve Bank statement says:

While export earnings have picked up strongly, this has been mainly driven by rising prices, with only very limited increases to date in volumes.

There is a sense of déjà vu about this because year after year, since 2000, Treasury has been forecasting a turnaround in Australia’s export volumes, and every year Treasury has gotten it wrong. Every year the Howard government has said, ‘The improvement in volumes is just around the corner—just you wait and see,’ and every year it is like a mirage disappearing on the horizon. As those volumes are supposed to come on board, there is another excuse, such as the bird flu virus or a global economic slowdown, despite economic growth that has been very strong over the last few years. Any number of excuses has been proffered as to why our export volume has failed to pick up. The statement goes on to say:

With substantial investment in the resources sector and in related infrastructure projects currently underway, it is likely that export volume growth will pick up, though the expected improvement has been slow to eventuate.

That is exactly the point that I have been making—that Treasury, the trade minister and the Prime Minister have gotten it wrong for the last five years and the improvement in our export volumes that is always forecast has not occurred. I will return to our appalling trade accounts in a little while.

The Reserve Bank statement goes on to say that there are various sources of upward pressure on inflation. It says:

At the current stage of the expansion there are a number of factors that could be expected to put upward pressure on inflation in the period ahead.

It refers to aggregate wages growth having picked up over the last year, reflecting the tight conditions in the labour market. Secondly, it identifies the fact that world commodity prices have resulted in some large increases in the raw materials costs of many business. Thirdly, the statement says:

... any acceleration in demand would more readily put pressure on the economy’s productive capacity than at earlier stages of the expansion.

That is, we now have a situation where demand for Australian goods and services is well and truly smashing up against capacity constraints. The government has done very little to anticipate and then ease those capacity constraints. I refer, of course, to skills shortages and the bottlenecks in infrastructure that are now very well known and identified by agencies such as the OECD, the International Monetary Fund and, of course, the Reserve Bank. These three influences together or acting alone could well and truly increase inflationary pressures. The Reserve Bank goes on to say:

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Given the prevailing levels of capacity utilisation and labour market tightness, this outlook is consistent with a modest increase in underlying inflation.

This is a warning from the Reserve Bank that it is looking very carefully at the inflation numbers and the underlying forces acting upon the inflation outcome in Australia. It says:

... the Board recognises that policy would need to respond in the event that demand or inflation pressures prove stronger than currently expected.

That means that there is a tightening bias—that the Reserve Bank is disposed towards tightening rather than being neutral or easing interest rates.

You would think that the Australian government would have been able to manage such a great economic expansion, spurred so strongly by the phenomenal growth in China. China’s real GDP grew by almost 10 per cent last year, and the Reserve Bank says:

... China is now the world’s fourth-largest economy (at market exchange rates) ... and remains the second-largest when measured at purchasing power parity exchange rates.

There are very credible forecasts to suggest that, in purchasing power parity terms, China will indeed surpass the United States as the world’s largest economy by 2015, which is less than a decade from now, and India will become the third-largest economy, behind the United States. We have this incredible growth of China and India in our own region, in the Asian century, and Australia is standing on the doorstep of that incredible growth.

There are enormous opportunities for the Australian economy but, sadly, the Howard government has failed to invest in the future so that we can fully take advantage of those opportunities. The Reserve Bank indicates that the outlook for economic growth in Australia remains favourable but identifies:

The income gains from the strong terms of trade ... providing ongoing support to domestic spending, particularly in the regions most exposed to the resources sector.

The Reserve Bank is saying that the housing market has now come off a bit, but not nearly as much as some had anticipated. Some of the domestic demand has been eased but we still have this injection of national income from abroad—$40 billion over the last few years. The boom times are well and truly here as a result of the voracious appetite of China, in particular, for raw materials.

When you put it all together, this very strong injection of income into Australia as a result of China’s growth, the Reserve Bank finds:

Business conditions generally continue to be favourable, as evidenced by strong growth in profits and investment.

It goes on to say that profitability in the mining sector should remain strong in the near term.

What does that mean for the budget, given that we are speaking about appropriations? We know that the Treasurer has consistently underestimated the size of the budget surplus. There has been very strong criticism from the Business Council of Australia of the Treasurer’s record in that regard. That critique of the Treasurer has been along the lines that this consistent underestimation of the surplus has allowed the Treasurer to argue that there is not the capacity for genuine tax reform in this country because the surpluses would not sustain it. But when the surpluses turn out to be, in some cases, twice as big as those forecast by the Treasurer, there is a collective, ‘Oh, oh. We’ll get it right next time.’ They have not managed to do that in the last few years.
There are now economic forecasts, prepared by private forecasters, of a budget surplus in the coming financial year in the order of $15 billion. Everyone will know that in the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook the budget surplus figures were revised upwards for the current year by almost $4 billion, proving again that the Treasurer has systematically underestimated the true size of surpluses. Now, these independent forecasters suggest that perhaps the surplus could be as large as $15 billion. But the government runs the grave risk of squandering the opportunity for tax reform, because we have a Reserve Bank statement that says there are fairly strong inflationary pressures and that it is looking very carefully at the numbers underlying the inflation figures and at wages growth.

As a result, the Reserve Bank is poised, watching to see what happens with this budget. If we get big surpluses and the government says, ‘We will now fund out of those surpluses very substantial tax reform,’ then the danger is that the Reserve Bank will say, ‘That is an injection of extra stimulus into the Australian economy, which will be inflationary, so we will increase interest rates.’

We have now got a situation where the Treasurer is saying, ‘Even if the surpluses are big, we may not be able to embark upon genuine tax reform.’ How could you get yourself in such a situation? We have predicted surpluses of $15 billion, but then we have the Treasurer warning, over the weekend and even more recently, that because resources booms do not last forever it may not be possible to implement tax reform. In fact, I am not sure that the Treasurer has ever—since the great tax adventure of 1998 to 2000—uttered the words ‘tax reform’ in a way that is empathetic.

The Treasurer is on the record as saying: ‘We might be able to provide tax cuts. People do want tax cuts but they do not want tax reform.’ That is untrue, because everyone knows that the tax system is crushing incentive. It is crushing incentive to move from welfare to work; it is crushing incentive for people to seek a promotion or to do overtime; it is crushing incentive for people in the income range, for example, where the 42c rate applies. It is crushing incentive up and down the income tax scale, and yet the Treasurer is saying, ‘Even if the budget surpluses are very large, we may not be able to implement tax reform, because it might be too stimulatory and the Reserve Bank would then be forced to increase interest rates.’ What a parlous situation for a Treasurer to get himself into when Australia is enjoying the good fortune of such high commodity prices—the best commodity prices since around 1974.

We will have to wait and see whether the Treasurer will get any sort of interest in the tax reform debate, apart from putting down discontent on the back bench and promoting the member for Wentworth as a parliamentary secretary—not for tax issues, not for financial issues, but for water. Perhaps he could make some observations about bottom-of-the-harbour schemes, which, I am sure everyone knows, are returning with force. Using his water portfolio would give him a segue into the tax reform debate, and we do know that many wealthy Australians are up to their snorkels in bottom-of-the-harbour type schemes. That might be a way in, but I suspect the member for Wentworth will be told to stick purely to water and not to tax.

**Mr Prosser**—Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The comments of the honourable member are pushing the limit, I would think. He should not reflect on the member for Wentworth.
The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Lindsay)—I thank the member for Forrest. The member of Rankin should not reflect on the member for Wentworth.

Dr EMERSON—Far from it, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was praising the member for Wentworth for the contribution that he was making to the tax reform debate until he was so elegantly elevated out of it. Returning to our external accounts, because that is an area of potentially great pressure on the Australian economy, the Reserve Bank statement says:

While export prices have increased sharply, growth in the volume of Australia’s exports has remained lacklustre, with average annual growth over the past five years of only around 1½ per cent.

There is the Reserve Bank belling the cat, pointing to the lacklustre growth in export volumes. The statement goes on to say:

… recent business surveys report a pessimistic outlook for manufactured exports, and the Bank’s liaison with Australian manufacturers reports that producers are finding it difficult to compete with developing economies in Asia.

What is the government doing about the slump in the volumes of sophisticated manufacturing exports? Nothing at all. In the last 10 years of the Labor government, volumes of Australian sophisticated manufactured exports grew by 11 per cent per annum. Under this government, they have grown by one per cent per annum. Australian manufacturing is in deep trouble, and this government looks on and says, ‘Let the cards fall where they may.’ We have a situation where we have got the best terms of trade since 1974 and we have got Australian manufactured exports in real trouble. When the resources boom finally tapers off, Australia could well be in real trouble.

As a consequence of that vulnerability, we have now witnessed in Australia a succession of trade deficits—in the order of nearly 50 successive monthly trade deficits. The current account deficit, on occasions in the last year or so, has passed seven per cent of GDP. When Paul Keating warned of the dangers of Australia becoming a banana republic, the current account deficit was less than 6.3 per cent of GDP. Our net foreign liabilities, both debt and equity, have grown rapidly in the last few years and now total 60 per cent of GDP. As Treasury economist David Gruen has pointed out, we need to get the current account deficit down to about three per cent of GDP compared with the average of 4½ per cent over the last couple of decades and a much higher average over the last five years.

In order to stabilise our foreign liabilities at around 60 per cent of GDP, we will have to run a sustained trade surplus of between 0.5 and 0.75 per cent of GDP. That is a surplus, Mr Deputy Speaker. We have not run a surplus for almost 50 months. So the prospects of running a surplus on the trade accounts seem very remote. It is all very well for people to say, ‘Everything will fix itself; it’s not a problem to have massive foreign debt; it’s not a problem to have massive current account deficits.’ People are starting to get very worried about Australia’s current account deficits. If overseas money market operators become very worried about the size of our current account deficits and our trade prospects, there is a danger of a depreciating exchange rate. I am not predicting that; we don’t know. But there will be pressure, as the resources boom tapers off—it doesn’t fall away but tapers off—for there to be a depreciating exchange rate. The Reserve Bank statement shows that there is indeed very substantial pressure on the prices of non-traded goods. If there were such a depreciation, there would be great pressure on the Australian prices of traded goods—imports—into Australia, which would compound those inflationary pressures.
The government is ill-prepared for this and it has failed to invest in Australia’s future. It has failed to design and implement a new productivity raising agenda. As a result, productivity growth turned negative at the beginning of 2004 and it has remained stuck there ever since. We need a government that has a vision, that will invest in a new productivity raising agenda in this country and secure Australia’s future. That government is a Beazley-led government, and we can’t wait until we get the opportunity to throw this government out on the day of reckoning and restore economic stability and vision to this country.

Ms GAMBARO (Petrie—Parliamentary Secretary (Foreign Affairs)) (5.17 pm)—It gives me great pleasure to speak in this cognate debate on the Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and the Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2005-2006 and to outline the great successes that have occurred in the Petrie electorate since the Howard government was elected in 1996. It has benefited enormously, in a multitude of ways—in health, roads and the education system. The other day I had the pleasure of attending the opening of the Australian Technical College in North Brisbane and I look forward to participating in the great work that is going to occur there. I want to speak about aged care funding, business infrastructure and some of our trade and export successes.

The Petrie electorate is a very diverse electorate. It is made up of Brisbane North, the metropolitan area, and also the city of Redcliffe, which is on a peninsula. It has a very long, diagonal shape and it is constrained by infrastructure issues. There are many road issues that this government has funded. The black spot program, a $44.5 billion program, has been a very successful program, including in the electorate of Petrie. In fact, many residents of the Petrie electorate regularly write to me and update me on what roads should be next on the priority list. The electorate has received $345,000 for black spot road improvements under the program. I want to highlight one improvement in particular—the Gaynesford Street, Aspley area and the Gympie Road area, where there used to be continual pile-ups of cars. It was continually like a car park. It was very stressful to get onto that main road. Because of this wonderful black spot funding, the residents of Aspley and surrounding areas now do not have to be stuck in traffic for longer than necessary. It is absolutely vital that we continue to free up our roads in the local area.

In recognition of this fantastic program, which is one of the best programs that we have had in terms of people being directly involved in the process and nominating roads, the federal government is committed to extending the program by a further two years. We have invested $90 million until 2008.

The Petrie electorate is blessed with some of the best hospitals in the country. The Prince Charles Hospital was part of my electorate until recently, but unfortunately it has been redistributed to the electorate of Lilley. In the time that I have been the federal member for Petrie we have had a substantial amount of funding. The last lot of funding received was through HACC funding to make sure that our older residents are serviced well, with a HACC office at Prince Charles Hospital so that people’s loved ones can access services when they are greatly needed. The National Drug Strategy is an area that has been benefiting the Petrie electorate: $261,998 was recently committed to the electorate.

The electorate has a number of welfare organisations that do an amazing job. I want to put on record some of those fantastic groups that help many out there who turn to them in times of need. Centacare is one that I particularly want to focus on. It provides respite care and ac-
commodates three care recipients overnight in a homelike environment for an average of five nights and five days. It does a wonderful job. Recently it was the recipient of some $110,000 worth of funding. There is always a demand for low- and high-care places. I want to put on record the wonderful work that Ozcare and Blue Care do in the Redcliffe community area. I thank them for the great outreach services that they provide to the local Petrie constituents.

Child-care places have also been great beneficiaries of the Howard government. Some 129 outside school hours places were provided for the Petrie electorate recently. These reflect the ongoing commitment that this government has in making sure that families and supporting parents with school-age children have access to high-quality child-care places. I myself have in the past been a regular user of outside school hours care. I could not have functioned without this wonderful support. Expressions of interest for the second allocation are scheduled for the first half of this year. I commend the wonderful work that our schools and our community organisations play in providing those outside school hours places—and the care and commitment that their staff provide.

We have a growing electorate. The middle of the electorate, in the North Lakes area, will have some 25,000 people living there by the year 2011. A number of schools have been started and have grown and developed. One that I am particularly proud of is the North Lakes State College. It benefited recently from a $4.2 million capital grants program. It is doing some very innovative teaching. The very comfortable setting and the design of the school makes it a pleasure for the students and teachers. I commend them for their great work and for their classroom and music improvement section which we recently contributed to as well.

I want to talk about Investing in Our Schools, which is one of the best programs that the former education minister, the Hon. Brendan Nelson, instigated. It has been very well received in my electorate. It provides direct funding to P&Cs. Previously I would go along to P&C meetings and talk to them about federal-state funding. Now we have an opportunity to fund the P&Cs directly. P&Cs know exactly what schools are in need of. They work very hard to ensure that schools are resourced correctly. I want to place on record the $27,510 that was given to Somerset Hills State School for installing airconditioning. I am sure that that will make many students very happy. And recently Stafford Heights State School was outfitted for a computer lab upgrade and storage facilities—to the tune of $55,000. This has been a very successful program. I delight in visiting schools and seeing what a great improvement has been made in the lives of the students by providing this direct funding to the P&Cs and the school community.

The Lighthouse program has also been a successful school based program. It really shows our commitment to young people, particularly young people at risk. Literacy and bullying issues were clearly something that we needed to tackle. We have been able to deal with those issues through the Lighthouse program. I also want to place on record the great work that the Redcliffe Special School does, particularly with students with disabilities. They were recently provided close to $50,000 for a health and fitness room. I would also like to thank the Woody Point State School for developing those special school career options.

We have some challenges ahead as a nation. Childhood obesity is one of those challenges. Again, I commend the former education minister Brendan Nelson for the work that he has done there. I also commend the minister for health, Tony Abbott, for the Healthy School Communities program and making sure that school communities and canteens provide
healthy food options. I want to place on record the fine work that Bracken Ridge State School, Somerset Hills State School, Stafford Heights, Grace Luthern College and Northside Christian College do to ensure that their students have healthy food. Some of those schools have banned soft drinks and are providing healthy alternatives. They have redesigned their tuckshops and they have put healthy food on the menu.

A surprising spin-off with all of this is not just that they have provided healthy food but that their profits have gone up, which is a very welcome addition that provides additional funding for the parents and citizens. If you can get that healthy outcome as well, that is good. Of course, they can then contribute some of those funds back into redeveloping the tuckshop further. I was very pleased to hear that that is a positive spin-off. The Clontarf Beach State School has had upgrades in the playground equipment. We have provided the Humpybong State School with shade cloth. Also, Hercules Road State School has benefited from a new school community hall. I want to say what a terrific program this is. I hope that it will continue and be funded well into the future.

Every year I take great delight, as do many of the members in this House, in presenting students in my electorate with student prizes. This year is no exception. We always have four or five students who go on and do bigger and greater things. It is wonderful to see them later on after they have left school to see some of the academic pursuits, endeavours and opportunities that they find for themselves. I think that this is a terrific program, providing $2,000 for students. I always welcome the opportunity of inviting their families and their friends to my electorate office and presenting the certificates personally, because I think that too often in this country we do not reward academic achievement as much as we reward sporting activities. I think we need to do a lot more of that and make people feel very special and privileged because they have achieved great things in their academic life.

Sporting communities play a large part in the Petrie electorate. It was a great delight when I presented the Peninsula Cricket Club with funding for their community organisation last year. I know that they will continue to provide great support to the community. It is a real collaborative program. They work with a number of other clubs. It is terrific to see the great work that they are doing enhanced with this grant to their sporting facilities. Redcliffe RSL is another great community in the electorate. The volunteers there and their advocates do fantastic work. I had the pleasure of working with them more fully in the portfolio area that I was involved in in the defence area. I want to pay tribute to them, their president, Bob Long, and the welfare advocacy work that they do in particular. We have been able to provide some $17,000 in funding through a building excellence in support and training grant to them. It will be a tremendous help and boost to ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen and it will help veterans, widows and widowers. I would also like to acknowledge the welfare organisations in my electorate, Chermside Anglican Welfare Ministries, Redcliffe Welfare Council, St Vincent de Paul at Deception Bay and St Vincent de Paul at Margate for the emergency relief funding that they provide and the care and dedication of their staff.

I mentioned earlier that last Friday I was at the signing of an agreement for a $17 million Australian technical college, the Australian Technical College Brisbane North. The Minister for Vocational and Technical Education, Gary Hardgrave, was with me. This is a wonderful achievement for the Petrie electorate. We have shortages, as do many other electorates, in the automotive, electrotechnology, commercial cookery and hospitality areas. Redcliffe City
Council—I pay tribute to the mayor, Les Bradshaw, and all of the people on the committee—and businesses have worked solidly on this project for a year to provide that terrific pathway for students so that they will have the advantage of trade training and an industry placement in addition to their grade 11 and grade 12 academic year. The college will be located at the Scarborough campus of the Southern Cross Catholic College and a second campus will open at St James College in Fortitude Valley. This has been a collaborative effort. This technical college has been established in the north Brisbane region, which includes Redcliffe city, and has been made possible by the joining together of two organisations, the Redcliffe City Council and Commerce Queensland. They have been working together to form a strong industry partnership and gain the support of local businesses and employers. I pay tribute to Councillor Peter Howston, who has been a leading light in the past year in making this project possible. I congratulate the Redcliffe City Council and the local businesses for what they have done to bring this project to fruition. Last Friday was a terrific day. The project is worth $17 million in buildings and it will be a great leap forward.

I also acknowledge the work of the four councils in the area, Pine Rivers Shire Council, Redcliffe City Council, Brisbane City Council and Caboolture Shire Council. They benefit greatly from the roads funding which the Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads, Jim Lloyd, administers. Improved flood-warning systems and natural disaster mitigation programs have been funded. These programs protect lives, homes and infrastructure, which sometimes we all take for granted. They also provide business and employment opportunities. I commend for the great work that they do. They are all experienced in growing communities and they have many challenges ahead. Recently, $35,880 was provided to the Redcliffe State Emergency Service—I thank them for the work that they do—for a new garage, communications equipment and rescue tools. They do a great job whenever a disaster occurs. The grants have been very important to the councils in my area. We will continue to ensure that they are funded and will provide some ongoing recurrent funding for infrastructure which is so important to our lives.

There are a number of great companies in the Petrie electorate that are benefiting greatly from the Export Market Development Grants Scheme. I think this is a terrific program. It gives companies a boost to get into the world export area. I pay tribute to Aeropower at Kippa Ring, Bayline Services, Military Agency Services at Bracken Ridge, Sirius Observations at Clontarf, the St Pauls Foundation and Polyflex. They work in a number of areas, including educational and technological services. They provide vital jobs for Australians: 20 per cent of all Australian jobs are dependent on exports and in regional areas one in four jobs are provided by export companies. It is a terrific scheme.

The Petrie electorate is a great beneficiary of both the Howard government’s fiscal management and the programs which have been introduced since it came into power in 1996. The electorate continues to grow. Queensland is one of the fastest-growing areas in Australia, and the electorate of Petrie is no exception. We have many challenges ahead. We need to work to ensure that the funding of infrastructure, particularly our roads, continues. I was delighted to see the state government finally taking some responsibility for extending and duplicating the Houghton Highway. That highway has been a constant source of problems and accidents in recent times. We have a strong economic future and it is only because of the Howard government and Peter Costello’s strong fiscal policies that we have been able to fund all these valu-
able programs. I am delighted today to have been able to speak about the great achievements of some of the companies and organisations in the electorate which are benefiting from our strong economic climate and the ability the government has to continue to fund its programs.

Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (5.35 pm)—I am pleased to speak in this debate, although I am not sure that I am pleased to be talking about the matters that I am going to address. The reason for that will become patently obvious as I proceed. I note that the Special Minister of State described Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2005-2006 in his second reading speech by saying:

They seek appropriation authority from parliament for the additional expenditure of money from the consolidated revenue fund, in order to meet requirements that have arisen since the last budget. I, too, would like to raise some concerns about issues that have arisen since the last budget and require the attention of the government in terms of appropriations. The common thread that runs through the issues that I will address is the lack of comprehension by the government of the realities of my electorate and the conditions under which people work, the conditions in which they live and the issues that in the first instance confront people who live in very small and remote island communities in the Indian Ocean. These concerns also reflect the failure of the government to adopt a coordinated approach when it comes to addressing issues that have arisen in my electorate and, indeed, across the north of Australia.

A couple of weeks ago I, along with other members of the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, was lucky enough to visit the Indian Ocean territories of Christmas and the Cocos islands, both of which, of course, are part of my electorate. In both communities I had extensive discussions with community members, business leaders and religious leaders about matters which were of concern to them. The most outstanding issue was one that was raised on Christmas Island and relates to a heavy lift crane on the Christmas Island wharf. This crane is used for the loading of phosphate mined on the island and lifting the dust bags containing phosphate from the land and putting them on-board ships. We have a problem. The problem is that the crane does not work and there is apparently no timetable for its remediation. That is a major cause for concern.

What happened was largely this: from 2 to 7 January, there was a planned maintenance shutdown for the painting of the crane. On 4 January, they identified cracks in the base footing stools of the crane. On 5 January, Christmas Island ports advised port users that there may be a delay in the use of the port. On 7 January, Favco engineers and welders arrived to address the issue of the crane. On 11 January, Christmas Island ports advised port users that the crane was out of service until further notice. On 13 January, an independent engineer arrived on the island to make an assessment. On 18 January, Christmas Island ports were advised unofficially that they were not to comment on prospects for future use of the crane until the Department of Transport and Regional Services had received a report and taken decisions, and that it would likely be four to six weeks before repairs are made—that was the unofficial talk of the time.

From 18 January to 2 February, the phosphate mining company on Christmas Island contacted DOTARS every two to three days and still found, at the end of that period, that the engineer had not finalised the report and until the report was finalised the department could not make a decision to commission the repairs. We have subsequently learned that that report is still not available—as we understand it. It is certainly not available to users.
We are left in a position where a port which is vital to the commercial viability of the phosphate mining company on Christmas Island is not functioning. This of course has a gravely detrimental effect on the operations of the Christmas Island Phosphate Company. Indeed, the viability of the company has been jeopardised. The major long-term economic activity on Christmas Island is phosphate production. The production and sale of that product depends on exports and the ability to off-load product from the port. Two forms of the product are exported: dust, which is packed into bags which are loaded onto ships by crane; and rocks, which are fed into the holds of ships by gantry. The dust is what I am talking about now.

It has been six weeks since the cracks in the base of the crane were discovered, and the mining company and the community need to know immediately what action the government proposes to take. The government needs to understand the significance of the cost impediments confronting the phosphate mining company and the impact on the future viability of the phosphate mining operation and therefore on the viability of the Christmas Island community as a whole. This afternoon I was told by the chairman of the phosphate mining company that they have a proposal to use an alternative arrangement: loading the phosphate bags from a small jetty onto barges and then transshipping them back onto ships. You do not have to be Einstein to work out the costs in time and money involved in multiple handling—costs which need to be borne by someone.

The Commonwealth, not the mining company, is responsible for this crane. The Commonwealth needs to ensure that the mining company’s operations are not handicapped and that the company does not suffer undue costs as a result of alternative shipping arrangements, which are indeed inefficient. We are told that loading a ship, which would normally take two to three days, could, under the alternative arrangements which are being proposed until a new crane is provided or the old crane is fixed, take six or seven days. The cost of that operation should not be borne by the mining company. Any losses which it incurs as a result of the breakdown of this crane ought to be underwritten in the first instance by the Commonwealth because the Commonwealth is responsible for providing infrastructure. Yet we have not seen from the Commonwealth any explanation as to when this infrastructure will be repaired, how it will be repaired and who is going to take responsibility for the fact that it was broken in the first instance.

We know that the crane was meant to have been fully inspected in April 2005, when its motor was in a state of disrepair. If the crane had been properly inspected in April 2005, you would expect that the fault in the base of the crane would have been identified. That, of course, did not happen. This is a challenge that the government needs to address immediately. It needs to confront the problem immediately. It needs to ensure the people of Christmas Island and the phosphate mining company on Christmas Island that the future of the phosphate mining operation will not be jeopardised because of the faulty crane and that the costs incurred as a result of the alternative arrangements being used while the crane is inoperative will not have to be met by the mining operators or the community but will be underwritten by the Commonwealth.

These people are entitled to a quick response. They are sick and tired of the shillyshallying that goes on when they deal with the Commonwealth government over Christmas Island. They need these assurances immediately. They need assurances that they will not suffer these increased costs. The phosphate mining company need to be able to assure their customers—as
I am sure you would understand, Mr Deputy Speaker—that their dust can be placed in the market at the right time and at the right price. They will not be able to do that if this crane is not repaired quickly. I am sure that you and others will understand the importance and the immediacy of this problem. I urge the government to address this matter immediately and to give a proper and appropriate explanation to the community of Christmas Island.

The other matters I wish to raise relate to defence, a subject which I know, Mr Deputy Speaker, is high on your order of importance. A number of times over the past month we have heard about problems in the Department of Defence. On 6 December last year the shadow minister for defence, the member for Barton, outlined that $7.4 billion was missing from Defence’s $17 billion budget in its 2004-05 annual report. The member for Barton then described it as follows:

This is the second year in a row that the Auditor-General has found that the Department of Defence are in breach of section 48 of the Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997.

You may recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, that at the time I pointed out that if this were an Aboriginal organisation the government would have shut it down. No doubt you understand the history of the way in which ATSIC and organisations within ATSIC were treated by the government when they failed financial reporting requirements. But of course there are other issues which have been raised. The media reports over the past couple of weeks concerning defence equipment are very scary. As someone who as late as the end of last year visited our troops in Iraq and previously visited troops in Afghanistan and East Timor, I have to say that I am very concerned about the nature of the equipment which our troops are being asked to use. We now know that there are investigations into faulty defence gear. We see headlines like ‘Faulty gear puts troops at risk’ and ‘Soldiers gagged on gear concerns’. The government should ensure that it addresses these concerns promptly. It is about time that Australian soldiers were able to say with confidence that they are the best equipped soldiers in the world. I have to say now that in terms of their own personal equipment they would be right to say they are not.

Another issue I wish to raise relates specifically to Defence Force personnel in NORFORCE’s Arnhem squadron based at Nhulunbuy. Seven ADF regulars, only two of whom are single men, pay for their own electricity under an arrangement between the federal government and the mining company Alcan negotiated 17 years ago when the company was called Nobalco. The arrangements allow the company to recover the full costs of generation supply of power to all government properties. This makes the Nhulunbuy case an anomaly in the ADF allowances structure. The NT government also has an agreement to pay the full costs of power supply, but it sends out power bills to its staff at the standard domestic rate and then pays the company the agreed rate. This is not the case with the Commonwealth.

Power charges have increased steadily with the increase in petrol prices. Generators are powered by diesel, with a 43 per cent increase between April 2005 and October 2005. Alcan will continue to rely on diesel into the near future. The ADF families are being charged at the government rate of 21.88c per kilowatt hour, plus GST. Customs and Quarantine staff pay the same. This compares with the domestic rate for Nhulunbuy of 11.01c, plus GST—which is not applicable to company staff as the cost of their electricity is part of their pay and conditions—and the commercial rate, which has a sliding scale from 17.97c to 12.5c, plus GST. In comparison, people in Darwin pay around 12c per kilowatt hour for domestic power. Sample bills from two ADF families show a two-adult, two-children family paying $937.70 per quar-
ter and a family of six adults paying $3,150.28 per quarter. If they were charged the domestic rate they would be paying $518.99 per quarter and $1,584.96 per quarter respectively. That is an outrageous discrepancy and a difference that needs to be addressed.

In addition, by way of comparison, it is worth noting electricity costs for Defence families at Weipa in Queensland and Karratha in Western Australia, both of which are largely mining towns. In Weipa the electricity charges are 19.27c per kilowatt hour on the first 300 kilowatts and 13.09c per kilowatt hour thereafter, plus GST. In Karratha charges are 0.25 per connection fee and 13.94c per kilowatt hour, plus GST. A current bill from Nhulunbuy is $937.70 for the consumption of 3,896 kilowatt hours of electricity; a Weipa Defence family would only pay $581.38 and a Karratha Defence family would pay $622.16.

These are anomalies which need to be addressed. In Nhulunbuy, Defence Force homes have been charged at domestic rates rather than the government rate. If they had been charged the government rate, the bill would have been only $471.42. These people should not be disadvantaged in this way by the way in which they are charged for electricity. Clearly families are being charged as if their homes were government offices. The families are getting desperate. The spouses believe that their partners will have no option but to eventually leave the ADF because they simply cannot afford to stay on as a result of the high cost of power combined with the excessive freight charges, contributing to the very high cost of food and groceries.

One of these people said to me, ‘If the word gets around, nobody will want to accept this posting.’ Another said, ‘I can’t afford this; we’ll have to resign if we can’t get this resolved quickly.’ ADF members have written to the minister and to me. They are keeping the army land commander informed and have kept Northern Command abreast of the issue. They are asking for the following: that power is charged at the Nhulunbuy domestic rate, plus GST; that there is reinstatement of an airconditioning allowance for this remote locality as a cushion against fluctuating prices as determined by the mining company; and that there is reimbursement from the government for billings of the government rate backdated to 1 September 2005, when the airconditioning allowance was terminated.

This is a clear sign that the government’s one-size-fits-all approach on these issues does not work. I appreciate that the remote locality conditions have changed in recent times, but what we know on an issue which I have confronted here on a continuing basis—no doubt you have heard me talk about it before, Mr Deputy Speaker—is the effect of these allowances on the fringe benefits tax reporting requirements for Defence Force personnel. In my view, there is simply no reason why we should not have an exemption for Defence Force personnel as far as fringe benefits for reporting requirements are concerned. I am strongly of the view that there should be a blanket exemption for all Defence Force personnel from these fringe benefits tax reporting requirements. This will make a material and dramatic difference to the conditions of service experienced by Defence Force personnel in remote Australia.

Mr Deputy Speaker Lindsay, I say to you as someone with an interest in these issues and a history on them that, if this were done, it would change dramatically the feeling of Defence Force personnel in remote Australia, particularly people based in the Northern Territory. It is something I have discussed here time and time again. The issue of the electricity charges at Nhulunbuy, however, highlights a major problem that the Defence Force need to address. That is that, when they locate Defence Force personnel in these remote areas, they should ensure

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that they are treated in the same fashion as you would expect other government personnel to be treated if they were working for a state or territory government. The fact is that they have been treated very differently. The fact is that in this instance they are required to pay a lot more for their domestic electricity than they should be paying. It is something which the government needs to address as a matter of urgency.

On the issue of the crane at Christmas Island, it is clear what the government needs to do. Not only does it need to give assurances; it needs to make a very timely intervention to make sure that there is a new crane put in place or that the old crane is repaired as a matter of urgency and that it underwrites any costs which are borne by the mining company of Christmas Island as a result of the failure of this equipment.

Mr HUNT (Flinders—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage) (5.55 pm)—Mr Deputy Speaker Lindsay, may I say that you are looking sartorially splendid on this fine evening. In addressing the appropriation bills, I want to raise two issues in relation to capital and infrastructure. The first is the failure of the states to invest in adequate water and, in particular, ports, power and rail infrastructure and to put forward an approach which might deal with that. The second is to address a second kind of infrastructure, which is social capital within the Indigenous community—an issue which has now come within the remit of my portfolio and is becoming of increasing interest and concern to me—and to put forward a constructive proposal as to how to best advance Indigenous health and development outcomes.

In looking first at the question of hard infrastructure at the state level, I want to break this question up into three parts. Firstly, I want to look at the issue of water infrastructure within New South Wales; secondly, more broadly within Australia; and, thirdly, the implications of the failure to invest adequately in water infrastructure for other infrastructure projects across different disciplines within Australia.

Let me begin with demand and supply. At present we know that we are facing a gap—and this is information provided by the Water Services Association of Australia—of almost 1,200 billion litres a year by the year 2030. To give you a sense of what that means, that is getting close to twice the demand that Sydney currently has. We face that water shortage around Australia. That is on a business as usual case, based on decreasing water yields in some cities on a conservative basis and on increasing demands through population growth around the country. That is a significant problem. It is real, it is tangible and something which we have already faced in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide. It is a real problem experienced today as a result of a decade of neglect by the largely Labor state governments over that period.

The second element is the question of supply. We know that there is currently about 1,800 billion litres of waste, recyclable water which is currently discharged into our estuaries and oceans by state water authorities around the country. That is water which is recyclable. For example, in Sydney we have over 400 billion litres of primary effluent which is being discharged from the three principal outfalls. That water is recyclable. There is an environmental problem with this waste of water and there is an enormous opportunity cost which was made manifest in the somewhat ridiculous proposal to pursue a desalination plant for Sydney at a time when they continued to waste 400 billion litres a year of primary effluent which could have been recycled.
We know that the New South Wales government has ditched that plan, but it has failed to set out a clear proposal for recycling the 400 billion litres a year of effluent for industry, agriculture and environmental flows. That possibility is real. We recently discovered that the former AGL gas pipelines, which go to the largest industrial users in Sydney, remain as an option. These are disused gas pipelines, a conduit, which can be easily aligned to transmit industrial water for industrial purposes, thereby taking pressure off the environment in two ways. One is by decreasing the discharge of primary effluent and the second is by increasing the use of recycled water. Both of those are desirable outcomes, and the use of recycled water in place of potable water is a far preferable use of water for an appropriate purpose.

Why do we have this problem? You would imagine that no state would want to sully its coastline. The problem is that we have an old style mentality in relation to infrastructure. Water is seen as a single-use good. Traditionally there has been a notion that it is an inexhaustible good and free. Both of those concepts are wrong, but the notion that it is an inexhaustible good resides with bodies such as Sydney Water and Melbourne Water, which have failed to adequately prepare and reuse water that could be reused. Instead it is used once and discarded. There are small recycling programs. The figures available to me show that in Melbourne less than five per cent of water and in Sydney less than three per cent of water is recycled. In Brisbane 100 billion litres of water is discharged into the ocean—60 billion litres of that comes directly from the Luggage Point treatment plant and an additional 40 billion litres is discharged into the Brisbane River. This opportunity to reuse water must be accompanied by a commitment at each of the state levels to 100 per cent recycling. It is a simple proposition: the shortage is palpable, the supply is real and the opportunity must be taken.

Dr Emerson—You are cutting across Malcolm.

Mr HUNT—I am sorry?

Dr Emerson—Give Malcolm a go; he’s got potential.

Mr HUNT—Malcolm Turnbull is doing a tremendous job, and we have talked over the last year precisely about a national recycling project.

Government members interjecting—

Mr HUNT—Exactly, as we discussed, and we jointly worked very happily on this.

Dr Emerson—You are a happy little team!

Mr HUNT—Absolutely; we have a happy team. I ask the member for Rankin whether he believes it is appropriate that, in his city of Brisbane, 100 billion litres of sewage is discharged into the Brisbane River and Moreton Bay. It is a simple question: is that an acceptable practice in the 21st century? What we have around the country is a 19th century practice of disposing of water in the 21st century. In Israel, in California, in Virginia and in so many different places around the world, recycling is a real practice that is seen as essential. I make no apology for having set out in my maiden speech the goal of ending the practice of ocean outfall around Australia, of reusing that water for industry and agriculture and recycling it appropriately. We need to end that practice.

Moving forwards, we can see that this is emblematic of a problem with infrastructure spending around the states. We have been forced to step in to create a National Water Initiative, which reports directly to the Prime Minister, so he has the religion on water. We have contributed $2 billion towards water infrastructure around the country. But the question of
infrastructure extends beyond the issue of water. We see a deficit in infrastructure spending at the state level. Why is this the case? What has occurred is that the states have learned the lessons of the early 1990s in the blowing out of state budgets in Western Australia, Victoria and South Australia. Instead of blowing the bottom line they have maintained the bottom line, increased recurrent expenditure but stolen from the budget for infrastructure. If you look around Australia, you see a decrease in infrastructure spending in terms of gross state capital: from 4.1 per cent to three per cent in Victoria, from 5.2 per cent to 3.7 per cent in New South Wales and from 5.4 to 4.2 per cent in Queensland. And on it goes through South Australia and Western Australia.

In practice this means that we have faced power shortages in Western Australia and New South Wales. We have faced the risk of water shortages in New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. The rail systems in Sydney and Melbourne have suffered. There have been inadequate gas supplies in the outer suburbs of Melbourne and Brisbane and there have been choked ports in New South Wales and Queensland.

These changes in expenditure from robbing from the infrastructure account to pay for the recurrent account have practical impacts both on national productivity and on people’s lives. The answer is simple: there needs to be a rebalancing at the state level. They need to control their recurrent expenditure but also contribute their fair share to the intergenerational equity which comes from infrastructure expenditure. That is an incumbent responsibility. It is less immediately obvious than the blowing of a state budget in Western Australia, South Australia or Victoria in the period 1990-92, but its effect on the long-term viability of those states and economies is just as profound. It is a classic case of robbing from the future to pay for the present.

I make the point that this links in at the national level on the issue of competency and fitness to govern—that is, how can you best manage your economy? I did some research with the help of the Parliamentary Library. We found that, over the past 40 years, the coalition at the national level has outperformed federal Labor governments. Over the last five decades, interest rates have averaged 6.6 per cent under coalition governments compared to 12.1 per cent under Labor governments. Unemployment has averaged 3.9 per cent under the coalition compared to 6.9 per cent under Labor. This has a dramatic impact on human lives. Similarly, inflation has averaged five per cent under the coalition compared to 6.9 per cent under Labor. Economic growth has been higher by 0.4 per cent. Over a period of 56 years of hard economic data, the bottom line is that, on average, housing rates have been 5½ per cent higher when Labor governments have been in control as opposed to coalition governments. It may just be coincidence, but it is 56 years of quite significant coincidence. The point is that at the state level we have a theft from the next generation’s infrastructure and at the federal level—if you take the 56 years of data or if you compare the current government with the previous government on all of these indicators—we have the same result. You see that there is a different impact on national productivity.

This takes me to the one area which I believe has had the greatest area of shortfall between aspiration and achievement within Australia over the past three decades and under all governments—that is, social capital in the Indigenous community. Undoubtedly—and I think it is critical to acknowledge—Indigenous health and epidemiology is a national tragedy. Today, a
male Indigenous child aged between five and 10 years old can expect to live to 59 years—17 years less than the national average for a non-Indigenous child. Similarly, the life expectancy of a female Indigenous child is 65 years—18 years less than a non-Indigenous child. Infant mortality rates amongst the Indigenous population in Western Australia and the Northern Territory are 16 babies per 1,000 births or over three times the infant mortality rate of non-Indigenous Australians.

The National Health Survey reports that more than one in four Indigenous deaths are caused by cardiovascular disease—11 times the rate for non-Indigenous deaths. Diabetes is up to 25 times higher in the Indigenous community than in the non-Indigenous community. Indigenous people are eight times more likely to die from chronic kidney disease than non-Indigenous people. These health statistics translate to economic development, and there are many members of good faith on both sides of this House who have acknowledged that and recognise that as a priority.

As I look forward over the coming year to my priorities, Indigenous affairs is one area in which I wish to work much more actively. I have already been speaking with the new Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, on this question of Indigenous development and health. Last week I met with young Indigenous leaders from around Australia. I worked with them for three days in the Yarra Valley during the Australian future development forum, and I committed to them that this would become a prime focus of my activity.

The means to doing this is the interesting question. The reality of how we deal with this problem has undoubtedly been the great challenge for governments over the past three decades. One contribution which I believe can be made and which I wish to work on specifically is the link between Indigenous health and Indigenous land management. I have seen communities such as Mutitjulu at the base of Uluru who have money and rights but who have not succeeded in dealing with any of these great tragedies. There is a crisis with the epidemic level of addiction in the Mutitjulu community.

Similarly, I have seen communities based around land management at Dhimurru on the Gove Peninsula near Nhulunbuy in the Northern Territory, where they run Indigenous protection areas. They are a shining example for Australia of how an Indigenous community can embrace land management and, through that work, provide real and meaningful activity for young people and real and meaningful health outcomes by being engaged in, alive and proud of their culture and twinning that with economic activity. Under the Indigenous protected areas program, for which I have responsibility, a total of 19 Indigenous protection areas have been declared around Australia. That covers 13.8 million hectares and there are another 11 projects under way. I think that has been incredibly important. This year we are looking at converting an additional six proposals into Indigenous protected areas, which would add 5.3 million hectares of land to the national reserve system. That is an outstanding conservation outcome but, much more importantly, it is an outstanding opportunity to use Indigenous protected areas as a means of promoting Indigenous land management as a means of promoting Indigenous health and development.

I believe that ultimately the best of these Indigenous protected areas could become Indigenous national parks. It is not about any additional transfer of land; this is land which was already under Indigenous title. It is about the status of land management and a practical means
of providing Indigenous people with meaningful employment, of transferring culture and promoting economic development and, from all those things, providing practical health outcomes. People who are engaged and involved and have purpose on a day-to-day basis are less likely to be drawn into the culture of addiction. It is a challenge, but this and the question of hard physical infrastructure—in particular, water infrastructure and the objective of recycling 100 per cent of Australia’s waste water by 2025—remain my two primary campaign objectives at a national level this year.

Mr Kerr (Denison) (6.12 pm)—I congratulate the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage for an interesting and committed speech, but the fairy tale of Liberal administrations making greater investments in public infrastructure is so beyond all plausibility that I suggest he refrain from the political point scoring and focus on the substantial task in front of him, which I do not doubt his zeal to perform. He does himself greater justice when he focuses on those matters rather than on representing a party that was at the forefront of the privatisation of the public sphere and making complaint about its reduction.

In addressing the Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and the Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2005-2006, I wish to speak about military discipline and the manner in which the defence forces deal with people against whom allegations of misconduct are made and instances in which military personnel are injured. We are facing what can only be described as a crisis in our capacity to attract into the military new recruits and retain those that have been attracted. It is no exaggeration to say that, without substantial increases in the attractiveness of the armed forces, the kind of speculation that was recently put forward by a former commander of the defence forces, which was that we would need to reintroduce national service, would become more commonly spoken. That would be a very retrograde step and not one I support at all. I went through the experience of the Vietnam years, when compulsory military service created great controversy at a time when Australian forces were engaged in a war on which the community was divided, and I would hate us to go back to that point.

Secondly, the military does not want a reintroduction of national service. It wants to be a volunteer force. It wants to be a streamlined, effective and professional military force. The idea of universal military service, which would be the only fair basis for its implementation, would place strains on those objectives. Imposing on them an obligation to train universal entry recruits into the military services for a relatively short period of time—insufficient time to train those recruits into effective components of the military service—would be difficult to make compatible with the streamlined, professional highly trained military using high-level technology that we are seeking to build.

If we were not to have a universal system and it was to be on the basis of random selection or some other mechanism, then it would suffer from the defects that the recruitment suffered from when people’s fates were determined by the draw of marbles out of a barrel, which led to great controversy and dissatisfaction. I do not want to go back to a situation where we have to contemplate military conscription. I do not think the government wants to go back to a situation where it has to bring in such conscription in order to fill places in the military. But that then leads us to the significant question of how we will recruit and retain people in the military if we do not have a fair system of military justice and if we do not find means of
dealing fairly with those who are injured or incapacitated through their service and make claims against the Commonwealth.

I want to give three instances to highlight the difficulties of which I speak. The first instance relates to the very junior entrant—a person in the cadets. The second instance relates to a very senior person who was removed from command without explanation and without natural justice. The third instance is the long-lasting and longstanding problem of the Voyager survivors.

Going to the first instance, that of the cadet, I recently appeared in the Federal Court as part of a legal team which came together to press the case of the mother of a former Air Force Cadet, Eleanor Tibble. Eleanor Tibble entered the cadets with the objective of ultimately becoming a member of the Air Force. It was her life dream, and her passion was service in the cadets. Unfortunately, allegations of the following nature emerged. A youngish, 29-year-old senior instructor who was in part responsible for training developed a regard for young Ms Tibble. We understand that that regard was reciprocated. They went out to the movies together and they went to Ms Tibble’s family home—Mrs Campbell invited this young man into her home—but the young man realised, I think quite correctly, that his fondness for Eleanor Tibble was inappropriate in the case of somebody who was an instructor of a 15-year-old in the cadets. Although I do not purport to represent his exact words, he quite properly made it plain to his seniors within the cadets that he thought he could no longer remain because he had developed an inappropriate attitude towards or relationship with a 15-year-old cadet.

Were this to have happened in a school situation or at the Boy Scouts or what have you, we would have an instinctive reaction to any impropriety. Let me say that my understanding of the circumstances—and there may still be some distance to travel in terms of the ultimate determination of all the facts—is that there was no impropriety other than the fact that too great a fondness had developed between these two young people, a 29-year-old man and a 15-year-old girl. He recognised the inappropriateness of that and reported it. It did not go beyond that. But had it been a situation that occurred in the schools or the Boy Scouts or some situation of that kind, the instinctive reaction would have been that if there was any impropriety it would have been on the part of the 29-year-old adult, not on the part of a 15-year-old girl. But, sadly, a decision was taken which required her to resign from the cadets on the basis that she was unfit to continue as a cadet.

That was a disgraceful and grossly wrong decision. She was given no opportunity to contest it. She did complain, and ultimately the complaint wended its way up the military command. Ultimately, a decision was taken that the decision to require her resignation should be reviewed, and her commanders were told to reinstate her. But there was still delay. They did not pass on that information. About 10 to 14 days later—I do not pretend to be specific about dates—still unknowing that she had in fact been reinstated, she took her life. That in itself is tragic, but what is sadder is that the military thenceforth has done everything possible to prevent Mrs Campbell, the mother, from pursuing her claim in the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal of Tasmania to get redress.

The proceedings I was involved in in the Federal Court were resisting an application for the Commonwealth to dismiss those proceedings on the basis that the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal lacked jurisdiction to hear the mother’s complaint. Fortunately, that decision is now concluded and the matter will go back to the tribunal for ascertaining the necessary facts and to
determine whether within the jurisdiction of the tribunal findings an order should be made. So those proceedings are not yet completed. You would understand my concern that any parent who has heard this story and hears the continuing resistance of the military to the open inspection and examination of these matters in a tribunal of a state should say, ‘Why the heck should I subject my child to procedures of that nature if I cannot be satisfied that the military will resolve these problems and it won’t happen again?’ The jury is still out on that question, but it is a crucial one, because unless people will enter the cadets and work their way up—and that is an attractive process of entry into the military—then we will have further difficulty with recruitment, notwithstanding all the personal tragedies that the obvious facts of that case suggest to anyone listening to it.

The next instance is in relation to Wing Commander Robert Grey. Wing Commander Robert Grey was formerly the senior officer responsible for the Air Force in my state of Tasmania, based in Hobart. For reasons that he is not aware of, and certainly I am not aware of, he was effectively removed from that senior role. There may be good reasons for that but, if so, they have not been disclosed. Wing Commander Grey, for the last four years at least to my knowledge, because he has sought my assistance, has been pursuing a request for review so that he can know the basis upon which his removal was effected and he can be accorded natural justice. The saddest thing about this is that, just as in the Tibble case, the 15-year-old girl, where the most vulnerable but the most junior of persons might be said to be subject to the military system—of course, cadets are not formally part of the defence forces and they are not part strictly of the military justice system but we would expect their treatment always to be fair—Wing-Commander Grey, somebody who rose through the ranks to a very senior position, was told effectively in correspondence, which has gone as high as the Prime Minister and still awaits final resolution, that he was not entitled in the determination of whether to hold a particular command to the application of natural justice such that he needed to be told what it was that he had done wrong and why his removal was required.

That is a dreadful situation. I understand that, in times of war, military command will be conditioned by circumstances that will sometimes require immediate judgments to be made. In those circumstances we would normally say that the niceties of civilian life have to be bypassed in requiring reasons why somebody loses confidence in a junior officer. In times of active service, when those decisions have to be taken in life or death moments, nobody expects a judicial-like process to occur.

But where in peacetime a senior commanding officer of a state is removed effectively from that office, and when reasons or opportunities for redress of grievance are requested and no opportunity is allowed, it must also enter the minds of people who might enter the military, ‘I have a career system here, but capricious and arbitrary decisions could cut short my opportunity to serve my Australian community.’ If the military at the highest levels say, ‘When we are making these command decisions, we have no obligation to accord such senior officers natural justice,’ again it must hang in the mind of any person who is thinking of re-enrolling or re-enlisting after a period of time to build their career, ‘Look, I might be better off doing something else entirely different where that kind of unfairness is not permitted.’ The military is a very large organisation, and facilitating decent treatment of those at the lowest and the highest levels is absolutely crucial.
Wing Commander Grey still has significant correspondence awaiting final determination. He has been promised review and an opportunity to have his matters considered, and he has correspondence yet to be answered. But years and years have passed and the buck has been passed from one level to another, back and forth, including from the Prime Minister’s office. It is a most unsatisfactory situation and one which leads me to be very critical. I hope in the end he does get what he has wished for—that is, an explanation for why he was treated in the way he was and an opportunity to at least put on the record his account in relation to those matters. He believes his reputation was effectively publicly trashed. It was a matter which got public attention; it was not a private matter. When you remove a commanding officer from a state such as Tasmania it does carry a very public awareness in the community. It is not simply a private matter within the military.

The third point I want to mention relates to the Voyager cases. A number of efforts have been made to find resolution in the Voyager cases, but there still remains outstanding litigation. Where that litigation is premised on disputed understandings of fact, I have no objection. If it is truly the military’s view that some people’s claims are not based on injury or effect caused as a result of the Voyager and they are contesting on those grounds, on the merits, no one can object. Of course, it is something that the claimants would wish to be resolved as quickly as possible, and I share that desire.

But, sadly, what we find now is every technical legal point being taken. Years, decades, after the Voyager disaster we are still seeing the meanest, most technical of points that can be taken in relation to that litigation being taken. One of the practices that now often happens—and it has certainly happened in the Tibble and Voyager cases—is that the litigation is briefed out to major commercial firms. The old framework of litigation that the Commonwealth used to employ—that is, of a model litigant, where as a public litigant representing the public interest the ethical responsibilities of the Commonwealth were always placed in the highest spectrum and unmeritorious technical points were not taken—seems to be less influential as a doctrine. I think there are some serious questions that we will have to examine in due course about the consequences of the shift towards privatisation of public litigation. It has not been an altogether successful process, in terms of both its ultimate cost and the ethical environment in which that litigation is conducted.

Returning to the Voyager cases, the fact that these matters are not necessarily being examined and contested on their merits but on these very technical points must leave a sense of concern that, if you rise through the military but some misadventure occurs and you need to address the problem at a later stage, you may well be confronted by a litigant on the other side that is remorseless in its utilisation of the most technical defences available. And that of course is not the most attractive thing to somebody who might be contemplating a long-term career in the military.

So, to conclude where I started, these issues all go back to the desirability of having an all-volunteer Defence Force: one in which morale is high; one in which people who want to gain some military experience can do so; one in which parents of kids who want to join the cadets can be confident that they are placing their children in a safe environment where they will be treated fairly; one where, if someone rises through the military and reaches relatively high office, notwithstanding that, they will be treated fairly, unless warlike situations require decisions to be made in circumstances where natural justice cannot be afforded; and one where, if
they are injured, they will be treated fairly through the litigation that occurs. These are important principles that we should never forget.

Mr BALDWIN (Paterson—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources) (6.31 pm)—I rise tonight to speak on the appropriation bills. As this parliament would be aware, it is one of the few opportunities a parliamentary secretary gets to speak on the issues affecting their electorate. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Prime Minister and my colleagues for their support in my appointment as parliamentary secretary. But I want to say right from the very beginning that, even though I have been appointed a parliamentary secretary, it will in no way lessen my drive and determination in pushing the issues that are important to the people of Paterson.

I also express my appreciation to Russell Chafer, who is in charge of the secretariat of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit. It was a time that I enjoyed, with some of the work that we did. As in all these things, when a person is elevated, they leave behind unfinished work—as did my predecessor—but some of the inquiries that we worked on, still to be reported to the parliament, will value-add to the work of this parliament. I encourage all ministers to take note of the recommendations that are made. They are well considered by both sides of the parliament when they come together at committee level to make sure that they advance the government as much as they can.

The key thing I want to say is that, upon my appointment and swearing-in on the Friday, I found that on the Sunday I was to head to India. The reason for heading to India as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism And Resources was to attend the first ever India-Australia Coal and Mining Forum. This was a critically important forum in that there were 73 delegates from Australia—the largest ever delegation to go to India on such a critical issue as coal and mining, on carbon sequestration and also on the partnerships between mining industries and the community.

But, coming back to the things that are really important to my electorate, first and foremost are roads. In this parliament I have been a very strong advocate of roads like the Pacific Highway. And, if only the member for Denison had the courtesy to leave quietly—like the courtesy I afforded him of hearing him in silence—it would be very much appreciated. That being said, I have been a very strong advocate for the Pacific Highway, Weakleys Drive, the Bucketts Way and, indeed, the Lakes Way—in fact, all of the roads in my electorate. The true factor though is that, of all the roads in my electorate, there is only a very small portion of the New England Highway which includes Weakleys Drive that is a fully federal responsibility. We have funded that, but the delays and procrastinations of the Road Transport Authority and the New South Wales government, who conduct all the planning and the prioritisation of the works, have been incredible. Here we are coming up to the 10th anniversary of this government, and for 10 years this road has been in planning phases and still not a single sod of soil has been turned.

The costs have now blown out from some $18 million to $20 million to $33 million, and we have to accept that; we have to keep working. But it is now a project that has been brought in under the AusLink proposal. They say they are going to commence work on it next financial year, but I will wait and see. The problem is not the federal government; the federal government has put up the money. The state Minister for Roads put out a press release after the last budget, condemning this government for giving it only $3 million towards planning, but it
was found out and the state minister, Mr Costa, was so embarrassed because all the RTA had actually asked for was $3 million. ‘Ask and you shall receive’ is the motto.

The arrogance of the New South Wales state Labor government surprises me when I look at roadworks and at the history of Bucketts Way, a road that the state government was trickling money into. It is a road of significant importance to the people in my electorate, in areas such as Stroud, Gloucester and all the suburbs in between, including areas up to Taree, in Mark Vaile’s electorate. We fought hard but we got $20 million for that road. Of that $20 million, $15 million has now been allocated, an underspend, and we can see the significant improvements in that road. But since then, since we put the money out, guess what has happened? The state government has refused to put money into roadworks. This is a regional road and a large share of the responsibility is indeed the state government’s—in conjunction with local government—but it has walked away.

So we got a little bit smarter and at the last election I went to the minister and the Prime Minister and I said, ‘I want $10 million for roadworks in my electorate.’ That was $6 million for Dungog Shire to be spent on the road between Dungog and Clarence Town and on part of the road between Dungog and Paterson. Also, to connect that road, I wanted $2 million for Port Stephens Council for the road between Clarence Town and Raymond Terrace. In addition, for Great Lakes Council, I wanted $2 million to be spent on the Lakes Way. But it was important, with this $10 million that the federal government put up, that we encouraged and forced the state government to match the funding. The state Labor government in New South Wales cannot see that this is a gift-horse and have refused to provide funding. They have refused to provide money for these roads. To give you an example of the state these roads are in, they are like the road in the McCain mixed vegetable ads where the trucks drive along with all the vegetables in the different boxes and by the time they get to the factory they are already mixed up because the roads are so rough and so bumpy.

We committed $10 million, but at this stage we cannot give the councils that money because the state government has refused to match it. So tonight in this chamber I am calling on the state government to think bigger than it does and come up with $10 million funding. In the absence of that, I am talking to Minister Lloyd about providing that funding directly to the councils. The people in these areas are being affected because of the lazy, arrogant, recalcitrant state government in New South Wales. The way that it treats the people in my electorate is amazing. It has never refused to spend money on another tunnel, collapse as it may, in Sydney, or to extend the freeway or to do something else in the Sydney area, but when it comes to regional areas it is always a problem.

Perhaps that problem has been further exacerbated with the Pacific Highway. Under the 10-year agreement, the federal government committed $60 million per annum to a state owned highway, the Pacific Highway—and we fulfilled that commitment. As it was a state highway, the state government were to commit $160 million per annum and, to their credit, they did that. Under the AusLink proposal, the federal government agreed to up the ante from $60 million per annum to $160 million per annum for the next three years, to be matched by state funding. So we have seen an increase in expenditure on the Pacific Highway alone of $100 million per annum.

The point that I am getting to is that there is an intersection called the Myall Way turn-off at Tea Gardens Hawks Nest on the Pacific Highway. The state government and the RTA, in
their wisdom, have decided that there will be no flyover at this intersection. People with caravans, tourists largely, on their first time out of Sydney pull into Hawks Nest, connect their caravan and continue north. So they pull their caravan straight out in front of two lanes of traffic doing in excess of 100 kilometres an hour. It is a recipe for disaster.

I spent a week at Nerong, near Bulahdelah at Myall Lakes, over Christmas and nearly every day there was a serious smash in this vicinity—and that is with two lanes, not four lanes, of traffic. There are two lanes of traffic doing between 90 and 100 kilometres an hour and there are serious accidents every day. In the last couple of weeks there have been fatalities in the general area of this intersection. It is a bad area, but does the state government listen? No. In fact on 26 May the local community had a meeting with Michael Costa, the then roads minister, and put forward the case. The costing for that intersection then was $6 million. The new state roads minister, Mr Joe Tripodi, must have bought a new calculator because by the time he had had the report done into the intersection and came up with some costings, guess by how much that intersection had gone up to: it had gone up to $16 million. Inflation of $10 million in just over six months is an incredible inflationary index. But this is the state government saying, ‘We do not want to build that intersection so what we’ll do is inflate the price so that makes it unaffordable so we don’t have to build it.’ But what about the lives? What price is a life?

The key factor in all of this is you are going to have this roadwork completed by the middle of this year, so they say. By the middle of this year we will have trucks, B-doubles, doing 100 to 110 kilometres an hour past that intersection on not one but two lanes coming south and two lanes going north, with people venturing across that route. Mr Tripodi has said, ‘I’d fund it if only the federal government gave me more money.’ He does not understand that a $100 million increase per annum, from $60 million to $160 million, is an increase; it is more money. The thing that I find hard to understand is that the federal government, even though they provide matching funding, have absolutely no say in the prioritisation of where this money is spent. It is all at the whim of the state government. Mr Tripodi, in his wisdom, wrote a letter to the editor that is arrogance personified. Part of it says, of the review that was to be done on the intersection:

The review analysed traffic numbers and future growth, reporting that an overpass is not yet needed at the intersection of Myall Way and the Pacific Highway.

It was also found that the cost of the overpass would be $16.6 million including contingencies. Contingencies of some 30-odd per cent! I have been in the construction industry and I can tell you that contingencies are normally between five and 12 per cent; 12 per cent is a bad project. But it is 30 per cent for the New South Wales RTA when they have already done all the geological surveys in the area and they have already tested the soils and already know what their costs are. Then this letter from Mr Tripodi, to the Manning River Times on 27 January, says:

Mr Bob Baldwin and Mr John Turner—

who is the state member for Myall Lakes—

must come clean with their electorates and explain the Pacific Highway is a National Network road and the Federal Government has financial responsibility for the intersection upgrade.
He also says:

Many parts of the National Road Network have the Federal Government funding 100 percent of any upgrades, others they fund 80 percent.

I am somewhat confused. A response was put out by John Turner, who is a former New South Wales shadow roads minister and understands the legislation and its requirements. I quote this part of Mr Turner’s letter:

I refer of course to Minister Tripodi’s … letter to your paper which says that “… the Pacific Highway is a national network road and the Federal Government has financial responsibility for it”…

Minister, so you have some understanding of your portfolio, can I advise you that you, as Minister for Roads, own the Pacific Highway. Just ask the people who have had their properties acquired by the Roads and Traffic Authority.

You have the same title to the roads as people have in their homes, an estate in fee simple.

He does not understand that the Pacific Highway is owned by the state government and the federal government agreed to provide support funding in the interests of traffic safety. The Federal Highway going north to Brisbane is actually the New England Highway. So we see arrogance from a minister who has never even been to the area, has never seen the intersection and refuses to meet with constituents in that area. I find this amazing.

There is a boundary redistribution on at a state level, and at the next election the area of Tea Gardens will move from the state seat of Myall Lakes to that of Port Stephens. The response from the state Labor member, John Bartlett, for Port Stephens was: ‘It’s not in my electorate yet.’ I thought he would have been a caring and concerned man—but not at all. He is prepared to sacrifice people because it is not in his electorate yet. In March next year, when the state election will be on, I will be reminding all the people at Hawks Nest, Tea Gardens and North Arm Cove that he did not care about this road, this intersection or their lives because it was not in his electorate.

If I took that approach in the Hunter, on every issue in Newcastle—like the need for an extra federal magistrate—I could quite easily say, ‘It’s not in my electorate.’ On the F3 from Branxton down to Hampton, I could say, ‘It’s not in my electorate,’ and not fight to get funding for it. There are a range of issues. I could say about the port upgrade in Newcastle, ‘It’s not in my electorate.’ But as a responsible politician and representative of the community, it is important that I look beyond the boundaries and look at what is good for the whole of the community. As I said, in March next year, I will be urging people in his electorate right up to the stroke of midnight, when the ballot boxes close and the people have cast their votes, not to vote for a person who does not care about their future.

Much more work needs to be done on roads. I will again be meeting with the Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads, Jim Lloyd, and putting forward that this intersection needs to be looked at and that he needs to make a personal representation to Mr Tripodi—I know that he has already had correspondence with him—to see what can be done to install this intersection. We cannot wait 10 years when you consider how many people would be involved in serious or fatal crashes at an intersection like this.

I can only hope that in March next year there is a new government or at least a new minister in New South Wales who is prepared to get out of Sydney, look at this area and prioritise this intersection. I hope it will be a Liberal-National Party government, because I know that
we have a commitment from their shadow minister and from the Leader of the Opposition, Peter Debnam, that this intersection will be prioritised and that it will be built.

As for the roads in the Dungog, Port Stephens and Great Lake shires, I am calling on Minister Lloyd to provide $10 million worth of funding, without state government ties. The state government will not recognise these roads. It will not provide the funding or the support, yet the people in these shires pay the taxes that provide for it. To give an example, Dungog council has to fund 120 kilometres of roads and its base is something like 9,000 voting ratepayers. Its 120 kilometres of regional roads is four times more than that of Newcastle council, six times more than that of Maitland council and three times more than that of Lake Macquarie council. The population of Dungog does not raise enough revenue to maintain the roads, let alone provide for all its other support services. Part of the reason for this is that 95 per cent of the roads in Dungog are not eligible for state government road funding assistance. If it were not for some of the black spot and Roads to Recovery funding provided by the federal government to councils such as Dungog, the Great Lakes and Port Stephens, many of these important road works would never be upgraded or safety improved.

In the short time left available to me, I want to say again that I will continue to prosecute the case for the people of Paterson. I will fight to make sure that their roads and their safety are paramount, but it is very hard to talk to a ‘stonewall’ minister who will not listen. I am sure that he was born without ears, and I can guarantee that he was born without a brain!

Mrs ELLIOT (Richmond) (6.49 pm)—Before I address Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2005-2006, I would like put on record how incredibly proud I am to be the member for Richmond. It is a culturally rich and very beautiful place to live. Those who live there can often overwhelm us with their warmth and generosity. I was not surprised that, in a recent study by Deakin University, Richmond was found to be the happiest electorate in New South Wales and the second happiest in the whole country. The people of Richmond know that this is because they have an incredibly strong connection to the community. Richmond has a lot of people dedicated to community work and a strong community spirit. We have a huge number of individuals and groups who give up their time and resources to reach out and help others—the sick, the old, the young, the disabled and the lonely. We have many committed community groups who work so hard to preserve our beautiful environment. Our locals are passionate and committed to many important local, national and international issues. I would like to commend all the people of Richmond for their strong community spirit.

Despite this incredible community spirit, we have many challenges because we have seen again and again over the last decade how the Howard government has failed the people of Richmond. By not having a vision for our great country, this short-sighted government has failed to invest in the things that make a community great, such as health care, aged care, education, training and the environment. Despite the strength, talent and hard work of locals, the reality is that Richmond has 10,000 families who earn less than $500 a week. We have soaring youth unemployment, a skills crisis and cuts in federal spending on our TAFE colleges and universities. We have a significant shortage of GPs, including GPs who bulk-bill.

Twenty per cent of Richmond’s population is aged over 65. Inadequate funding for aged care and constant cuts to the PBS make it very difficult for elderly residents. This government’s shameful record, particularly when it comes to health, affects many in this demo-
graphic in my electorate. There are many pressures on local seniors, especially the 13,000 on fixed pensions. As I said, 20 per cent of the population is aged over 65—one of the highest proportions in the country—so our health needs are major.

There is a national crisis in our health workforce and the Howard government is showing no real signs of leadership to fix the problem. With an ageing population, this situation will only get worse. Every day, locals are telling me about the difficulties they have in finding a GP, let alone one who bulk-bills. The monitoring of full-time equivalent GP numbers by the Department of Health and Ageing shows a critical shortage across the nation, with many of the costly programs thought up by the Minister for Health and Ageing having very little impact—and we see that on the ground in Richmond. The national average ratio of people per full-time equivalent GP has hit 1,451. The government’s own recommended figure is closer to 1,000 people per GP.

The Department of Health and Ageing regards areas with a ratio of more than 1,400 as an area of need under the More Doctors for Outer Metropolitan Areas program. The ratio in Richmond is 1,314. In the neighbouring electorate of Page, the ratio is especially dire at 1,589. Given that the Northern Rivers area has one of the highest proportions of elderly people in the country, this crisis has worsened, as the demand for GPs obviously increases with age. Local GPs have told me that when they are seeing a large number of elderly people the demands on them are much greater.

While GP numbers are dwindling as a result of an underinvestment by the Howard government in university places and GP training places, the current workforce is also getting older. More than 30 per cent of GPs are aged over 55 years, an increase of 10 per cent since 1996. The number of GPs under 35 years has decreased by 17 per cent since 1996, when the Howard government cut GP training places. The problem is even worse in regional areas because new GPs prefer to stay in cities and the Howard government does not provide enough incentives to attract them to areas of need.

The situation is exacerbated by the enormous HECS debts that young doctors now have when they leave university. They often have little choice but to stay in the cities to earn more and pay off these huge debts. They cannot afford to move to regional areas and there are no incentives for them to come to regional areas. The Howard government continues to rely on importing overseas trained doctors. At the last election, the major workforce policy from the health minister was to import 150 GPs every year to areas of need without additional support programs or a national competence measure.

The Productivity Commission in its health workforce report calls for the Howard government to provide leadership when it comes to addressing the critical shortage in the health workforce. The message to the government is clear: invest in universities, train more GPs, train Australians first and train them now. We see first-hand in Richmond how difficult this situation is with our ageing population.

Another major impact upon the ageing in particular in my electorate is this government’s attack on the PBS. It really does put the health of the local elderly at risk. One particular example that I would like to speak about is the removal of calcium from the PBS that we saw last year. There was a huge outcry in relation to this, particularly in my electorate. There was a major forum that many people attended to voice their concerns. There was a major campaign to have calcium reinstated on the PBS. Because of this huge community campaign and be-
cause of the pressure that was put on the health minister, it was returned for renal conditions but not for osteoporosis. Of course, people suffering from osteoporosis—or those who want to prevent it, as we have been told we have to do—desperately need to have access to calcium. It is absolutely shameful that the Howard government does not put calcium back on the PBS for those suffering from osteoporosis.

We also saw changes in last year’s budget that greatly impact pensioners, who now have to wait until they use 54 scripts a year before they are entitled to free medicine, with it going up to 60 by 2009. We also saw an increase in the Medicare safety net, even after the health minister’s rock solid, ironclad guarantee that it was not going to happen. These all greatly impact upon my electorate.

Another major health issue of huge significance in Richmond is dental health. There is a dire need for federal funding for dental health and, under the Constitution, it is indeed a responsibility of the federal government. As we all know, the Howard government scrapped the $100 million a year Commonwealth dental health scheme. The reality is that dental health affects your overall health, so it is so important that people are able to access it. The minister for health himself has said in relation to Labor’s dental health scheme:

_The Keating government’s program did reduce waiting times. No doubt about that._

So why doesn’t he restore the funding? That is the reality—we need to have federal funding back to fix this problem. There are only about 240 public dentists to cater for more than 2.5 million health care card holders, children and the elderly across Australia. This compares with more than 3,000 private dentists that treat the rest of the population. We always hear the Howard government blaming the states. I am sick of their buck-passing. It is time for them to fix the problem. It is their responsibility under the Constitution, and they are obligated to provide this dental health care.

With an elderly population, aged care is another major issue within my electorate. More funding is needed for aged care, and it needs to be spent in the right places. So many people, of course, want to be able to stay in their homes, so we need to have a lot more money for CAPS and EACH packages to be adequately providing home care for those people. Many people are telling me how long they have to wait. They will be assessed and then often have to wait months and months before they get home care.

We also need more beds in our nursing homes. Indeed, our local aged care system is in crisis and the government has abandoned our elderly. When you look at Richmond, 20 per cent of our population is aged over 65. Current projections say that this will be our nation’s population in 40 years time. We will be looking at the same percentage, so we have a chance in Richmond to get right what we are going to be facing as a nation in 40 years time. But the Howard government has missed an opportunity to fix the problems on the ground now in preparation for the future.

It is not only our elderly but also our sick who are not being cared for properly by this government. Because of this government’s mean-spiritedness, often the responsibility to care for our needy falls on our tireless and underfunded volunteer and community organisations. One such organisation is the Tweed Palliative Support group. This group is coordinated by the Tweed Shire Council citizen of the year, Meredith Dennis, who won the award for her outstanding contribution to our community as the volunteer coordinator of the group. I have seen
first-hand Meredith's dedication and commitment to the dying. She and her team of volunteers do a remarkable job delivering support and in-home care for the terminally ill. They do this with immense sensitivity and dignity. That is why it was so outrageous that the Howard government recently knocked back its application for funding to purchase a support vehicle. Meredith was using her own car to visit these people who were terminally ill. It was a true testimony to our local community when they got behind Meredith's plight, with our local clubs coming together to donate a vehicle. I certainly commend them, but it in no way excuses this government's meanness and lack of support for these community groups.

I want to speak now on behalf of all the young people in my electorate who are facing a future of limited choice because of the Howard government's refusal to address the skills crisis in this country. Youth unemployment in Richmond is at a staggering 30 per cent. This arrogant, short-sighted government has continually ignored warnings from the Reserve Bank and industry groups about a massive skills crisis in this country, and our young people are bearing the brunt of it. The sad truth is that, instead of investing in education and training, the Prime Minister wants us to compete with low-wage economies like China and India by reducing Australian wages. This out-of-touch government thinks it can address the skills shortage and youth unemployment with its backward and extreme industrial relations changes — changes that will strip workers of their rights, slash their wages and leave the most vulnerable, including the unemployed, the young, the old and the unskilled, on their own to negotiate their conditions with their bosses. This strategy not only is economically irresponsible but also will undermine the very way of life that Australians are so proud of.

Our education and training system was set up to support and prepare young people to reach their full potential in their adult working lives, yet the Howard government systematically ripped funding and investment out of this system, making it harder for our kids to access the education and training they will need to prepare them for the future. After a decade of the Howard government refusing to properly invest in vocational education and training, we are now seeing situations of $100,000 degrees. We are seeing 300,000 Australians turned away from TAFE each year. This is an outrageous situation.

The latest financial reports show that the federal government's spending on skills development increased by a measly 0.8 per cent in 2004. In contrast to that, federal Labor is serious about education and has a vision for our future. We need to compete with overseas developing economies by addressing our skills crisis and building the skills of Australian workers, and that is why Labor is designing strong, practical measures to ensure our kids have affordable education and training choices, like providing free TAFE for traditional apprenticeships, creating more real apprenticeships, providing more incentives to train apprentices in areas of skills shortage and offering young people better choices by teaching trades, technology and science in first-class facilities. Australian businesses, students and workers deserve a government that is serious about addressing our skills crisis and serious about investing in vocational education and training.

Another major issue is the lack of accessibility to and affordability of child care in Richmond. This creates a huge problem for so many families within my electorate. The government is forcing many single parents back to work, but of course it is not providing adequate child care for those children. Also, another major issue is after school care and vacation care.
There is only one after-school care centre in Tweed, and it is already full. We desperately need more after school and vacation places, as well as a greater investment in child care.

The environment is another major issue in the Richmond electorate that we feel very strongly about. All Australians deserve to live in a healthy environment with clean air and water, safe food and healthy ecosystems. Without a doubt, climate change is the most serious environmental challenge facing our local and global community. From this government we need to see policies that focus on shifting energy use and production to clean and efficient sources. Yet tragically, despite warnings from the scientific community, we have had a decade of inaction by the Howard government. But federal Labor is serious about climate change and will take practical steps to face this global crisis.

Firstly, we must ratify the Kyoto protocol. The vast majority of countries in the world have signed the protocol, Australia and the USA being notable exceptions. Australia’s per capita emissions are the highest in the world. Alarmingly, the Australian Greenhouse Office predicts that Australia’s emissions will rapidly rise to be 123 per cent of 1990 levels by 2020. The Howard government is making Australia an international disgrace when it comes to environmental concerns. We have to do our bit globally and sign Kyoto, we need to establish a national emissions trading scheme and we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by supporting green energy like wind and solar power and increasing our mandatory renewable energy target to five per cent. This will also serve to create regional jobs and foster the development of an internationally competitive renewable energy technology export industry.

We also need a strategy that will support our Pacific neighbours under the effects of global warming. Their future is most uncertain as they face rising sea levels, more extreme weather events and a collapsing environment. As a result, some of our neighbouring island nations will be flooded and uninhabitable. Climate change threatens our health, our economy, our natural resources and our children’s future. Delaying action for a decade is no longer an option; we have to see action on this. We have had a decade of the Howard government continually refusing to invest in the systems that strengthen our nation, our economy and our community—issues such as health, education and training, aged care and infrastructure.

I am calling on this government to stop looking after its own interests and to start listening to and addressing the needs of everyday Australians like those in my electorate of Richmond. We need to provide for the health of our families and our seniors so that they can get to a GP and get the dental work they so desperately need. We must address our national skills crisis and our soaring youth unemployment. We must look after our elderly and provide access to decent, affordable aged care facilities. We must support our working families with decent, affordable child care, and we must protect our environment and natural heritage and address climate change. These are the basics that underpin a great nation and these are the kinds of policies that we need to be delivering for Australians. Instead, we have seen massive inaction from the Howard government over the last 10 years that is greatly impacting upon my electorate.

As I said at the outset, we were rated as the second happiest community within Australia and the happiest within New South Wales. That is because of the great work that our community groups do and because of the great strength and the community spirit that we have.

Mr McMullan—it’s your great representation!
Mrs ELLIOT—It is certainly the community that are wonderful. In particular, we have so many groups right across the board who care for people. One group in particular is Twin Towns Friends and its marvellous coordinator, Doreen Welsh. She runs a volunteer group and they visit elderly people in their homes. They receive no funding at all. As I say, it is a volunteer group. Doreen is just fantastic. Day after day, she goes out visiting people. We have so many people who move to our area. They retire here. Often their spouse becomes ill. They do not have a lot of family living close by and it is groups like these that spend all their time visiting them and providing that great community support. We have so many groups right across the board throughout the entire electorate that are so committed and that do such a wonderful job. It is this that forms the basis of a strong community.

As I have said, all we have seen from the Howard government is inaction right across the board, which is outrageous. We have to provide so much more for those within our community who so desperately need it. We have also seen—and I hear this all the time in the area of the Northern Rivers—the National Party abandon rural and regional Australia, which is a concern to so many people. We have seen them selling out on issues like Telstra and industrial relations. Lately, we have seen them involved in so much infighting and being concerned about themselves. I am afraid they are a spent force in representing regional and rural Australia. It is a concern that people raise with me constantly. The reality is that they are not able to represent people within these areas.

The reality is that we need to have so much funding within these vital areas right across the board. As I said earlier, 20 per cent of our population is aged over 65. If we do not start addressing these issues now, the crisis that we are seeing in Richmond particularly in areas like aged care and health care we will be seeing right across the nation. We need to be formulating plans, particularly with the baby boomers retiring, to make sure that we can adequately provide as people are ageing. Instead, we have not seen the government addressing any of these issues at all.

The issue of youth unemployment that members spoke about earlier is also of major concern. Particularly in regional areas, the options for young people are so limited. So many families tell me now that the option of their child going to university is just not on their radar anymore. They just cannot access HECS fees at all. There is a lack of training and employment opportunities for them. It is unfortunate that so many of them will have to move away, which is very difficult. They do not have the financial resources to do that. We need to keep people within our areas, staying with their communities and also their families. It is so vitally important.

I would also like to commend the community who also work so hard to preserve our local environment. We have a beautiful pristine area. A quote that we often hear from locals is, ‘We don’t want to be like the Gold Coast.’ That is because we do not. We are a very unique area and we want to maintain that. We want to sustain and preserve that for the future.

Mr CAMERON THOMPSON (Blair) (7.09 pm)—It is a pleasure to be speaking this evening on the Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and addressing some issues of grave concern in my electorate of Blair. Recently I received a letter from the Premier of Queensland, Peter Beattie. I was not the only one; there were lots of Queensland coalition members who received letters from the Queensland Premier. He wrote to me and he wrote to the other members, and he called us ‘champions for Queensland’. Indeed, that is a correct assumption by the
Queensland Premier—we are champions for Queensland and we work very hard for Queensland. But it was a ridiculous and absurd letter from the Premier of Queensland, Mr Beattie, who spent $150,000 on ads in newspapers carrying on about what a disaster the Queensland health system has become. We all know that to be true—the Queensland health system is a disaster, and it is a disaster because of Mr Beattie. It is not a disaster because of the actions of anybody else.

The Queensland health service is run by the Queensland Premier and the Queensland ministers. They administer it and it is a mess and a disaster. Apart from the depredations we have seen as a result of Jayant Patel and the recent Caboolture hospital crisis, we have seen basically a winding down in health services in Queensland over many years. The Queensland Premier had the hide to write in his ads and to write in his letters to me and my colleagues that the problem with the Queensland health service was inadequate training of doctors at the federal level. That is the greatest tissue of lies in relation to Queensland that you could imagine. The problem in Queensland is that the Queensland system is so underresourced that doctors who train in that state leave the state. He is unable to keep the people in the state.

In this appropriation bill the question of health is so important to all Australians, and doubly so at the moment to all Queenslanders, who are faced with this abominably ramshackle state run system. We have an obligation here at the federal level—and I must compliment successive coalition health ministers for the efforts that they have gone to to increase the training of doctors and to facilitate the training of doctors from country areas. That has, I think, been a series of exemplary moves by those ministers to combat what is a very real problem. But for the Queensland Premier—who finds himself in more strife than Flash Gordon because of his continual neglect of the state and of the proper administration of the state—to try at the last minute, in a panic, to blame the Prime Minister of Australia and the federal health authorities for problems of his own making I think is just shameful. He wrote me a letter and I wrote him a letter back. I want to put it on the record:

Dear Mr Beattie

Thank you for your letter about the Queensland health crisis.

The state of our Queensland health system is of grave concern to me. I have noted your recent advertising campaign. It reminds me of earlier attacks you directed at me and the Commonwealth in relation to the Ipswich Motorway.

You cannot continue to blame others for the parlous state of planning and administration within your government departments.

Poor planning and under-funding by Queensland Health, workplace bullying, and the failure to direct resources to the coalface has resulted in the decline in Queensland health services.

Similarly, incompetence, politicisation, a focus on cost shifting and a failure to plan has produced a deficient proposal to upgrade the Ipswich Motorway. It falls short of the needs of our region in terms of traffic carrying capacity, network redundancy, separation of traffic streams and serviceability during construction.

Successive state ministers and their departmental side kicks have created a motorway plan based on self interest and a real political fear of nimby-ism. Sadly for your shoddy administration, motorists and industry in our region have a different requirement. They require a road that can actually carry the current and projected traffic numbers.
Your government has endorsed and continued to promote a motorway plan that would be redundant within five years of completion but only if unrealistically small assumptions about traffic growth are conjured into effect.

In reality, the motorway today is carrying more than the accepted capacity of a six lane road (80,000 vpd) on every day of the week.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a four-lane road that we are talking about here. I continue:

On Fridays, it is carrying 105,000 vehicles. If anyone in Main Roads still claims your plan can cope with these numbers or the real rate of growth, they should be sacked for incompetence or (more likely) sycophancy.

The rest will tell you that the alternative scheme for the Goodna Bypass devised by me and endorsed in the subsequent Maunsells Report will do the job for this region at least until 2035.

In your letter, you address me as a champion for Queensland. Thanks. Like all my colleagues (so named), I am concerned about issues like health and transport, where your government has failed.

In Queensland, the abysmal state of health services, the contribution of Jayant Patel, the Caboolture emergency crisis etc., all have occurred courtesy of Peter Beattie and the government you lead.

In our region, the Goodna Bypass will be the cornerstone of transport infrastructure for at least 25 years. It will be the basis of continuing development and regional capacity building for many decades more.

There is no viable alternative to the bypass.

Now the question for you is whether your government will help the Commonwealth to deliver this essential piece of infrastructure and do so in a timely manner.

Yours sincerely

Cameron Thompson

Federal Member for Blair

I wrote that letter to the Queensland Premier because the continual incompetence of the Queensland government presents itself in so many ways. As I said, we had the health crisis. But in my local sphere, the greatest question is: how the heck are we going to carry the huge traffic volume funnels through the Ipswich Motorway if we produce deficient plans that will be redundant before they can be implemented? That is the nature of traffic planning in the Beattie government.

The Beattie government, at the moment, have embarked on a proposal in which they intend to duplicate the Gateway Motorway. That motorway is a Commonwealth road. Why have they chosen it on which to implement a grandiose scheme? It is because they believe that they can implement enough tolls to recoup more money than it will cost them in the outlay. That is the only area in which they are prepared to contribute to traffic planning in our area, and it sucks. It is extremely deficient and the people in our region, who expect the services needed by the fastest-growing region in Australia to be met by the Beattie government, are being woefully underserviced and underrepresented by that government.

I want to speak some more about the Goodna bypass, because it will gobble up a lot of Commonwealth money. We have a strong Commonwealth commitment to going ahead with the Goodna bypass, which basically means duplicating the most congested section of the Ipswich Motorway. Instead of just having one road to drive on, there will be two. There will be proper network redundancy in the event that one road gets blocked. But what do we have from the Beattie government? We have a proposal to merely upgrade the existing road. They
have continued to flog that plan even though, on the basis of studies that have been conducted, that road as envisaged by the Beattie government will be a dead duck before it is completed.

I have spoken on that matter before in this House, but I want to bring to people’s attention something that has happened recently. The Queensland transport minister, Mr Lucas, in a last ditch attempt to try to get the upgrade idea up front and proceeding again, came up with a proposal. I have a schematic diagram of it here. In it, he claimed that they could construct the entire Ipswich Motorway, which is 19-odd kilometres long, build this new road while 100,000 vehicles a day try to drive on it and complete this entire project within four years.

The timing that the Queensland transport minister, Paul Lucas, presented to show that he could do it in four years demonstrated that they would dig up every inch of the road from Dinmore through to Granard Road—the full 19 kilometres. He divided it into five projects, so that everything except for the interchange at one end would be occurring at once. So if you hopped in a taxi or on your treadly and you set out from Dinmore to drive to Gailes, as 100,000 people do every day to try to earn their living, you would be riding or bicycling your way through construction sites, up and down and past the workmen and the excavators, every day for at least a full year of the project.

There would be five of those projects going on at once—that is, every single one apart from the interchange on one end. Then, for a period of at least two years, there would be four of the five projects all going at once. You can see that for a four-year period, the disruption to users of that road would be so woefully horrendous as to basically bring the entire economy of Ipswich to a halt, not to mention the grave impact it would have on every employer across the whole of the south-east Queensland region who draws workers from that region.

It is a shameful and disgusting plan. What really angers me more is the absurd party-first notion of representatives of the Ipswich district who continue to promote that project, as dead a duck as it may be. They continue to promote that project to the detriment of every single stakeholder in it. The state government will not be advantaged by a project that will basically strangle our region. Even though it continues to advance it, it will not be advantaged by such a proposal.

The Commonwealth, the road users, the transport companies—if you go to Australian Meat Holdings at Dinmore, the largest abattoir in the southern hemisphere, you will find that they have about 4,000 workers who have to get to work every day for the three or four shifts there. They have to arrive on time. They have 700 tonnes of meat going out every day. They cannot afford to have that disrupted by construction continuing for four years—they say, but in reality it will be at least seven years—in order to complete that project.

But we have now found that, after the state government and the state transport minister wilfully tried to con the people of Ipswich with a plan to basically squash the whole project down into four years, after they tried to rip off people with this notion that they could somehow conduct all this work while people are trying to drive on the road and that somehow this would be good for us, the reality of what is doable is now starting to come to light. The Commonwealth had funded one part of this project prior to the state government announcing its four-year scam. The Commonwealth had put up the funding for the most direly needed part of this road—that is, the interchange between the Logan Motorway and the Ipswich Motorway. The Commonwealth put up $160 million for that project back in June 2004, under the
The AusLink program. It was signed off by the minister and that money was allocated back in 2004.

The Commonwealth has now agreed to proceed with that as part of our plan to build the Goodna bypass and duplicate the road west of the Logan Motorway. The state government said that it could build that entire project. As to its timing, it said that it would start construction of the interchange in June 2006 and complete it at the end of August 2008. But what has happened now? Now that we are actually down to signing off on that individual part of the project—because the interchange is universal to the bypass and the upgrade project, the reality is becoming clear—the state transport minister says that the best he can do is start in December 2006 for a completion date in December 2008, and that is being optimistic.

So a six-month slide in the schedule from Mr Lucas shows you how much he was prepared to gild the lily. He was prepared to tell the people of Ipswich that he would have his ill-conceived construction project going on six months earlier than it was feasible for him to do it. So that is a six-month con for motorists, who basically are left with another six months to cover in that process. Similarly, he said in his ill-conceived four-year plan that he would start construction of the Wacol to Darra section in September 2006 and complete it in February 2009, I think. That has slid out again at one end—by more than a year. That is another part of the project that the Commonwealth is now endeavouring to proceed with. But of course the state is not able to meet their half-smart rhetoric with reality, and they are sliding back by a year.

So that is a year more construction and interference by the state than they had sworn on a stack of Bibles it would take and, if they think that that is small beer, they are wrong. To people who earn a daily living by using this road that is a disgusting act for them to do. We expect honesty from the transport minister in Queensland. We expect a straightforward depiction of the facts of this argument and all we get is him continually leading the chorus of ee-i-ee-i-oh with all his Labor mates in the Ipswich area to the detriment of every single soul endeavouring to use the road. This is no small project. It is going to be over $1 billion. In the end it is probably going to be something like $1.3-odd billion to deliver up the fully upgraded section of the Ipswich Motorway and the Goodna bypass as envisaged by the Commonwealth.

What is really important about this is the vision in the Commonwealth scheme, as it has been articulated, to separate the heavy through traffic onto the new road and to create a new route whereby all of those trucks will follow the Goodna bypass and go down the Logan Motorway and cross over the Gateway Bridge, so we have a purpose-built road capable of carrying B-doubles and that kind of heavy freight. According to the study that has been done by Maunsells, if the Goodna bypass is built, 60 per cent of the traffic that is currently on the Ipswich Motorway will find itself on the new road and to a large extent it will be those heavy trucks with the through freight.

Our vision, the vision of the Commonwealth, does not end there. We are saying that the state’s insistence that we continue to force those trucks down the Brisbane urban corridor and up and down past the QEII stadium is to the great detriment of all people who live in that area, with the pollution and the damage to the road that that causes. That will end under our proposal. But the state government, that supposedly have the responsibility for traffic planning in our region, are the donkeys determined to force the negative outcome by forcing that traffic to continue to use that abysmally underprepared road, past all those letterboxes and up
and down past the QEII stadium. That is absurd. They know that it is absurd and it is insane for them to continue to force this detrimental outcome on the people across the whole of southern Brisbane and Ipswich.

There is another point to this concerning the section of the motorway west of the Logan Motorway between Dinmore and Gailes. If we build the Goodna bypass we are going to have all that heavy traffic on the road and traffic that will remain on the existing Ipswich Motorway will be mostly the traffic that comes out of Brisbane Road. It will be the traffic of Ipswich, the people of Ipswich going shopping. People such as the member for Oxley and others in my area who continue to insist that even after we have built the Goodna bypass we should come back and build the state government’s grandiose scheme of a huge superhighway through there are just giving one more in the eye to the Ipswich people. We do not want the super-highway going through there if we have diverted all the heavy traffic into that other area. We want something that facilitates our community. I have heard that Queensland transport believe that if we do proceed as the Commonwealth is proposing, we might actually be able to reintroduce buses on the Ipswich Motorway. It would facilitate people shopping in Ipswich shops. Isn’t that incredible! That is anathema to the Beattie government. They want everyone to keep on using Ipswich as a dormitory and shop somewhere else—down in Indooroopilly or somewhere.

We have a vision of being able to reclaim the centre of Ipswich, the part of our town that has been a wasteland of trucks roaring by at 100 kilometres an hour, a sewer of trucks roaring by. We can reclaim it for the use of mums and dads and for people to go shopping and these sorts of things. We want greater access, more on-ramps and off-ramps on that road, more bus stops and more opportunities to access the train stations. The idea being paraded by the member for Oxley and the others in the region is insane, and the mayor has given vent to frustration about it from time to time. A great big motorway being built there would only inconvenience people who were seeking to shop and to take their kids to school. The Commonwealth is about building greater function into our area, greater service and greater flexibility for the people of Ipswich, a proper future under a proper plan. (Time expired)

Mr McMULLAN (Fraser) (7.29 pm)—It is very interesting to have the opportunity to speak in the debate on the Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and the Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2005-2006 on the day after the Treasurer has put out his ritual annual tough budget warning. I refer to yesterday’s Australian Financial Review, with the headline ‘Treasurer warns of tight budget’. I am sure that all the people who follow these things thought, ‘It must be mid-February again!’ It is perhaps a little earlier this year because of the Commonwealth Games, but essentially it is the Treasurer’s standard game—and I do not just mean this Treasurer. It is the standard game of ‘treasurers’, plural, and, in some ways, a proper and appropriate thing for them to do even in years when they do not mean it.

But this year I hope the Treasurer does mean it, because the concerns that he has articulated have been raised by a number of people in this parliament, including me, over the years, and he has pooh-poohed them over the years. He has ridiculed them, and now he is articulating them. I hope he means it and is going to pursue it. He has said two things, one of which I do not wish to pursue today, although it is a very important issue and I understand that others, including the member for Rankin, have raised it—that is, the risk that, if the budget is too stimulating, it will lead to increased interest rates. I think that is a question that the Reserve
Bank's statement has left open, but that is not where I want to go and that is not the issue I want to pursue.

The Treasurer also went on to say, 'The country had to avoid its long history of the economy faltering after a terms-of-trade boom ended in a bust. The country believes it can relax economic policy and spend up the proceeds. Inflation gets away, and the let-down is a hard adjustment.' He is absolutely right about that and is absolutely right that we are in danger of doing it all again. It is ironic that he should be the one making those comments, because he is substantially responsible for the fact that we are in danger of doing it all again because of the way in which the economy has been allowed to grow and grow in such an unbalanced way with a trade crisis of monumental proportions. It is hard to believe that Australia can have the best terms of trade in a generation and the worst trade outcome in a generation.

Looking at it in big-picture terms, over the last 30 years there have been two big economic management mistakes made in Australia. Of course every year everybody gets things right and wrong in economic management because it is an inexact art. But there have been two big economic management mistakes. In recent years we have been so focused on not repeating one of them that we are galloping towards the other. I refer to the enthusiasm and speed with which we are proceeding to repeat the mistakes that were made when the then Prime Minister was Treasurer in the late seventies and early eighties, when we frittered away the benefits of the resources boom.

We thought the resources boom would go on forever, we spent it in consumption and it drove up inflation, it created a trade crisis and, at the end of the day, we finished the then Treasurer and now Prime Minister, Mr Howard’s treasurership with double-digit inflation and double-digit unemployment. That prospect—not double-digit inflation and double-digit unemployment, because we are in a different global situation, but that serious question of frittering away the resources boom in short-term consumption—is what I want to pay particular attention to while we are debating these supplementary appropriation bills, as we are actually in the process of the government considering the next budget, and it is to that I wish to turn my attention.

I firstly want to refer to some recent remarks that were unfortunately very quickly retracted by the Minister for Finance and Administration, because I thought he had it right when he suggested cutting or abolishing the superannuation contributions tax was a more responsible and important reform than the current frenzy surrounding income tax and particularly income tax cuts at the top end. It is a great pity that the Treasurer seems to have overruled the finance minister and that this proposal seems to be off the table. It is very hard to believe that we are seeing a debate within the government dominated by calls for tax cuts when the official forecasts are suggesting continuing strong growth and the economy is already sucking in imports at an unsustainable rate.

As Max Walsh said in a recent article in the Bulletin, it is just not responsible—these are my words, not his, but that was the tone of his remarks—to be advocating the sort of tax cut that will lead to more consumption when excess consumption is one of those things, along with the shortage of savings, that is driving the trade crisis that Australia faces today. So this reinforces the point that cutting or abolishing the superannuation contributions tax is a much better policy option that top-end tax cuts in this year’s budget.
There is a real risk that the current and forecast surge in revenue driven by the global resources boom will not last as long as we hope. After all, basic economics tell us that the higher prices will attract increased production to meet demand, and this will inevitably slow the price boom for our resources. All booms end; this one will too. When the current Prime Minister was Treasurer, Australia frittered away the benefits of the last resources boom. We must not repeat that mistake. We need to use this temporary benefit to buy some real reform, some genuine structural change in the economy and some lasting social benefit.

One option would be a major program of infrastructure investment, but a cut in tax on superannuation contributions would deliver some real reform and deliver benefits to working Australians, yet not exacerbate the pressure on imports or interest rates. Access Economics has warned that a large tax cut and its consequences might lead the Reserve Bank to increase interest rates. This would make it at best a zero sum game and would leave many families worse off. But using the surplus to cut or abolish the superannuation contributions tax would boost the retirement incomes of all Australian workers without running these risks. The benefits would be substantial and real but would be locked up for the future—and boosting savings and retirement incomes is a significant long-term need. Such an initiative would not be just a tax; it would be genuine reform. But any step in this direction needs balanced consideration.

Last year the Treasurer delivered big superannuation tax cuts to himself and all those, including me, in higher income brackets, while low- to middle-income earners got nothing. We cannot justify doing this again. At the same time, the superannuation co-contribution scheme, which is claimed to be designed to assist those on lower incomes, is so open ended that much of the benefit flows to low-income earners in high-income households. Given that the biggest winners from abolishing the contributions tax would be high-income earners again, some balancing measures would be required. On the superannuation front, this would need to include attempts to better target the benefits from the co-contributions scheme or looking at other measures to balance the flow of benefits.

In addition, another genuine reform which might balance the flow of benefits would be to target such tax cuts as are responsible to low- and middle-income households to reduce the punitive effective marginal tax rates they face on any extra income they earn. Properly structured, this could also constitute long-term structural reform because it has the potential to address work disincentives at a time when demographics and economics are combining to put pressure on the labour market. There are many alternative packages which could be considered. The key questions to ask are: does the change address long-term economic and social challenges? Will the measures exacerbate our trade crisis? Will the proposals put upward pressure on interest rates? Abolition of, or substantial cuts to, the tax on superannuation contributions passes all these tests.

It is a great pity that our reform-shy Treasurer seems to have ruled it out. Let us hope the Prime Minister backs his new Senate leader and overrules the Treasurer. That is where the nation’s long-term economic and social interests lie. So I want to put that firmly before the parliament as a proposition that I think is far superior to the fevered pursuit of high-income tax cuts, unless those are funded by equitable base-broadening measures.

I turn now to another broad economic issue that I think the budget almost certainly will not address—because everyone is very complacent about it as the superficial statistics look good—but where I think there is a serious problem in our country. Contrary to popular belief,
this year’s budget needs a jobs focus as well as needing to respond to the emerging skills cri-
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or below those of the recession in 1990-91. The failure of the Howard government to create full-time jobs has left families vulnerable.

It is also very alarming that at a time of such significant underemployment Australia should be suffering a skills crisis. There is obviously no shortage of Australians available and willing to work. The skills crisis is not being caused by too much success in employment generation. It is an indictment of a decade of underinvestment in skills development and training. The 2006 budget needs an employment and skills focus. If this Treasurer’s 11th budget is as complacent on this front as his previous 10 have been, Australian working families will bear the burden.

In the remaining five minutes, I want to come back to a comment I made previously about economic debate in this country. In the lead-up to the 2005 budget in the United Kingdom, the British Institute of Fiscal Studies published an authoritative examination of the options open to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but nothing comparable is published in Australia. The UK commentary examined questions such as: how likely is the Chancellor to meet his fiscal rules, and what has been the distributional effect of the government’s tax and benefit policy decisions to date?

Despite good work by many commentators, there is nothing to equal this in Australia—and we would be well served if there was. Similarly, after the UK budget the IFS published a comprehensive budget analysis which contained both macro-economic and distributional analysis. Although we will see much well-informed commentary after the budget, there will be no equivalent independent and authoritative analysis, and our democratic debate is the poorer for it. That is why I have been calling for some time for Australia to establish a body similar to the UK’s Institute of Fiscal Studies to enhance the quality of our economic debate here. The quality of our economic debate is not an esoteric matter which affects only economists and politicians. If it was, it would not be worth spending even a dollar on it. But the experience of previous decades shows that the quality of economic analysis and debate in any one period is a significant factor in creating the preconditions for strong economic growth in the future.

The great economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s had their origins in the quality of the economic debate and analysis in earlier years, but the pace of reform is slowing. That is why we need to reinvigorate the economic policy debate. We cannot afford to repeat the complacency of the last period, as we did in the beginning of the 20th century, when Australia was complacent and slipped down the global economic league table. It took much debate and many difficult reforms in the 1980s and 1990s to turn this around. The signs of such complacency are re-emerging.

There are some useful elements already there to structure such a debate. If the Productivity Commission was given the role it should have in looking at the key economic issues, such as infrastructure investment and skills development, it could make an even bigger contribution to the economic debate. That would be a very substantial contribution. We already have that body, and it is very good. But we need something similar in the general area of economic policy, and fiscal policy in particular. There is a lot of rubbish talked about economic policy in Australia—we just need a factual base. We will still disagree about what measures we should take, because you bring values to bear on the data, but we need an independent source of the
information. Even a cursory examination of the British Institute of Fiscal Studies makes the contrast stark.

An April 2005 briefing note assesses the government’s management of the public finances over an eight-year period and judges it against the rules it sets itself to constrain public sector borrowing and debt, and against the performance of other industrial countries over the same period. It then discusses how the public finances might evolve, given the tax and spending policies of the three main parties. That is, it looks at not just the government but at the opposition proposals and, in the case of the UK, the third party. I would be interested to see what they would think if they looked at the Greens’ approach in Australia: a very interesting but a very short piece of fiscal analysis. But in Australia the competing packages could well be assessed by such an independent institute.

A number of writers and agencies make good contributions: journalists in the media, Access Economics’s Budget Monitor and NATSEM’s important work on distributional analysis. But big gaps in Australia’s economic policy debate continue. No one initiative will solve that problem, but an Australian Institute of Fiscal Studies providing authoritative fiscal policy analysis and working beside an enhanced Productivity Commission, focusing on the big domestic and international economic policy challenges, will take us a big step forward. Economic policy debate in Australia today is dominated by simplistic slogans about surpluses and complacency built on the back of a one-off boost to our terms of trade. We cannot afford this arrogant complacency to continue. Reinforcing the institutional framework for policy analysis and debate will help.

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (7.49 pm)—I certainly welcome the opportunity to speak on Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2005-2006 as they form part of the government’s program, which has been a very responsible one from an economic point of view. This is a government that has created employment opportunities. It is a government that has created growth in real wages and has managed to keep inflation and interest rates low. So we really have a very proud economic record, and these appropriation bills form part of the strategy that underpins that economic record.

It is interesting to note that the member for Fraser was trying to draw some comparisons as to the relative performance on unemployment of the coalition and the current opposition. The people of Australia are not silly: they made their judgment in 1996 on the performance of the Labor government and they have repeated their judgment over a range of elections right up until the 2004 election, when they believed that the government best placed to keep the economy strong, the political party best placed to drive the economy harder so that we could achieve better economic outcomes for families and the whole community, was the coalition. Certainly people have little faith in the ability of the Australian Labor Party to manage the economy. They have passed that judgment time and time again. They have little faith in the Australian Labor Party to keep interest rates low. They have little faith in the Australian Labor Party to generate jobs. These appropriation bills are part of an ongoing strategy to build a stronger Australia and a stronger community.

I believe one of the major factors behind strong growth in regional and rural areas is infrastructure, and it is something that I want to focus on during my address tonight. I refer to physical infrastructure, such as road and rail, and also to infrastructure such as technology—vitaly important matters to the people of regional and rural areas. If we are going to have
strong investment in regional areas, people have to know that they can operate a business on a competitive basis and export their products around the country and the world from their regional location. A strong focus on infrastructure is part of that and is very much a strategy that this government has adopted.

Entrepreneurs in a range of locations in my electorate, such as some of the smaller centres like Bellingen or Bowraville, can service customers around the world through high-speed internet. It is very much a focus of this government to ensure that regional and rural areas have access to the sorts of telecommunications services that will enable regional Australia to remain competitive not only now but into the future.

Harking back for a moment to the issue of roads, one of the programs which The Nationals have been very much focused on is the Roads to Recovery program. This program has strengthened local road infrastructure in a range of local government areas around the country. It is interesting to note that most items that come out of regional and rural areas to be exported from this country begin their journey on a local road. That is why Roads to Recovery is vitally important. This program has enabled many local councils to improve the condition of road infrastructure for their ratepayers. I believe the success of the program is very much focused on the fact that it is local councils deciding local priorities, not Macquarie Street, Sydney, deciding what is right for regional communities and skimming off a substantial fee to go into bloated state bureaucracies. It is actually local councils on the ground making good local decisions because they understand their local area.

Another important area of infrastructure that concerns my electorate is the Pacific Highway. I recently distributed a newsletter inviting constituents to subscribe to regular progress updates on the state of the road. I also called on the members of my community to sign a letter to Mr Joe Tripodi, the state roads minister, who has become known around my electorate as ‘Slow’ Joe Tripodi because when ‘Slow’ Joe is on the job nothing happens quickly. Whenever ‘Slow’ Joe is around, there is one thing you are sure of: a grab-bag of excuses. No matter what the problem is, it is the federal government’s fault or someone else’s fault. If it is raining, it is the federal government’s fault. If the road is not finished, it is the federal government’s fault or there is some other reason. When ‘Slow’ Joe is about, there is always an excuse.

One of the projects that I have particularly focused on is called the Bonville deviation. Regrettably, notable is the large number of fatalities that have occurred in that section of road. We have had some 13 deaths since 2001, and the material that I have sent out to the electorate is encouraging people to write a letter to Joe or sign a letter to Joe, telling him to get on with the job, to get off his backside and stop whingeing and whining and make the Bonville deviation happen. This road is way overdue. It was originally planned in 1998, and the New South Wales state government announced it would fully fund the Bonville deviation. It was due for completion in 2003. ‘Slow’ Joe is a bit behind time on that one and we are certainly working hard to keep him accountable.

We have seen some action in Bonville. We have seen the start of some safety works, which is welcome—$5 million in safety works—but was ‘Slow’ Joe responsible for it? No. Who funded it? The federal government had to fund that. In addition, the federal government was so focused on the importance of the Bonville deviation that it offered ‘Slow’ Joe $30 million to advance the works and make things happen quicker. You would expect that, if any spending minister responsible for roads was offered $30 million to get things happening quickly, they

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would accept it. What did ‘Slow’ Joe do? He knocked it back. Today is 14 February and we have been waiting some 168 days since the $30 million was offered to the state roads minister—and he is still yet to take it up.

Remarkable as it is that a roads minister might reject such an offer, his excuse is even more remarkable. He gave the tenderers for the Bonville deviation some 13 weeks to submit their proposals. Then he gave the bureaucracy of the RTA some six months to choose between the tenderers. You may ask: was there a Melbourne Cup field of tenderers? It could be a very complicated job with 50 tenderers and lots of paperwork to go through to pick the one that would give the best value for taxpayers. How many tenderers did ‘Slow’ Joe have to pick from? Two! He has allowed his bureaucracy six months to choose between tenderer A and tenderer B—so committed is he to take up the $30 million offered by federal roads minister Lloyd to get this work started. It is no wonder that he is known as ‘Slow Joe Tripodi’ around my electorate.

There is a tremendous contrast between the federal roads minister, who is focused on making things happen with $5 million for safety works and an offer of $30 million to accelerate the Bonville deviation, and the state roads minister, who really wants to see things happen at a very slow pace indeed. Minister Lloyd and Minister Tripodi are like cheese and chalk. I have been working hard to bring to the attention of all the people in my electorate the need to keep pressure on Mr Tripodi. I have been working with my state counterpart, Andrew Fraser, the member for Coffs Harbour. He has been putting pressure on Mr Tripodi, but it is a tough ask. Mr Tripodi is very keen to sit on his backside and live up to his reputation of being ‘Slow’ Joe.

Another important thing about the highway is that we have had massive growth in heavy vehicle movement, which has increased by some 34 per cent between 2001 and 2004. I am delighted that we have been able to negotiate under AusLink some $960 million of state and federal money to be invested in the road over the three years between 2006 and 2009, because there is another important stretch of road which vitally needs upgrading: the Sapphire to Woolgoolga road to the north of Coffs Harbour—some 15 kilometres of road with 37 junctions. With 2,000 heavy vehicles thundering down that road every day, a massively growing population and lots of people commuting to Coffs Harbour from the outlying northern beach suburbs, it is a disaster waiting to happen—a mix of high-speed heavy vehicle movement through-traffic mixing with local residents making their way to work. It is vital we get that road upgraded as quickly as possible. I am delighted that we have been able to include that project within the next three-year funding plan. It is an absolutely vital project and one that my electorate is very focused on.

In talking about infrastructure, rail is also vitally important. It is very difficult if you upgrade a road network and you do not do something about rail, because you will only clog up the road network due to increased traffic. So the federal government is not only focusing on the Pacific Highway and road infrastructure but is investing some $450 million to upgrade the east coast rail line between Sydney and Brisbane, aiming to take some 120,000 containers a year off road onto rail by the year 2011. The federal government through AusLink is very focused on ensuring that we have the sort of transport infrastructure that will make Australia a strong economy and also make business competitive in regional and rural areas through a combination of highway upgrades with a strong focus on rail—a focus that has been missing.
The New South Wales government has allowed the state rail network to deteriorate to a terrible state. The federal government has had to take a lease over the rail line to get this vital piece of infrastructure going and, through the ARTC, manage rail infrastructure in an efficient way so that rail carries its share of the total transport task.

I would now like to turn to telecommunications. I mentioned earlier the vital nature of telecommunications services for doing business in regional and rural areas, which need to be able to use high-speed internet to access customers around the world. We have, I believe, a good story to tell in relation to telecommunications. We have seen Telstra roll out infrastructure around the country. I think it is important that we move to full private ownership of Telstra. We have seen the telecommunications changes that have occurred to date make some dramatic improvements to the Australian economy. The Allen Consulting Group report for the Australian Communications Authority said that Australia’s economy was some $10.3 billion bigger in 2003-04 than it would have been without the introduction of telecommunications competition in 1997—a vital statistic—that small business would be some $2.16 billion better off in 2003-04 than it would have been without the introduction of competition at that time and that an additional 29,600 jobs have been created in the Australian economy as a result of competition.

I see that the member for Hinkler has just come into the chamber. He is very focused on the important role that telecommunications plays in rural and regional Australia. He is very focused on the importance to local businesses, local schools and local hospitals of having quality telecommunications. And this government has met that challenge. We have recently seen that over $3 billion is to be invested through the $1.1 billion Connect Australia program and the $2 billion communications future fund, which will ensure that regional and rural areas have quality telecommunications not only now but also in the future.

In my electorate, 29 exchange areas have been enabled for ADSL since the beginning of 2003. Over the same period, 26 mobile phone towers have been built and we have seen a dramatic improvement in mobile phone coverage and a dramatic improvement in high-speed internet roll-out. We still have a lot more work to do. The National Party is very focused on the fact that this process has to continue and is vitally important.

I would like to talk for a moment on the issue of health. The National Party is very much focused on the rural health strategy—

Mr Neville—Indeed!

Mr HARTSUYKER—The member for Hinkler agrees. He is very much focused on health needs in his electorate—a very well represented electorate, I might say. The federal government is very focused on health needs in regional and rural areas. We need to deliver quality health services no matter where an individual chooses to live. In Coffs Harbour, we have seen a $3 million investment in the rural clinical school. We can encourage more people to practice medicine in regional and rural areas if we get them training there. It is a great success. The University of New South Wales is doing a great job through the rural clinical school in Coffs Harbour in training young doctors in regional areas, and hopefully they will continue to practise there when their training is done. This is underpinned by a range of other measures such as bonded scholarships and reserve places in medical schemes for people from regional and rural areas.
Another fine part of the rural health strategy is the Medical Specialist Outreach Assistance Program, which funds medical professional specialists in regional areas so that people can receive the services they need in their local towns and regional centres rather than having to travel to Sydney. For many elderly people in particular, a very long journey to Sydney or Brisbane to receive specialist services can be quite a daunting task, not only in the procedures they face as a result of their illness but also in having to travel a long way from home and their support networks. That is why this government is focused on delivering the services where people live. It is not focused on the metropolitan centres but on equity of access to medical services no matter where you live. In 2004-05 some eight specialist practitioners operating under the scheme provided services to 3½ thousand patients.

The government is very much focused on infrastructure and the need to provide quality medical services in regional and rural Australia. The government is very much focused on the needs of a range of communities right around the country. I am proud to be part of this government because of that. I see infrastructure as a vital priority. I know that the member for Hinkler agrees. He is very focused on physical infrastructure and telecommunications infrastructure. As secretary of the backbench policy committee on health, I am very much focused on the need for quality health services. We see equity of access and opportunity for people to receive those services as being of vital importance. So I commend these appropriation bills to the House. They form part of what is a very solid program by a responsible government which sees a strong Australia and a strong economy as major objectives and is going to continue to deliver for the Australian people.

Ms HALL (Shortland) (8.05 pm)—It is interesting. If this is such a strong budget and such a strong government, why couldn’t the member for Cowper use the full 20 minutes that he is allocated to discuss the appropriation bills? I will touch a little bit on some of the issues that the previous speaker mentioned in his contribution, but I will approach it from quite a different perspective to the one that he approached it from.

This is an arrogant, out-of-touch government that is pursuing its extreme agenda. It is a government of zealots driven by a philosophy based on individualism. There is no recognition of the fact that people succeed, strive and enjoy happiness more when they live together and are part of a community. Rather, it is a government that promotes winners and losers, in groups and out groups. As such it gains its strength from the fact that it causes great divisions within the community. It is beholden to its masters in big business, and its extreme arrogance is demonstrated by government member after government member coming up here to this House and attacking the state governments.

If this is such a strong budget and if this is a government that is putting forward such a strong budget for the people of Australia—looking after the people of Australia, moving Australia ahead—why is it that the members of that government cannot talk about the achievements of the government? Rather, they focus on the state governments. It seems to me that what they are doing is what they do time and time again in this parliament, and that is pass the blame for their failures on to somebody else: ‘It wasn’t me. I knew nothing about it. It’s the state government. It’s the local government. I will take no responsibility whatsoever for what’s happened.’

When history reviews the achievements of the Howard government I do not believe that it will treat it very kindly. I think it will find a place in history of being a time of great division,
a time when Australian has been turned against Australian and when certain groups of people within our community have really been disadvantaged. I look at what has happened over the last 12 months and I see the Australia that I know and care very deeply about changing before my very eyes. Telstra legislation passed through this parliament to privatise Telstra, yet people in my electorate cannot even get mobile phone coverage. People in my electorate have problem after problem with their telecommunications. The workforce that Telstra employs has been downgraded considerably. I believe that this does contribute to the problems that I see in that area.

We had the industrial relations legislation pass through this parliament at the end of last year, legislation that I believe is going to extremely disadvantage many people that I represent in this parliament. The industrial relations legislation and the AWAs that will come into play will be fine if you have got a skill that no-one else has or if you are in a highly paid job. But, if you are a person that does not have that level of skill, your wages are going to be eroded, your conditions are going to be eroded and you will have less time to spend with your family. The government says nothing has happened. The opposition forecasted that there would be these changes, and I stick by that. But it will be slow. It will not happen today. It will not happen tomorrow.

At the weekend I heard of a case of a young guy who is going to university in Sydney and was working as a roadie, setting up for performances. He was told he had to be at work by six o’clock and that if he was not at work by six o’clock he did not have the job. He sat there for two hours, and the work started at eight o’clock. He officially finished at 12 o’clock, but the next two hours was spent tidying up. He was paid for four hours. He complained about it—and he did not get called in again. He needs that money to survive. These are the types of things that this government is allowing to happen.

The Welfare to Work legislation that passed through this parliament late last year is also legislation that I think has the ability to change the face of Australia. This legislation is going to disadvantage people who are on a disability support pension. I believe it will in fact make it harder for them to return to the workforce. As a person who worked for many years with people with disabilities to help them to secure employment, I know that the legislation is not the right way to achieve that. As recently as two weeks ago I had a constituent sitting in my office who had applied for the disability support pension and been rejected. He has quite a severe disability. When he was assessed he was allocated the 20 points he needed to qualify for the disability support pension, but those who make the decisions in Centrelink said no. They said that with some training he would be able to get a job. This gentleman comes from a non-English-speaking background, he cannot read or write, but he is being sent off to train. Added to that, Centrelink have refused to grant him a sickness benefit. They say he has to apply for Newstart and actively job search. I believe that the government will be liable if this constituent obtains a job and then injures himself or those he is working with, because his condition is such that it could jeopardise those people working around him.

Another flow-on from the government’s Welfare to Work legislation is shown by a case I raised in the House last week. An elderly woman, 61 years old, is caring for her mother, who suffers from dementia. Her mother needed to sell her home, which is in an area where the values have skyrocketed. It is a little miner’s cottage, but she received somewhere in excess of $500,000 for that house. That money is with the protective commissioner. The woman who is
looking after her cannot draw on it, cannot touch it in any way. Her husband is a pensioner, but because her mother is not eligible for the pension because her assets are too high this woman is unable to get a carer payment. So she is put in the position of either having to look for a job, to actively job search, or having to undertake volunteer work. Her mother requires 24-hour day care because she has severe advanced dementia. This woman is saving the government a considerable amount of money, yet she is being disadvantaged by this government.

Another example I would like to bring to the attention of the House is that of a number of gentlemen who are working for a Meals on Wheels group within my electorate. The week after the legislation passed through the parliament my office was inundated with calls from these gentlemen who were undertaking their mutual obligation by working 15 hours a week for Meals on Wheels. They were all in excess of 60 years of age, but the Centrelink officer in question had advised them that now this legislation was through they had to actively job search. I am sure that members in the House know that that is not correct; that is not a requirement of the legislation. But the point I am making here is that the government did not even get the information to their Centrelink officers so they could administer the changes properly. In fact, I had to provide the Centrelink officers with the information so they could take it back to their offices and educate their staff as to what the requirements of the legislation were. I think that is a disgrace.

Today the Minister for Human Services said that there had been 24,000 days of unplanned staff leave in Centrelink over the last 12 months and that he has been able to reduce it. He also said that the Centrelink lines were shorter. I suggest that maybe the minister could put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and stand in one of those Centrelink lines. I actually did that in January. I went to pick up a carers allowance package for a constituent, and I stood in that line for 45 minutes before I could get some papers to take home to that constituent, who was housebound. If that is improving a system and making the Centrelink line shorter, I would hate to see what will happen if this minister is allowed to be in control of Centrelink for too much longer. I fear that those lines will extend outside the door.

Also, at that particular time people were contacting my office because they were being told that they needed to wait for between two to three weeks for an appointment. These were people who had absolutely no money at all. It is hardly what you would expect from a department that this minister has made twice as efficient! I suggest it takes more than getting rid of those 24,000 days unplanned leave to enable Centrelink officers to do their job a lot better than they have in recent times. Maybe providing them with the information that I provided to the Centrelink officers on Welfare to Work might help them.

Other legislation that has passed through this House includes the voluntary student unionism legislation. That has cost the University of Newcastle $6 million. I hardly see that that will benefit the people whom I represent in this House.

That brings me to the issue of health. Last night in the House I raised the issue of doctor shortages. I believe what the member for Cowper believes: we should have equity of access to health care and health services. But, unfortunately, in Shortland we do not have that equity of access. We are not considered to be regional or rural in the sense that the people living in the electorate of the member for Cowper are. The area that I represent is identified as an area of labour force shortage. The area that I represent has a number of doctors, all of whom have
closed their books. The area that I represent in this parliament has a doctor who has just re-
tired and left 2,000 patients without any access to medical treatment.

Unfortunately, because the government’s policies are geared towards supporting people in
electorates like the member for Cowper, the people of Shortland are disadvantaged. It is not
equity of access for all; rather, it is equity of access for those few who members on the other
side of the House seek to represent. I find that an absolute disgrace. Within health, we still
have an inordinate waiting list for public dental services. This government continually refuses
to reintroduce the Commonwealth dental health scheme that it abolished when it was elected
in 1996.

In the Shortland electorate, we are still trying to get our Medicare office in Belmont back,
but the government ignores us. In Shortland, all the elderly people—people like the Swansea
pensioners who visited me here in Parliament House today—have to pay more under the PBS
and are unable to get their calcium tablets on the PBS, all because of the actions of this gov-
ernment. The Minister for Health and Ageing gave that ‘rock-solid, ironclad guarantee’ that he
would not lift the Medicare safety net before the last election, and we all saw what he did
there. Women in the Shortland electorate who are outside the breast-screening target group
aged 50 to 69 are still unable to have their mammograms done in the public system. Adding
insult to injury, the amount of money available to them as a refund under the Medicare sched-
ule is nowhere near what it costs. This government has made a practice of disadvantaging all
those people, but not its mates in big business, the high-flyers that it sees can give it an advan-
tage.

If you look at education, you see the government’s approach to the skills shortage is: ‘Let’s
bring more people in from overseas. Let’s bring doctors in from overseas. Let’s bring appren-
tices in from overseas.’ How about investing in apprentices here and in the young people of
Australia? When we debate TAFE and university legislation, for the government it is about
linking funding for those institutions to workplace relations, requiring the staff that work there
to sign AWAs. It is an absolute disgrace.

Whilst the government is cutting back on these vital services to people that I represent and
people that the member for Ballarat represents, moving to privatise Telstra and doing scoping
studies in preparation for privatising Medibank Private, it is spending millions and millions of
dollars of taxpayers’ money on advertising. In the lead-up to the Workplace Relations
Amendment (Work Choices) Bill, it spent $55 million on its propaganda campaign. Add to
that the $152,000 that it spent on booklets that were to be sent to households throughout Aus-
tralia. There were 458,000 booklets, but the government decided that it did not like the word-
ing, so it just pulped them. And it is interesting that $120,000 of the money for printing those
booklets went to Howard government mates: they were printed by Salmac, a company that is
very closely aligned with the Liberal Party. And now I see that the government is all set to
spend another $143 million on more propaganda. The government is arrogantly planning to
spend at least another $143 million on advertising in the lead-up to the next election.

Mr Neville—Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like a clarification if the member will accept the
question.

Ms Hall—No.
The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hatton)—The member for Hinkler has asked whether the member would accept a question.

Ms HALL—No.

Mr Neville interjecting—

Ms HALL—I understand why the member opposite is a little bit defensive, but this government has made an art of spending taxpayers’ money on propaganda to sell its attacks on the Australian people. This government has really exploited the Australian people.

I wanted to mention how the government has failed the veterans in Australia and how it has cut money to veterans’ groups—it will not even supply them with stamped envelopes to submit applications for pensions. I wanted to touch on AusLink from the perspective of the people I represent. They believe that the federal government is not putting their share of the money into the funding of the Pacific Highway. This government stands condemned for its failure to look after the Australian people. (Time expired)

Ms KING (Ballarat) (8.25 pm)—In this debate on Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2005-2006 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2005-2006, I want to focus on the Howard government’s neglect of two areas vital to the economic development of our regions—infrastructure and regional universities—and in particular how this neglect is impacting on my electorate of Ballarat. The government does not have a comprehensive plan for addressing Australia’s regional infrastructure needs. Road funding in this country has become a national joke. The government has abrogated responsibility for the national highway network, turning it from a federal responsibility into a patchwork of projects requiring state, federal and private funding. It has continued through this process to politicise road funding and has failed to take up Labor’s suggestion of a national infrastructure advisory council, which would take the politics out of infrastructure funding and introduce cost-benefit analysis into the decision-making process.

In my own district we felt the effects of that when, despite all the evidence, the government had to be brought kicking and screaming to finally agree to fund the Deer Park Bypass. Even then, it has not funded the entirety of the project, extracting a proportion from the state government for what is clearly a national highway project. It was only when the state government agreed to kick in a proportion of the funding for a project that should have been funded by the federal government years ago that we saw any movement on this issue.

Now I see the comeback senator, Senator Michael Ronaldson, has finally had something to say on the Deer Park Bypass. Having been in this place for 11 years and having mentioned Deer Park only once—in his farewell speech—it is plainly hypocritical that he now wants to champion the project at the eleventh hour. This is the man who during the 2004 election campaign called the Western Highway Action Committee, me and all of the residents of Ballarat who were desperate to get this project funded, ‘immature and doing a dummy spit’. Why? Because we dared to criticise the Howard government for committing only a fraction of the funding needed for this project, effectively delaying its start until after the 2007 federal election. To the comeback senator I say: if you are as interested in this project as you feign to be, stop point scoring and work constructively with the state government to get this project up. The project has suffered enough from Liberal Party politics and it should not suffer any more because of you.
The state government should never had to have put in money for this project because it is part of the national highway network. It was a network that, until the federal government re-wrote the ground rules, was 100 per cent the responsibility of the Howard government to fund. The state money, as welcome as it was, could have been spent on state road projects in my area that are vitally important. It could have been spent on projects such as improving the Midland Highway—the highway that links the two great regional cities of Geelong and Ballarat. Upgrades to the Midland Highway are urgently needed. But now that the Howard government has moved the goalposts on national highways and required state governments to put some of their road funding into those previously 100 per cent Commonwealth government funded roads and further politicised road funding through AusLink the chances of getting any road projects up has been made that much harder, unless you are in a Liberal Party target seat.

Voters in Australia, especially those living in regional and rural Australia, deserve much better than this. They deserve a federal Labor government, which will base infrastructure spending on rational, impartial, unbiased analysis of needs, not favours for their mates. A Labor government will conduct a national infrastructure audit to establish a comprehensive and effective analysis of needs nationwide. A Labor government will establish a national infrastructure priority list to allow for sensible strategic planning. It will create Infrastructure Australia, a Commonwealth body with the special function of driving infrastructure rebuilding. It will establish the Building Australia Fund, a future fund that could make a positive contribution to our productive capacity. And it will work hard to reduce complex and overlapping regulations between the Commonwealth and the states, producing the capacity to work smoothly together, rather than the undermining and adversarial example set by the Howard government at Deer Park.

For 10 long years, the Howard government has presided over a severe deterioration in the building blocks of our national economy: our key infrastructure assets. It has failed to take advantage of 14 years of continuous economic growth, and has only now belatedly recognised that working with the states in a coordinated action on significant national economic infrastructure is in the national interest. And even now, that coordinated action has been undertaken grudgingly, with point scoring and an eye to the main chance at every step. The Howard government must address the structural impediments in our infrastructure in order to guarantee our ongoing international competitiveness and prosperity. Our regions demand no less. Despite the minimal agreements reached at COAG, there is much more to be done.

On another front, if the Howard government is failing regional communities in meeting transport infrastructure needs, it has absolutely left us for dead when it comes to telecommunications. The Liberal Party and their National Party colleagues sold regional and rural Australia out when they determined that they would sell Telstra. Yesterday in Senate estimates, and widely reported in today’s media, we have seen the failure of the Howard government to deliver adequate rural and regional telecommunications services.

In Senate estimates hearings, Telstra revealed that the so-called local presence plan designed to prevent it from abandoning the country after privatisation did not include one single legally binding commitment for rural and regional Australia. Telstra also admitted that, despite its fault rates in rural and regional Australia being higher than in metropolitan areas, it had scrapped $200 million plans to repair parts of the network. And we have had revelations
from a former Howard government minister that the government has failed to honour its 2001 election promise to deliver mobile phone coverage on Australia’s highways.

Not one of the revelations in the Senate estimates hearings comes as a surprise to people living in regional and rural Australia. We already knew that the local presence plan was a farce. We have watched jobs disappear in regional areas as Telstra cuts back on the number of technicians who repair and maintain the network. We have just seen 13 full-time permanent positions go in my electorate in the past month, with more to come. And no amount of spin about casual contract labour call centre jobs being created can hide the fact that Telstra is dropping its country presence to a bare minimum of full-time permanent employees—largely focused on sales and marketing and less focused on maintaining, repairing and expanding the network.

Broadband services in regional and rural areas are woefully inadequate. The government has lauded its HiBIS program and its replacement program as being the solution. The reality is that Telstra should be providing these services anyway; it is its obligation to do so. Telecommunications is a vital part of our ability to function in a modern age, required by every sector. Schools, businesses, families, health providers and emergency services are increasingly reliant on good broadband and reliable technology. The recent bushfires in my own district pointed that out clearly as people desperately had to rely on the internet to try to get access to up-to-date information about bushfires in their area because they had no mobile phone coverage.

But what has now occurred is that Telstra will not provide these services to regional and rural Australians unless the federal and, in some instances, the state government give it money to do so. So much for a commitment to telecommunications services in regional Australia. People living in regional and rural areas did not want Telstra sold. Labor has consistently said that the Howard government should have fixed Telstra, not sold it. But the Liberal Party proceeded with the sale and the lap-dog National Party fell over themselves to follow suit.

Now we see Telstra talking up the 3G, third generation, network, and dumping the CDMA mobile network which cost the taxpayers of Australia some $115 million. I take no satisfaction whatsoever in seeing The Nationals scrambling to express their dislike of this plan. Because no matter what happens to the politicians who may cop the backlash at the 2007 election, the people who actually live and work and go to school in rural and regional Australia will already have paid the price.

The Howard government is also failing our regional universities and the communities that depend on them for economic growth. When we look at regional universities throughout Australia, we see a disturbing trend. Regional universities are almost universally falling behind the sandstone universities as a destination of first choice for school leavers, whether they are from the country or the city, and a decline in mature age student enrolments is set to compound the problem for universities, such as Southern Cross University, that rely heavily on this market.

Perhaps most indicative of the dramatic difference in the Australian culture versus the UK and US cultures of regional university life is shown by the recent first round of university place offers. In 2006, regional universities and regional campuses have been faced with a wholly unpalatable choice. They must decide between lowering their entry scores to fill places or losing funding—a hideous choice indeed.

MAIN COMMITTEE
The University of Ballarat in my district has seen a reduction in demand for places and has been forced to lower entry scores. Central Queensland University has had to hand back 490 government funded places, thereby losing $5 million in funding because it cannot fill them. LaTrobe’s regional campus at Wodonga has lowered scores to 50 to try and fill places in its business, hospitality management and arts degrees. Something very serious is happening to our regional universities, which poses a significant threat not only to the regional university sector but also to the regional economies with which they are inextricably entwined.

There are several contributing factors, and every one of them paints a dire picture for our regional university sector. First is the government’s 25 per cent HECS fee hike. With average household incomes in many regional areas well below those of city areas, there is no doubt that increases in fees have had an impact. With HECS debt blowing out to some $13 billion, even the most optimistic commentator cannot suggest that increases in fees are anything but a major disincentive for young people going to universities. Substantial increases to the cost of living under the Howard government have also contributed. Students are subject to all the same increases in petrol prices and health care costs and lack of housing affordability as the rest of the population, yet this government has consistently refused to extend rent assistance to students on income support. Worse, the government’s recent abolition of student support services will make it even harder for students to access accommodation, part-time jobs and support services such as child care and medical assistance.

Then there is the impact of years of declining funding for universities. Australia is the only developed country to reduce investment in tertiary education—the only one! This government has overseen an appalling eight per cent cut in funding for tertiary education, compared to the OECD average of a 38 per cent increase since 1995. This decline in funding has been felt hardest in regional universities, which have less financial capacity to absorb cuts or to attract other sources of income.

The government claims that young people are taking up more trade opportunities and that is why there has been a decline in demand at regional universities. But this simply does not hold true when assessed against continuing higher rates of youth unemployment in regional areas. We have labour shortages in many regional areas, while the government has introduced a special class of visa to attract overseas apprentices into Australia. Again, this simply does not hold true when assessed against the continuing higher rates of youth unemployment in regional areas, the labour shortages in many regional areas and the fact that the government has introduced this new visa to attract overseas apprentices into the country.

But perhaps most insidious is that softer demand for university places overall has seen students choose the sandstone institutions at the expense of smaller regional universities. The big question is why? I have no doubt whatsoever that it marks a significant and increasing decline in the standing of our regional universities. There is a kind of snobbery about education that is damaging our regional universities. The logic says, ‘If I’m going to be paying such high fees to gain a university education and I have the score or, for a full fee paying course, the cash to get into Melbourne, Monash or University of Sydney, why would I want a degree from a regional university?’

Clearly regional universities have much to attract students, so where does this distinction come from? Students in the United Kingdom do not recognise this distinction. Oxford and Cambridge are honoured not for their location in a major urban centre but for their centuries
of history and educational heritage. In my view, the neglect by former minister Brendan Nelson of regional universities and his promotion of the urban sandstone universities over regional universities has done much to promote this notion that somehow regional universities are second-class institutions. I believe this attitude is in danger of becoming so deeply ingrained that it could, if left unchecked, permanently damage the ability of regional universities to survive, let alone thrive.

Regional universities need much stronger investment, but they also need courses that will attract young people out of cities and into the regions. Deakin’s Geelong campus law school has been a good example, but we need more. The University of Ballarat, alongside La Trobe’s Bendigo campus, is pushing for a medical school, which would be an enormous boost for both regions and should be supported if the government is serious about the value of regional universities.

We also need to be able to attract substantial research funding. Again, former minister Brendan Nelson let regional universities down by pursuing a research quality framework that increases the concentration of research in the sandstone universities and ignores the importance of research at regional universities. It is time for the country’s leading academics in business, economic and medical research to be equally likely to come from a regional university. There is no reason for the sandstone universities to have a monopoly on leading research, but at the moment it is hard for regional universities to keep up, not because of a lack of talent, drive or hard work but because the funding simply is not there to support them.

Clearly, regional universities need to be able to attract the best academic and research staff, competing for staff on an equal footing to the sandstone universities. The University of Ballarat has been embroiled in industrial disputes for much of the past year, and the government’s extreme industrial relations agenda of providing no choice for new staff but to be on individual contracts is being pursued with some vigour.

University towns also need to work on supporting students properly by providing: quality affordable rental housing stock; vibrant entertainment, culture and arts precincts; good broadband access; excellent public study facilities; and a reliable public transport system. Regional economies prosper where there is a thriving university that is fully engaged with the local community. Sadly, the former minister forgot this. The alarm bells are sounding not just for regional universities but for those communities whose economies depend on them.

The policy areas of infrastructure and universities are just two areas where the Howard government is letting Australia’s regions down. In the areas of regional manufacturing and exports, regional health care, regional access to the arts, sports, culture and employment and skills training this government has failed to address the specific needs of regional communities. On coming to office the government closed the department for regional development, scarpered the regional economic development units and castrated the area consultative committees. It has never found a suitable ministerial home for regional development and has left it to become the plaything of the National Party. The much rorted Regional Partnerships program is the closest thing the government has, but it is a program in search of a regional development policy. It is a program out there in the ether, looking for a policy to drive it. It is clear that this government has no regional development policy, no clue as to how to develop one and no plan to grow Australia’s regions. They and the once great Nationals have let Australia’s regions down.
Mr NEVILLE (Hinkler) (8.43 pm)—Before I move the motion that the debate be adjourned, I would like to say, as a person who worked for many years in regional development before I came into this place, that while I have a great deal of respect for the member for Ballarat and know she is a very dedicated member—

Ms Hall—Mr Deputy Speaker, I raise a point of order. I do not quite understand: is the member seeking to make a contribution to the debate?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—The member for Hinkler has been called. If he wants to make a contribution to this debate—

Ms Hall—If he is not making a contribution to the debate, I would like to point out that I do not know under what standing order he can stand up and just make a comment. Because if he can then I will, and I believe the member for Ballarat would like to stand up and make a comment. But I must say that I have absolutely no problem with the member making a contribution to the debate—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Shortland will resume her seat. The member for Hinkler has not spoken in the debate. He has every right to speak in the debate. I have called him. If he wants to speak in the debate, he may.

Mr NEVILLE—I realise that I forfeit my right to speak further in the debate. As a person who put a lot of time into regional development, I have to say that the REDOs which the previous Labor government put into place were a dismal failure. In fact, not one of them survived once the government funding was cut off. It is all very well to argue the toss about what are good models for regional development, but the previous government’s model for regional development—

Ms King—I have a question that I would like to ask.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Does the member for Hinkler accept that?

Mr NEVILLE—Yes, I will accept the question from the member for Ballarat.

Ms King—The question is: what have you put in place instead? It is not about what the Labor government did; it is about what you have put in place. You scarpered the regional economic development organisations—absolutely scarpered them. But you did not put them in place.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Under the standing orders the question has to be brief.

Ms King—That was pretty brief; it was less than a minute.

Mr NEVILLE—It is a good question and it really goes to the heart of what regional development is all about. As an objective observer of regional development, which is my occupation, I have to say that neither government—of coalition or Labor persuasion—has ever given regional development the recognition it deserves. I think the failure of the REDO scheme—and I am coming to the member’s question—was that it depended entirely on federal government funding and, when that was cut off, the whole thing fell like a pack of cards. My personal view—and I am sure the member would agree with me on this—is that regional development only exists and prospers where the people involved with it have a sense of ownership.
Having lived with the regional development model for many years, the Queensland government have built a model of involvement. At least for the tourism side of regional development they have cultured a model under both coalition governments and Labor governments—so it is not exclusive but they have all had the good sense to understand how it works—whereby there is a membership base of somewhere between 400 and 600 members, depending on the size of the region. On top of that, the local authorities give money. On top of that again, the Queensland state government, to its credit—under both National Party and Labor governments, and it still exists under the Beattie government—have given another level of funding. So with those three levels of funding the regional development organisations, in respect of their tourism activities, have done extremely well.

The member has a valid point in her question insofar as no government of coalition or Labor persuasion has ever really seriously addressed the problem of building a fourth tier on that—a federal government tier. I suppose what the coalition has done has been to throw that job back to the ACCs—which, to the credit of the previous Labor government, were their invention. The ACCs, despite the criticism of some of them, have been very effective. In fact, I have two of the best of them in my electorate. I have one at the northern end of my electorate called the Central Queensland ACC, chaired by a fellow called Kym Mobbs, who is an exceptional practitioner. The ACC in the southern end is chaired—and most people in Australia know this man—by Bill Trevor, the mayor of Childers, whom you would remember from Childers backpacker fire fame. They are two men who are very proactive in bringing to the government projects that will enhance employment.

It is easy to say you can solve this problem by throwing money at it; you cannot. Unless there is that sense of ownership and involvement, it does not happen. I know this intimately because I was the regional development practitioner for a city and 10 shires. It is a very difficult job to pull all those diverse forces together. Coastal shires have the new lifestyle—the sea change mentality—the regional city for the area has a different mentality and the rural shires want to see the enhancement of rural life. You have to meld those forces together to create a generic promotion of that area.

I think the failure has been that we have so heavily complicated the system. The member’s question is a very important one; I am glad she asked it. I do not throw this back in her face; I really mean this from the bottom of my heart. We could be doing a lot more in regional Australia. The ACCs go a long way towards achieving that. I am not saying they are perfect. I am not saying that there is not a better level above the ACC. But in my area, because I have these very focused chairmen, we have been able to bring forward to the government some very important projects. Some of them are ACC regional partnerships, some are sustainable regions and some go back to the old regional solutions. There is a mixture of them.

To give you an example, a fellow called David de Paoli was growing chillies, and very successfully. What David de Paoli said was, ‘If I could get some money from the federal government, I would build a factory and I would process these chillies.’ I am not saying he did this just at the behest of the federal government; he put a lot of his own money into it as well. Now he employs over 100 people and is the leading chilli grower and manufacturer in this country and is exporting to the Middle East and Asia. That was about half a million dollars in round figures.
Then there was another company called Jabiru. You have all seen Jabiru aircraft at your airports. They are the little fibreglass planes that they are now using in aeroclubs. They come from a firm called Jabiru Bundaberg, which was founded by two men, Phil Ainsworth and Rodney Stiff, who had previously worked for the cane harvester manufacturer, Austoft, which you would be aware of, Mr Deputy Speaker Causley. They went out on their own and said, ‘There is a niche in the market for light aircraft.’ We have helped them on a number of occasions both with those sorts of grants and with export market development grants. The other day when the minister was not available at short notice because of the air crash—the name of which eludes me—and he had to go to the funeral, I was asked to open that plant. What a thrill it was not opening the plant but marking the step forward in that plant. Their thousandth aircraft went off the floor that day. This is a very small Australian company.

Then there is another firm that manufactures agrifibre. They have taken cannabis—the non-medicinal form, I might add—and used it to develop a fibre industry. That fibre will have a huge impact in the fibreglass and building industries and so on as it develops. Another project was soft shell crabs. I do not know if you know this, Mr Deputy Speaker—I did not know this—but at a certain time in its cycle of development the soft shell crab turns soft and sheds its carapace and its claws. Interestingly, during that short time it is soft.

If you harvest the crab at that stage you can cook it—the reason being that, during that period of going soft and shedding its carapace and claws, the crab purges itself, so there is no muck in its innards. So you have this beautiful fresh crab and you can eat the whole lot. If you harvest it at that stage the whole thing—the nippers, the legs, the carapace—is edible. Half a million dollars—it is huge business; six or seven times the price of fish on the international market. These industries are all worth about or under a half a million dollars.

Then there are the sea scallops. A firm in Bundaberg is growing the spat, the spat being the genetic product that creates the scallop. They take it out into Hervey Bay, to the east of Bundaberg, into farm type areas, where they deposit the spat and out of that grows the scallop and the shell and so on. It can increase the number of scallops in the area manyfold—three, 10, who knows how many times. That was done for half a million dollars.

I know that both the members in the chamber, for whom I have great respect, come from large provincial areas—Ballarat and the Hunter. Nevertheless, sometimes in country areas we look for the big hits in regional development. We look for the Comalcos. Not that I am in any way decrying Comalco. I would have Comalco in the southern end of my electorate, as I already have in the northern end of my electorate, tomorrow. But we often go for the big hits, and in this development of regional expertise we do not recognise the medium sized industry that employs 100 or 120 people. If you get four, five or six of these you can be employing anywhere from 500 to 750 people. In small and medium sized communities, that is a significant difference to the generation of industry in those areas.

So I appreciate the question. I know I have strayed beyond the general bounds of the honourable member for Ballarat’s question, but it is a thing I believe in passionately. I have never been able to get state or federal governments, even though they do it in tourism for some reason or other, to say, ‘Let’s empower the regional bodies to do this work.’ If you do not have the sense of ownership, the sense that you are creating jobs for your local region, it does not happen.
I have a great admiration for Gladstone, in the northern end of my electorate. For many years we had heard that there were $8 billion worth of projects on the drawing board. Gladstone is a totally different kettle of fish from Bundaberg, which is in the southern end of my electorate. Gladstone is the big industry. Gladstone is the fastest growing port in Australia. With 12 per cent of Australia’s exports it will rival the Hunter in the next 10 years. I do not say that with any sort of hubris but, if it is not ahead of them, it will be up there with them. It is big business. The honourable member knows that—she has seen Gladstone; she knows what it is all about.

Gladstone is a different kettle of fish. There we have big industries like Comalco, with 2,000 people employed in the construction and 600 permanent employees at the end of it. There will be 1,500 people employed to get to stage 2 and another 300 or 400 permanent employees after that. You would know that from the smelters in the Hunter Valley. But what they did in Gladstone was set up a development board—part local government, part port authority, part private industry. They said, ‘We’ll bring a practitioner in here. We will not tie him down with state development and this rule and that rule; we’ll let him be a free agent’—like a trade commissioner operates. Indeed, the person they appointed had been a trade commissioner and a consul-general in at least three overseas countries. The difference he made in two years was amazing. So the member for Ballarat is justified in asking that question. I think both sides of politics have really failed badly in not giving a sense of ownership to regional development in places like the Hunter, Ballarat, Bendigo, the Green Triangle, the Wide Bay region, the greater Mackay region, Townsville and the Cairns region. We have some amazing provincial cities.

One of the first jobs I had in regional development—and I started off, as you could imagine with my political background, being a bit ambivalent about it—was to analyse Gough Whitlam’s ideas on regional development. There are not many things on which I agreed with Gough Whitlam, I must admit, but he had the idea of going to the states and saying, ‘We’re prepared to take one of your provincial cities, like Albury-Wodonga.’ He apparently offered the same deal to Joh Bjelke-Petersen for Mackay or Bundaberg, which was not accepted; he was in the process of developing Monarto in South Australia. He said, ‘We cannot go forever just letting Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne’—and to some extent Adelaide and Perth—‘keep sprawling with no purpose. We need to have other cities in Australia that are not capitals that develop industry and purpose.’ To the credit of governments in New South Wales—and I know there has been a lot of criticism since and I know in some respects it failed—I think the Albury-Wodonga experiment has a lot to commend it.

For example, I still think today that, rather than let Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Ipswich continue to just sprawl, we would do well to go onto the Darling Downs, perhaps south of Toowoomba, between Toowoomba and Warwick, and build a new city of 200,000 or 300,000 people with fast rail links and road links to Brisbane—because that has to be done anyhow. Those on the Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services with the member for Shortland all know that, for the inland rail from Melbourne to Brisbane to work, we have to engage at some time or another with the Toowoomba range. Until we do that, a lot of these schemes are not going to work.

I think there is a great case for doing something about that and creating a new city on the Downs. It can be planned perhaps not with the same intricacy as Canberra but with the same sorts of values of wider footpaths and a better lifestyle. Plan it so you are not pouring money
down the drain patching up after the event. I got up to give a small contribution, but nothing affects me or goes to the core of my being more than regional development, and I thank the member for Ballarat for the opportunity. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

Main Committee adjourned at 9.03 pm
QUESTIONS IN WRITING

Recruitment Agencies
(Question Nos 1106 and 1108)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Trade, in writing, on 10 May 2005:

(1) What sum was spent on recruitment agencies in (a) 2001, (b) 2002, (c) 2003, and (d) 2004 by each department and agency in the Minister’s portfolio.

(2) Will the Minister provide a list of the recruitment agencies which are used by the department and agencies in the Minister’s portfolio.

Mr Downer—On behalf of the Minister for Trade and me, the answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

DFAT

(1) The department uses recruitment agencies to provide administrative support to DFAT selection processes. Costs based on financial year expenditure are as follows:

- 2001/02 – $69,267.33
- 2002/03 – $119,530.60
- 2003/04 – $134,114.24
- 2004/05 – $136,165.81

This does not include the fees paid to recruitment agencies for the provision of non-ongoing (temporary) staff and contractors as compiling these figures would involve an unreasonable diversion of resources.

(2) Verossity Pty Ltd (formerly Spherion Recruitment Pty Ltd)
- Green and Green Group

AusAID

(1) (a) $78,162.76
- (b) $96,782.40
- (c) $43,470.15
- (d) $67,549.13

(2) Alliance Recruiting Australia
- Allstaff Australia
- Dunhill Management Services
- Interim Office Professionals
- Recruitment Management Company
- Spherion Outsourcing Solutions
- Careers Unlimited
- Kelly Services Australia
- Robert Walters/Inc Dunhill Management
- The Public Affairs Recruitment Company
- Informed Sources
Select Australasia
Effective People
Patriot Alliance
The Green and Green Group

Austrade

(1)  
(a) $209,384
(b) $243,919
(c) $543,765
(d) $349,173

(2) 2001—
Manpower Services
Centaur Communications Ltd
Eva Helena Slotte
Spencer Stuart
Hudson Global Resources
RMC
M E Gray and Associates
2002—
Sheffield Ltd
Spencer Stuart
ESM (Executive Search and Management)
RMC
M E Gray and Associates
2003—
Spencer Stuart
Hays Personnel Services
Boyden Global Executive Search
Heidrick and Struggles Australia
RMC
Bronwyn Rodden
2004—
Hays Personnel Services
Heidrick and Struggles Australia
Horton International
Recruit Direct
Euro London Appointments
ABC Consultants Private
Hansen and Searson
Talent 2
RMC
Bronwyn Rodden
S Dryden

ACIAR:
(1) (a) $54,502.79
(b) $36,693.34
(c) $13,634.76
(d) $8,672.53
(2) Kowalski
Adecco
Allstaff
Julia Ross
Cordiner King

AJF
(1) (a) 297,675 yen ($4,593.82)
(b) nil
(c) nil
(d) nil
(2) Temp Staff Ltd (Tokyo) was used by the Foundation in 2001.

EFIC
(1) 2000/01 $265,533
2001/02 $129,400
2002/03 $99,114
2003/04 $230,830
(2) Board Search; Carmichael Fisher
Ellington Savage
ESperille
Hamilton James and Bruce
Hays Personnel Services
HR Matters
Hudson Global Resources
Lending Solutions
Link Recruitment Group
Management Recruiters Australia
Michael Page International
Prime Appointments
Pro-Ned Australia
Recruitment Solutions
Select Australasia

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
SOLs Outsource Legal Services
Spencer Stuart
TMP Worldwide
Tuckwell Trade and Logistics Personnel.

Pensions and Benefits
(Question No. 1177)

Ms Hoare asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 10 May 2005:

(1) How many people in (a) Australia, (b) NSW, (c) the electoral division of Charlton, and in the postcode area (d) 2259, (e) 2264, (f) 2265, (g) 2267, (h) 2276, (i) 2282, (j) 2283, (k) 2284, (m) 2285, (n) 2287, (o) 2289, (p) 2299, and (q) 2290, are recipients of the (i) Aged Pension, (ii) Disability Support Pension, (iii) Carer Allowance, (iv) Newstart Allowance, (v) Youth Allowance, (vi) Parenting Payment Single, (vii) Parenting Payment Partnered, (viii) Family Tax Benefit A, (ix) Family Tax Benefit B, (x) Child care Benefit, and (xi) Rent Assistance.

(2) In (a) Australia, (b) NSW, and (c) the electoral division of Charlton, how many people and what proportion of the population are receiving income assistance.

(3) In (a) Australia and (b) the electoral division of Charlton, how many recipients of Family Tax Benefit A received a debt notice in (i) 2002-2003 and (ii) 2003-2004.

(4) In (a) Australia and (b) the electoral division of Charlton, how many recipients of Family Tax Benefit B received a debt notice in (i) 2002-2003 and (ii) 2003-2004.

(5) What was the average Family Tax Benefit debt per family or individual in the electoral division of Charlton in (a) 2002-2003 and (b) 2003-2004.

(6) How many families or individuals in the electoral division of Charlton received a Family Tax Benefit debt notice despite having informed Centrelink within 14 days of a change in their circumstances.

(7) How many families with a Family Tax Benefit debt had part or all of their income tax refunds withheld to repay a debt in (a) 2002-2003 and (b) 2003-2004.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Data on customer payments by electorate is provided at the following site: http://www.humanservices.gov.au/publications/electorate_data.htm

(2) The proportions requested are shown in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Customers</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>4,948,608</td>
<td>18,972,350</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>1,595,346</td>
<td>5,983,604</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlton</td>
<td>34,903</td>
<td>114,892</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
Customer numbers represent total income support payments made by Centrelink for NSW and Australia.
Family Tax Benefit A, Family Tax Benefit B and Rent Assistance are not included in the calculation as these are not income support payments. These are assistance payments for specific purposes: Family Tax Benefit is a payment to help with the costs of raising dependent children, and Rent Assistance is for eligible people receiving more than the base rate of Family Tax Benefit Part A, to help with costs in the private rent market.
(3) (a) (i) In Australia in 2002–03, 538,133 families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit Part A incurred a Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt. (ii) In Australia in 2003–04, 116,787 families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit Part A incurred a Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt.

(b) (i) In the electorate of Charlton in 2002–03, 3,432 families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit Part A incurred a Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt. (ii) In the electorate of Charlton in 2003–04, 679 families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit Part A incurred a Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt.

(4) (a) (i) In Australia in 2002–03, 369,015 families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit Part B incurred a Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt. (ii) In Australia in 2003–04, 72,372 families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit Part B incurred a Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt.

(b) (i) In the electorate of Charlton in 2002–03, 2,382 families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit Part B incurred a Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt. (ii) In the electorate of Charlton in 2003–04, 428 families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit Part B incurred a Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt.

Note: The extraction date for the data is 25 March 2005 for both the 2002–03 and 2003–04 financial years. As debts for Family Tax Benefit Parts A and B cannot be reported separately some debts will be reported in answers to both questions three and four.

(5) For the electoral division of Charlton the average Family Tax Benefit reconciliation debt amount (a) for 2002–03 was $839 and (b) for 2003–04 was $1,017.

Note: The extraction date for the data is 25 March 2005.

(6) As there is no 14 day requirement to notify changes under the Family Assistance (Administration) Act 1999, the information requested is not recorded.

(7) The number of families with a Family Tax Benefit overpayment as a result of the end of year reconciliation process who had part or all of their income tax refunds withheld to repay a debt in (a) 2002–2003 was 215,569; and (b) 2003–2004 was 44,094.

Note: The extraction date for the data is 25 March 2005.

**Parenting Payment**

(Question No. 1493)

Ms Vamvakinou asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 26 May 2005:

How many persons in the postcode area (a) 3043, (b) 3045, (c) 3047, (d) 3048, (e) 3049, (f) 3059, (g) 3061, (h) 3063, (i) 3064, (j) 3428, and (k) 3429 currently receive Parenting Payment (Single).

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Data on Parenting Payment (Single) by electorate is provided at the following site:

**Parenting Payment**

(Question No. 1494)

Ms Vamvakinou asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 26 May 2005:

How many persons in the postcode area (a) 3043, (b) 3045, (c) 3047, (d) 3048, (e) 3049, (f) 3059, (g) 3061, (h) 3063, (i) 3064, (j) 3428, and (k) 3429 commence receiving Parenting Payment (Single) on or after 1 July 2004.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Data on Parenting Payment (Single) by electorate is provided at the following site:
Newstart Allowance
(Question No. 1495)

Ms Vamvakinou asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 26 May 2005:
How many persons in the postcode area (a) 3043, (b) 3045, (c) 3047, (d) 3048, (e) 3049, (f) 3059, (g) 3061, (h) 3063, (i) 3064, (j) 3428, and (k) 3429 receive Newstart Allowance in (i) 2002 (ii) 2003, and (iii) 2004.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Data on Newstart Allowance by electorate is provided at the following site:

Parenting Payment
(Question No. 1603)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 31 May 2005:
How many persons in the (a) electoral division of Prospect and the postcode area (b) 2145, (c) 2148, (d) 2164, (e) 2165, (f) 2175, (g) 2176, (h) 2178, (i) 2759, and (j) 2766 currently receive Parenting Payment (Single).

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Data on Parenting Payment (Single) by electorate is provided at the following site:

Newstart Allowance
(Question No. 1604)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 31 May 2005:
How many persons in the (a) electoral division of Prospect and the postcode area (b) 2145, (c) 2148, (d) 2164, (e) 2165, (f) 2175, (g) 2176, (h) 2178, (i) 2759, and (j) 2766 received Newstart Allowance in (i) 2003, (ii) 2004, and (iii) as of 1 May 2005.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Data on Newstart Allowance by electorate is provided at the following site:

Autism Spectrum Disorder
(Question No. 1660)

Ms George asked the Minister for Health and Ageing, in writing, on 2 June 2005:
(1) What is the incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in the Australian community.
(2) What is the explanation for the large increase in the numbers of children diagnosed with Autism in recent years.
(3) What funding is being provided by the Government for research into the causes of ASD, which organisations are conducting research and what is the nature of the research.
(4) What Commonwealth funding and programs are targeted at assisting children and adults diagnosed with ASD.
(5) Is the Government aware of the initiative by the Rotary Club of Dapto called ‘Partners in Autism Research’ which aims to raise $100,000 for Autism Research and that the ‘partners in Autism Research’ fund raising will be matched by the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund.
(6) Will the Government match contributions to the ‘Partners in Autism Research’ fund raising effort to advance research into Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Mr Abbott—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) There is a wide range of estimated incidence, most of these estimates are based on limited Australian surveys or overseas data. Variation in study methodologies, statistical variation and differences in diagnosis between clinicians are thought to be relevant factors. A recent study by Williams K, Glasson EJ, et al “Incidence of autism spectrum disorders in children in two Australian states”, in the Medical Journal of Australia 2005, reported an annual incidence of 8.2 per 10,000 children aged 0 – 14 years in New South Wales and 12.9 per 10,000 children aged 0 -14 years in Western Australia. The report was based on 1999 and 2000 data. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is currently preparing national estimates for inclusion in the revised Burden of Disease & Injury in Australia report.

(2) Some reports indicate an increase in the number of cases of autism diagnosed in Australia in the late 90’s and early 2000’s. However, it is unclear whether there is indeed an actual increase in the incidence of the disorder or if the increase is a consequence of other factors. To assess the level and any change of incidence requires consistent epidemiological studies.

(3) The Australian Government provides funding through the National Health and Medical Research Council for a wide range of research projects relating to mental health and neuroscience. Between 2000 and 2005, $3,653,386 was spent on research on autism spectrum disorders and related disorders.

(4) The Australian Government assistance for those with autism and their carers is provided through the government’s mainstream health, welfare, education and financial assistance programs. For example, assistance is available through Medicare attendance items, which can be used for the treatment of autism by medical practitioners.

The provision of early intervention and education services in relation to autism is the responsibility of state and territory governments. Their disability, health and education programs have components that include the care, treatment and education of those with autism.

The Australian Government provides through the Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement a Specific Purpose Payment to the states and territories to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities – $2.82 billion for the 5 years of the current agreement. The Department of Family and Community Services also provides specific funding to support children with autism; this has included $220,000 to Autism Queensland, $990,000 to Autism Spectrum Australia and approximately $192,000 to the University of Queensland to assist young children with autism and early intervention programs.

A National Autism Forum held in Canberra in June 2005, was organised by the Department of Health and Ageing. The Forum, attended by major autism stakeholders, including state and national autism organisations, the Australian and the State and Territory Governments and consumers and carers, provided an opportunity to discuss current activities and programs and to increase public awareness. A $50,000 grant to undertake a review of current services and best practice interventions for children with autism spectrum disorders was announced at the Forum.

(5) and (6) The Australian Government is aware of the “Partners in Autism Research” initiative and of the valuable research funding provided by the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund. From January 2001 to April 2005 the Government provided the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund with a total of $682,000 (GST exclusive) for the delivery of a national Mental Health Awareness Campaign, which has included the delivery of various mental health forums across Australia.
Pensions and Benefits
(Question No. 1662)

Ms Annette Ellis asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 2 June 2005:

(1) As at 31 December 2004, how many people in the electoral division of Adelaide, (a) in total, and in the postcode area (b) 5000, (c) 5006, (d) 5007, (e) 5008, (f) 5031, (g) 5034, (h) 5035, (i) 5061, (j) 5063, (k) 5065, (l) 5067, (m) 5069, (n) 5070, (o) 5081, (p) 5082, (q) 5083, (r) 5084, (s) 5085, and (t) 5086 were recipients of the (i) Age Pension, (ii) Disability Support Pension, (iii) Carer Allowance, (iv) Newstart Allowance, (v) Youth Allowance, (vi) Parenting Payment Single, (vii) Parenting Payment Partnered, (viii) Family Tax Benefit A, (ix) Family Tax Benefit B, (x) Childcare Benefit, and (xi) Rent Assistance.

(2) At 31 December 2004, what proportion of the total population in the electoral division of Adelaide was receiving income assistance?

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Data on Age Pension, Disability Support Pension, Carer Allowance, Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment Single, Parenting Payment Partnered, Family Tax Benefit A, Family Tax Benefit B, Childcare Benefit, and Rent Assistance by electorate is provided at the following site:


(2) The total population in the electoral division of Adelaide receiving income support payments from Centrelink as at 31 December 2004 was 32,869. Data relating to the total population of the electorate is not available.

Centrelink
(Question No. 1767)

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 23 June 2005:

(1) How many people are currently employed in total, and at each classification level, at the (a) Cranbourne and (b) Narre Warren Centrelink office.

(2) How many people were employed in total and at each classification level at the (a) Cranbourne and (b) Narre Warren Centrelink office at 1 July (i) 2003 and (ii) 2004.

(3) How many people currently employed the (a) Cranbourne and (b) Narre Warren Centrelink office were employed at that office on 1 July 2004.

(4) How many clients accessed services at the (a) Cranbourne and (b) Narre Warren Centrelink office for the financial year (i) 2002-2003, (ii) 2003-2004 and (iii) 2004-2005 and what proportion of clients accessed which particular services.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) and (2) There is no Centrelink office named Narre Warren. However, Fountain Gate Customer Service Centre is located in Narre Warren so these figures have been reported.
Tuesday, 14 February 2006

QUESTIONS IN WRITING

Centrelink Employees – Cranbourne and Fountain Gate Customer Service Centres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Cranbourne</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centrelink Band 2 Customer Service Officer</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrelink Band 3 Team Leader and Specialist</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrelink Band 4 Manager (APS EL1/2)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrelink Professional Officer (APS 3/4/5/6/EL1/EL2)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3) (a) There are currently 38 people employed at the Cranbourne Centrelink Office who were employed at the Cranbourne Centrelink Office on 1 July 2004. (b) There are currently 41 people at the Fountain Gate Centrelink Office who were employed at the Fountain Gate Centrelink office on 1 July 2004.

(4) There is currently no data available to identify the precise number of customers who access services at the Cranbourne and Fountain Gate Customer Service Centres. The following information provides the customer populations by payment type for Cranbourne and Fountain Gate Customer Service Centres. It should be noted some customers may be in receipt of more than one payment type and therefore may be included in the figures for more than one payment.

Centrelink Cranbourne Customer Population Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Payment Type</th>
<th>Cranbourne customer populations as at 24/6/2003</th>
<th>Cranbourne customer populations as at 24/6/2004</th>
<th>Cranbourne customer populations as at 24/6/2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Pension</td>
<td>4,026</td>
<td>4,247</td>
<td>4,567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bereavement Allowance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer Allowance</td>
<td>1,252</td>
<td>1,229</td>
<td>1,488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer Payment</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Support Pension</td>
<td>1,646</td>
<td>1,846</td>
<td>2,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Wage Supplement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Orphan Pension</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Assistance Office</td>
<td>13,609</td>
<td>14,081</td>
<td>15,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Family Restart</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility Allowance</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newstart Allowance</td>
<td>1,346</td>
<td>1,464</td>
<td>1,587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newstart Mature Age Allowance</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting Payment (partnered)</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>609</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting Payment (single)</td>
<td>2,008</td>
<td>2,131</td>
<td>2,266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Allowance</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pension Bonus Scheme</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sickness Allowance</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Benefit</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow Allowance</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow B Pension</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Cranbourne Customer Populations as at 24/6/2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit Type</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wife Pension</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Allowance</td>
<td>1,083</td>
<td>1,058</td>
<td>1,141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Training Allowance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: All cells that have a value of less than 20, other than zero, have been changed to display “<20”. This rule has been employed for privacy reasons.*

### Centrelink Fountain Gate Customer Population Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit Type</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Pension</td>
<td>5,820</td>
<td>6,315</td>
<td>6,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bereavement Allowance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer Allowance</td>
<td>1,854</td>
<td>1,921</td>
<td>2,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer Payment</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Support Pension</td>
<td>2,295</td>
<td>2,561</td>
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<td>Disability Wage Supplement</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Double Orphan Pension</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Assistance Office</td>
<td>23,378</td>
<td>24,789</td>
<td>27,915</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farm Family Restart</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobility Allowance</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newstart Allowance</td>
<td>1,897</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newstart Mature Age Allowance</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting Payment (partnered)</td>
<td>1,078</td>
<td>1,156</td>
<td>1,261</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting Payment (single)</td>
<td>2,498</td>
<td>2,784</td>
<td>3,039</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner Allowance</td>
<td>497</td>
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<td>348</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pension Bonus Scheme</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sickness Allowance</td>
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<td>94</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Benefit</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Widow Allowance</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>280</td>
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<td>Widow B Pension</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife Pension</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Allowance</td>
<td>1,800</td>
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<td>2,103</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth Training Allowance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: All cells that have a value of less than 20, other than zero, have been changed to display “<20”. This rule has been employed for privacy reasons.*
Advertising Agencies
(Question No. 1789)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister representing the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 23 June 2005:
(1) Will the Minister provide a list of advertising agencies which are used by the department and the agencies in the Minister’s portfolio.
(2) What sum was paid to each advertising agency used by the department and agencies in the Minister’s portfolio in (a) 2003-2004 and (b) 2004-2005.

Mrs De-Anne Kelly—The Minister for Defence has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:
(1) Defence - Young and Rubicam (formerly Young and Rubicam Mattingly).
   Defence Housing Authority - Cream Advertising (formerly Mac Media).
(2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising Agency</th>
<th>2003-04</th>
<th>2004-05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young and Rubicam Mattingly</td>
<td>$5,040,000</td>
<td>$4,480,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young and Rubicam</td>
<td>$80,921</td>
<td>$1,166,635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mac Media</td>
<td>$102,461</td>
<td>$1,166,635</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Advertising Agencies
(Question No. 1791)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Health and Ageing, in writing, on 23 June 2005:
(1) Will the Minister provide a list of advertising agencies which are used by the department and the agencies in the Minister’s portfolio.
(2) What sum was paid to each advertising agency used by the department and agencies in the Minister’s portfolio in (a) 2003-2004 and (b) 2004-2005.

Mr Abbott—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(1) A list of all advertising agencies which were used by the Department of Health and Ageing in 2003-04 is available in the 2003-04 Annual Report (p 452), and is included in Attachment A. Details of payments to advertising agencies which were used by the department in 2004-05 are available in the department’s 2004-05 Annual Report (p 358), and are also included in Attachment A.
   A list of advertising agencies which were used by the portfolio agencies in 2003-04 and 2004-05 are included in Attachment A. The Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency Ltd, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency, General Practice Education and Training Ltd, National Blood Authority, Private Health Insurance Administration Council, Private Health Insurance Ombudsman, and Professional Services Review did not engage an advertising agency in 2003-04 or 2004-05.
(2) The sum paid to each advertising agency used by the department and agencies in the Minister’s portfolio in (a) 2003-2004 and (b) 2004-2005 is provided in Attachment A.
Attachment A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department/Agency</th>
<th>(1) List of advertising agencies</th>
<th>(2) Sum paid to ad agency in (a) 2003-04 and (b) 2004-05. GST inclusive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Health and Ageing</td>
<td>Batey Red Cell (a) Nil (b) $1,579,211</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Melhuish Fishlock</td>
<td>(a) $152,716 (b) $159,964</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curtis Jones Brown</td>
<td>(a) $32,623 (b) Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA@D Communications</td>
<td>(a) $4,868 (b) Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRG International</td>
<td>(a) $3,590 (b) Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 303 Group</td>
<td>Nil $837,679</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TMP</td>
<td>Nil $71,211</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whybin/TBWA &amp; partners</td>
<td>(a) $801,536 (b) Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whybin/TBWA &amp; partners (including sub-contractor Cultural Perspectives Pty Ltd)</td>
<td>(a) $2,824,742 (b) Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, Rubicam and Mattingly</td>
<td>(a) $11,000 (b) Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Standards Australia New Zealand</td>
<td>TMP (a) $57,093 (b) $36,649</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Health and Medical Research Council</td>
<td>Husen Pty Ltd (a) Nil (b) $1,644</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Institute of Clinical Studies</td>
<td>Advertising Energy Pty Ltd (a) $87,268 (b) $39,433</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Religious Organisations: Funding
(Question No. 1908)

Dr Lawrence asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 9 August 2005:

1. Is the Minister’s department providing any funds to organisations which require their employees to meet certain religious requirements (e.g., membership of a particular church or religious group) as a condition of their employment; if so, will the Minister identify the organisations.

2. Does the Minister’s department provide funds to any organisations for programs which include religious instructions, or faith-based counselling; if so, will the Minister identify the organisations.

3. Does the Minister’s department place any requirements on church and charitable organisations which receive funds from the department that the funds not be used for religious or evangelical purposes; if so, what are the guidelines or requirements.

4. How does the Minister’s department ensure that services and programs funded by the Government and delivered by church and charitable organisations are not used for religious or evangelical purposes.
Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

**Core Department**

(1) No  
(2) No  
(3) N/A  
(4) N/A  

**Child Support Agency**

The Child Support Agency (CSA) does not fund religious organisations. The CSA does sometimes use services such as venue hire which may be available from organisations like church groups, and payment is provided for these services.

**CRS Australia**

(1) No  
(2) No  
(3) N/A  
(4) N/A  

**Parenting Payment**  
(Question No. 2140)

Mr Brendan O’Connor asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 18 August 2005:

How many people who reside in (a) the electoral division of Gorton and the postcode area (b) 3337, (c) 3338, (d) 3435, (e) 3437, (f) 3438, (g) 3440, (h) 3441, and (i) 3442 are in receipt of Parenting Payment.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Data on Parenting Payment by electorate is provided at the following site:

**Disability Support Pension**  
(Question No. 2141)

Mr Brendan O’Connor asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 18 August 2005:

How many people who reside in (a) the electoral division of Gorton and the postcode area (b) 3337, (c) 3338, (d) 3435, (e) 3437, (f) 3438, (g) 3440, (h) 3441, and (i) 3442 are in receipt of the Disability Support Pension.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Data on Disability Support Pension by electorate is provided at the following site:

**Disability Support Pension**  
(Question No. 2142)

Mr Brendan O’Connor asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 18 August 2005:
How many people who reside in (a) the electoral division of Gorton and the postcode area (b) 3337, (c) 3338, (d) 3435, (e) 3437, (f) 3438, (g) 3440, (h) 3441, and (i) 3442 have been granted the Disability Support Pension since 10 May 2005.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Data on Disability Support Pension by electorate is provided at the following site:

Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources
(Question No. 2172)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources, in writing, on 18 August 2005:

(1) Has the Minister received any training, coaching or assistance in public speaking or voice projection at public expense since the Minister took office; if so, what was the cost of this training.

(2) What is the name and postal address of the individual or organisation(s) which provided the training.

Mr Ian Macfarlane—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) No, not since I took office as the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources in November 2001.

(2) Not applicable

Minister for Human Services
(Question No. 2180)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 18 August 2005:

(1) Has the Minister received any training, coaching or assistance in public speaking or voice projection at public expense since the Minister took office; if so, what was the cost of this training.

(2) What is the name and postal address of the individual or organisation(s) which provided the training.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) No

(2) Not applicable

Research and Developmental Services
(Question No. 2226)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 5 September 2005:

(1) Did Centrelink enter into a contract with Evalue Pty Ltd at a cost of $22,000 for “research and experimental development services on social sciences and humanities”; if so, what form will the research and developmental services take.

(2) Which social sciences and humanities will be the subject of the research and developmental services.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Payment of $22,000 was made on 27 July 2005 under a contract with market research company Evalue Pty Ltd. This payment was incorrectly recorded in the AusTender electronic database as an additional contract under the heading: “Research and experimental development services on social sciences and humanities”. The title refers to a generic code belonging to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Commodity Classification (ANZSCC) system used by the database. A more accurate code would have been “Market research and public opinion polling services”.

QUESTIONs IN WRITING
(2) The purpose of the research was to identify opportunities to improve debt service delivery, as recommended in the ANAO’s audit report on the Management of Customer Debt tabled on 2 August 2004.

National Community Crime Prevention Program
(Question No. 2241)

Mr Price asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 6 September 2005:

(1) Did the Prime Minister announce, in the electoral division of Greenway, the eight successful regional grant recipients under the National Crime Prevention Program on 7 May 2005.

(2) In which Commonwealth and State electoral divisions are the successful applicants located and who are the respective Commonwealth and State members.

(3) Were invitations to the function to announce the recipients extended to the Commonwealth and State members of parliament representing successful applicants; if not, why not.

(4) What was the cost of the function to announce the grants and who paid for it.

(5) Who (a) was invited to attend and (b) attended the function and which organisations did they represent.

(6) What were the criteria used to select the organisations and the individuals invited to attend.

(7) Was the Minister’s department required to prepare a short list; if not, why not; if so, which projects made it onto the short list and which officers were responsible for its preparation.

(8) What consultations or inquiries did the Minister undertake about the projects before the successful grant recipients were finalised.

(9) Did the Prime Minister or his staff have any involvement in the process; if so, what are the details.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) No.

(2) The table at Attachment A includes details of the Commonwealth and State electorates in which the projects will be conducted and the respective members.

(3) Invitations were extended to Government members of the Commonwealth Parliament.

(4) At the date of this response some costs are yet to be finalised. Costs incurred for the venue, catering, event management and official photographer are expected to total approximately $9,000. These costs were met from programme funding.

(5) (a) A list of organisations formally invited by the Chair of the Greater Western Sydney Advisory Committee is at Attachment B.

(b) A list of organisations attending the function is at Attachment C.

(6) The criteria for the formal invitations were:

• representatives from grant recipients and their partner organisations;
• local community groups;
• local government representatives;
• police;
• members of the NCCPP Greater Western Sydney Advisory Group; and
• Government members of the Commonwealth Parliament.
(7) Yes. The Department undertook an initial assessment of all applications received. This work was undertaken by the Criminal Justice Division of the Department.

The short listed applications, together with information about all applications, were provided to the NCCPP Greater Western Sydney Advisory Group which includes representatives from justice and community service agencies, and from the community sector.

The Advisory Group took into account projects’ merits against the selection criteria and the need to equitably distribute funding for projects across the funding area when making their recommendations.

Throughout the assessment process, applications were assessed against the published Guidelines for Funding Applications which are available on the internet at www.crimeprevention.gov.au

The Advisory Group made recommendations to the Minister for Justice and Customs who made the final decisions regarding successful applications.

(8) None – the Minister accepted the advice of the NCCPP Greater Western Sydney Advisory Group.

(9) No.
ATTACHMENT A
SUCCESSFUL NCCPP APPLICATIONS IN WESTERN SYDNEY REGION BY ELECTORATE COMMUNITY SAFETY PROJECTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>S/T</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Federal Member</th>
<th>Federal Electorate</th>
<th>NSW Member</th>
<th>NSW Electorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Airds Bradbury Community Centre</td>
<td>Bridging Disadvantage and Crime through education</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Campbelltown</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
<td>Hon Pat Farmer (LP)</td>
<td>Macarthur</td>
<td>Geoffrey Corrigan (ALP)</td>
<td>Camden Campbelltown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumberland Women’s Health Centre</td>
<td>Religion and Family Harmony Project</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Holroyd Baulkham Hills Auburn</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>$145,386</td>
<td>Julie Owens (ALP) Laurie Ferguson (ALP) Hon Alan Cadman (LP)</td>
<td>Parramatta Reid Mitchell</td>
<td>Tanya Gadiel (ALP) Wayne Merton (LP)</td>
<td>Parramatta Granville Baulkham Hills The Hills Auburn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency Inc (MECA)</td>
<td>Pacific Let’s Talk</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Blacktown</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>$127,781</td>
<td>Hon Roger Price (ALP) Chris Bowen (ALP) Hon Jacki Kelly (LP)</td>
<td>Chifley Greenway Prospect Lindsay</td>
<td>Hon John Aquilina (ALP) Hon Pamela Allan (ALP)</td>
<td>Blacktown Riverstone Wentworthville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army NSW</td>
<td>Café Horizons Penrith</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Penrith</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>$150,000</td>
<td>Louise Markus (LP) Chris Bowen (ALP)</td>
<td>Prospect Lindsay</td>
<td>Karyn Palazzano (ALP)</td>
<td>Penrith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre</td>
<td>Community Harmony and Crime Prevention with African Communities in Blacktown</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Blacktown</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>$149,180</td>
<td>Hon Roger Price (ALP)</td>
<td>Chifley Greenway Prospect</td>
<td>Paul Gibson (ALP) Hon John Aquilina (ALP)</td>
<td>Blacktown Riverstone Wentworthville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Project</td>
<td>S/T</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Period</td>
<td>Amount Approved</td>
<td>Federal Member</td>
<td>Federal Electorate</td>
<td>NSW Member</td>
<td>NSW Electorate</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Off The Streets</td>
<td>Leading tour community</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Campbelltown</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>$150,000</td>
<td>Hon Pat Farmer (LP)</td>
<td>Macarthur</td>
<td>Mr Geoffrey Cornigan (ALP)</td>
<td>Mr Graham West (ALP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SUCCESSFUL NCCPP APPLICATIONS IN WESTERN SYDNEY REGION BY ELECTORATE PARTNERSHIPS PROJECTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>S/T</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Amount Approved</th>
<th>Federal Member</th>
<th>Federal Electorate</th>
<th>NSW Member</th>
<th>NSW Electorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hillsong Emerge Ltd</td>
<td>Greater Blacktown Community Partnership – Youth</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Blacktown</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>$414,479</td>
<td>Hon Roger Price (ALP)</td>
<td>Chifley Greenway Prospect</td>
<td>Hon Paul Gibson (ALP)</td>
<td>Blacktown Riverstone Wentworthville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies (Tresillian)</td>
<td>Mothering at a Distance</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Silverwater Emu Plains Windsor Berrima</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>$447,421</td>
<td>Laurie Ferguson (ALP)</td>
<td>Reid Lindsay Macquarie Hume</td>
<td>Barbara Perry (ALP)</td>
<td>Auburn Penrith Hawkesbury Londonderry Southern Highlands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**$842,347**

**$861,900**

**QUESTIONS IN WRITING**
ATTACHMENT B

ORGANISATIONS INVITED TO ATTEND BY THE CHAIR OF THE GREATER WESTERN SYDNEY ADVISORY GROUP

Airds Bradbury Community Centre
Australian Institute of Criminology
Australian Sudanese Youth Union Inc
Blacktown City Council
Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre
Blacktown Police
Cumberland Women’s Health Centre
Evans International Language Centre
Glennwood Community Association
Hebersham Aboriginal Youth Service
Hillsong
Hillsong Emerge Ltd and project partners
Kellyville Ridge Community Association
Mt Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency Inc (MECA)
New South Wales Attorney-General’s Department Crime Prevention Unit
NCCPP Greater Western Sydney Advisory Group members
North West Community Care
Pacific Flava Youth Service
PCYC Blacktown
Quakers Hill Police
Riverstone Aboriginal Community Association
Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre and Community Aid Service
Riverstone Sports Centre
Salvation Army
Salvation Army Youthlink
Senator Fierravanti-Wells & staff
Stanhope Gardens Residents’ Association
Sudanese Equatorial Council
Sudanese community leaders
Tresillian Family Care Centres and project partners
Walia Pty Ltd
Youth off the Streets

ATTACHMENT C

ORGANISATIONS WITH ATTENDEES AT ANNOUNCEMENT

Airds Bradbury Community Centre
Australian Institute of Criminology
Australian Sudanese Youth Union Inc
Blacktown City Council
Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre
Blacktown Police
Campbelltown City Council
Cumberland Women’s Health Centre
Evans International Language Centre

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
ORGANISATIONS WITH ATTENDEES AT ANNOUNCEMENT
Glennwood Community Association
Hebersham Aboriginal Youth Service
Hillsong Emerge Ltd
Kellyville Ridge Community Association
Mt Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency Inc (MECA)
Mt Druitt Police
New South Wales Attorney-General’s Department Crime Prevention Unit
New South Wales Department of Community Services
New South Wales Department of Corrective Services
NCCPP Greater Western Sydney Advisory Group
North West Community Care
Office of Louise Markus MP
Office of the Minister for Justice and Customs
Office of the Prime Minister
Pacific Flava Youth Service
Hon Pat Farmer & staff
PCYC Blacktown
Quakers Hill Police
Riverstone Aboriginal Community Association
Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre and Community Aid Service
Riverstone Sports Centre
Salvation Army
Salvation Army Youthlink
Senator Fierravanti-Wells & staff
Stanhope Gardens Residents’ Association
Sudanese Equatorial Council
Sudanese community leaders
Tresillian Family Care Centres
Walia Pty Ltd
Western Sydney Area Health Service
Youth off the Streets
Support Staff from:
Attorney-General’s Department
Official Photographer
Event Technical Production and Crew

National Community Crime Prevention Program
(Question No. 2242)

Mr Price asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 6 September 2005:

(1) In respect of the eight successful applicants for regional grants under the National Crime Prevention Program announced on 7 May 2005, under which of the three streams, Community Partnership, Indigenous community safety and Community Safety were they funded.

(2) In respect of each funded project (a) how many individuals is it targeted to reach, (b) what are its key performance indicators, (c) how will successful outcomes be defined, (d) what is the number of successful outcomes projected and the success rate, and (e) what is the duration of the project.
Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) Of the first eight projects funded under the Greater Western Sydney component of the National Community Crime Prevention Programme announced on 22 August 2005, six were from the community safety projects and two were from the community partnership stream. The projects will be conducted across a number of electoral divisions in Greater Western Sydney. Attachment A of the response to Question No. 2241 details the funding streams for projects and the electorates in which they will be conducted.

(2) The attached table sets out the current details for the eight projects awarded grants. Details about the key performance indicators, definition and measurement of outcomes are being refined in the development of funding agreements for each project.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>S/T</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Amount Approved</th>
<th>Project target</th>
<th>Key Performance Indicators</th>
<th>Anticipated outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Airds Bradbury Community Centre</td>
<td>Bridging Disadvantage and Crime through education</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Airds Campbelltown</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
<td>Aim to deliver 4 TAFE and 3 sessional parenting courses each semester. In addition will offer literacy programs, vocational workshops as well as resume writing and interview techniques. 3 community social events and 3 excursions will be run a year.</td>
<td>Computer lab upgraded Educators recruited and course/ workshop timetable developed Number of participants successfully completing courses Number of participants attending social events. Number of people utilising the computer lab and internet café.</td>
<td>Improved resources for disadvantaged communities Improved educational opportunities People on estate increase their qualifications Improved self esteem and social interaction of young people. Improved literacy Enhanced life skills Increased employment opportunities Strengthened parenting skills and family relationships Enhanced community pride Cooperation and participation of religious and community leaders and community members in the issue of domestic violence and its prevention Leaders kept informed about domestic violence education and prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumberland Women’s Health Centre</td>
<td>Religion and Family Harmony Project</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Parramatta Holroyd Baulkham Hills Auburn</td>
<td>2 years  3 months</td>
<td>$145,386</td>
<td>Religious leaders and community representatives of the Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Bahá’í and Jewish faiths in the relevant location</td>
<td>Steering Committee for project established Number of religious and community leaders participating and communities represented 3 forums and 3 information sessions provided to congre-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Project</td>
<td>S/T</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Amount Approved</td>
<td>Project target</td>
<td>Key Performance Indicators</td>
<td>Anticipated outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 training workshops per year for religious and community leaders on domestic violence, alternatives to violence and family harmony</td>
<td>Level of participation during training workshops</td>
<td>Leaders become trained to run anti-violence workshops/family harmony forums within their own community groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Project worker supporting participating religious and community leaders to run family harmony forums</td>
<td>Evaluation of project to include possibility of adoption of project by other communities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>3 family harmony forums held per year</td>
<td>Family harmony forums run by religious and community leaders through their own initiatives after conclusion of the project</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of community members actively attending family harmony forums</td>
<td>Appropriate, accessible resources available</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback from religious and community leaders and community members</td>
<td>Number and quality of resources (including domestic violence services), in relevant languages, updated and disseminated</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number and quality of resources (including domestic violence services), in relevant languages, updated and disseminated</td>
<td>Level of interest from wider community in activities</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive media coverage of</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**QUESTIONS IN WRITING**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>S/T</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Amount Approved</th>
<th>Project target</th>
<th>Key Performance Indicators</th>
<th>Anticipated outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mt Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency Inc (MECA)</td>
<td>Pacific Lets Talk</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Blacktown</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>$127,781</td>
<td>Ten families with at risk young people between the ages of 12-17 years and their parents from Tongan, Samoan, Fijian and Cook Island backgrounds in the Mt Druitt and surrounding areas.</td>
<td>Effective operation of steering committee&lt;br&gt;Sound research and options developed&lt;br&gt;Community consultation conducted&lt;br&gt;Best practice models developed&lt;br&gt;Greater level of understanding and awareness of culture&lt;br&gt;Young people reconnect with their family and a sense of belonging strengthened&lt;br&gt;Young people become more empowered to make positive decisions and choices&lt;br&gt;Better understanding of the availability of services and networks&lt;br&gt;Increased understanding of Australians laws and social structures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army NSW</td>
<td>Café Horizons Penrith</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Penrith</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>$150,000</td>
<td>Young people 15 to 25 years of age, Young people from Western Sydney &amp; in particular Penrith &amp; Blacktown</td>
<td>Provision of accredited training in hospitality.&lt;br&gt;Development of work ethics and skills.&lt;br&gt;Personal development and training</td>
<td>Young people remain engaged with program.&lt;br&gt;Young people receive help with non training issues as they arise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Project</td>
<td>S/T</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Project target</td>
<td>Key Performance Indicators</td>
<td>Anticipated outcomes</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre | Community Harmony and Crime Prevention with African Communities in Blacktown | NSW   | Blacktown | 2 years  | $149,180 | Newly arrived Sudanese and other African people, and particularly young people, in Western Sydney. Focusing on youth who are vulnerable to becoming involved in the youth justice system. | Participation at forums, training opportunities, and support of workers Enhanced community consultations to build support structures Creation of a data base of activities and service providers and referral of young | Greater level of understanding and awareness of culture Young people reconnect with their family and a sense of belonging strengthened Better understanding of the availability of services and networks including employment and sporting opportuni-
|                              |                                                  |       |          |          |          | life skills. Employment placement assistance upon completion. Support with personal, family and social issues throughout training and thereafter as required. | Young people feel valued. Increased self esteem and self reliance. Improved social and life skills. Ownership and pride in their achievements. Young people are work ready, committed and reliable and able to work effectively as part of a team. Young people able to take instructions and complete given tasks. More than 50% of participants attaining Certificate II. All participants completing the program go onto further education or training or have a paid job within three months. |
| Organisation     | Project              | S/T  | Location          | Duration | Amount Approved | Project target                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Key Performance Indicators                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Anticipated outcomes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|----------------------|------|-------------------|----------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Youth Off The Streets | Leading tour community | NSW  | Campbeltown       | 2 years  | $150,000        | Targeting young people aged 11 to 18 years on the Airds Bradbury Housing Estate. 70 young people, on average, currently attend activities. Some of these young people will participate in leadership workshops and give presentations to schools. Consultations and community sessions will also be held with local residents.                                                                 | Number of young people regularly and actively attending activities. Level of participation during workshops Number of schools interested in hosting talks. Willingness of young leaders to participate in school talks program. Feedback from schools Level of interest from residents and community in activities Volunteer participation. | To reduce the fear and incidence of youth crime by facilitating community partnership and consultation. Young people develop a sense of personal responsibility Reduce youth crime Increase pride in the community Increase ability of young people to manage peer pressure Increased respect of young people for residents |

$842,347

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
SUCCESSFUL NCCPP GREATER WESTERN SYDNEY COMPONENT APPLICATIONS

PARTNERSHIPS PROJECTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>S/T</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Number of individuals targeted</th>
<th>KPIs</th>
<th>Targeted outcomes (number, how defined &amp; success rate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hillsong Emerge Ltd</td>
<td>Greater Blacktown Community Partnership – Youth</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Blacktown</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>$414,479</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication channels are developed</td>
<td>Build a positive rapport with young people, particularly from Sudanese, and Indigenous cultural backgrounds.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>An understanding of issues important to young people is developed</td>
<td>Encourage and empower young people to progress their education.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number of young people participating in the various themed events and workshops, focussed on:</td>
<td>Encourage and empower young people to progress in their employment</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Numbers of young people re-integrated into school</td>
<td>Encourage and empower young people to take responsibility for their own lives and contribute to the broader community</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction to employers</td>
<td>Encourage and empower Sudanese, and Indigenous young people to relate positively to the authorities and the broader community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cross cultural sporting events with local police.</td>
<td>Documented and evaluated orientation programme for women offenders with young children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies (Tresillian)</td>
<td>Mothering at a Distance</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Snowy Mountains</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>$447,421</td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning and parenting needs audit for mothers in custody</td>
<td>Reduction of distress/anxiety caused by separation for ap-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Establishment of advisory Group</td>
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<td>Recruitment of Project Man-</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Documented and evaluated orientation programme for women offenders with young children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Project</td>
<td>S/T</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Duration</td>
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<td>Number of individuals targeted</td>
<td>KPIs</td>
<td>Targeted outcomes (number, how defined &amp; success rate)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berrima Correctional Facilities for mothers with children 0 – 5 years to enhance the mothers ability to provide appropriate parenting and reduce the impact of separation caused by incarceration</td>
<td>Development and implementation of orientation programme for mothers on entry to the corrective services system</td>
<td>Adoption of separation skills and strategies by incarcerated mothers</td>
<td>Supported play programme for children during first 2 hours of each visit session</td>
<td>Mothers group for parenting/child relationship skills</td>
<td>Develop/adapt the STEEP parenting programme within the prison system (10 weeks per group)</td>
<td>Number of individual consultations by project staff with mothers and referrals for additional intervention if necessary</td>
<td>Education and support programme for corrective services staff to enable them to assume facilitation of the project beyond the project term</td>
<td>Level of acceptance of, approximately 35 incarcerated mothers Reduction of trauma/anxiety for young children caused by separation and visiting their mothers in custody Improved maternal behaviour as identified by corrective services staff Reduction in inappropriate behaviour by children e.g. aggression, withdrawal Increase skills of incarcerated mothers to enhance mother/infant relationship, by learning about growth and development expectations, improvement in the responsiveness and sensitivity of the maternal child relationship, reduce negative parenting interactions, developing play skills and behavioural management Increased knowledge and skills of corrective staff on maternal and child relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Corrective staff to act as facilitators for educative and therapeutic interventions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Educational and information resources for use by mothers in custody and external carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduction in the cycle of intergenerational violence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$861,900
Disability Support Pension
(Question No. 2336)

Ms George asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 12/09/2005:
(1) How many people who reside in (a) the electoral division of Throsby and the postcode area (b) 2502, (c) 2505, (d) 2506, (e) 2526, (f) 2527, (g) 2528, (h) 2529, and (i) 2530 are in receipt of the Disability Support Pension.

(2) How many people who reside in (a) the electoral division of Throsby and the postcode area (b) 2502, (c) 2505, (d) 2506, (e) 2526, (f) 2527, (g) 2528, (h) 2529, and (i) 2530 have been granted the Disability Support Pension since 10 May 2005.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s questions is as follows:
Data on Disability Support Pension by electorate is provided at the following site:

Parenting Payment
(Question No. 2337)

Ms George asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 12 August 2005:
How many people who reside in (a) the electoral division of Throsby and the postcode area (b) 2502, (c) 2505, (d) 2506, (e) 2526, (f) 2527, (g) 2528, (h) 2529, and (i) 2530 are in receipt of Parenting Payment.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Data on Parenting Payment by electorate is provided at the following site:

Disability Support Pension
(Question No. 2401)

Ms Grierson asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 10 October 2005:
How many Disability Support Pension recipients currently reside in (a) Australia, (b) New South Wales, (c) the electoral division of Newcastle, and (d) the postcode area (i) 2287, (ii) 2289, (iii) 2291, (iv) 2292, (v) 2293, (vi) 2294, (vii) 2295, (viii) 2296, (ix) 2297, (x) 2298, (xi) 2299, (xii) 2300, (xiii) 2302, (xiv) 2303, (xv) 2304, (xvi) 2305, (xvii) 2307, (xviii) 2308, and (xix) 2309.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Data on Disability Support Pension by electorate is provided at the following site:

Child Care
(Question No. 2463)

Ms Hoare asked the Treasurer, in writing, on 11 October 2005:
(1) Will the Government’s policy to encourage single parents from ‘welfare to work’ result in greater pressure being placed on already limited child care places.

(2) Is he aware of any studies showing that increasing child care fees contributes to parents not participating in the workforce.

(3) Is he aware that for many parents the fees associated with childcare nullify any financial benefit from working, particularly in part time employment.
(4) Will the Government introduce a tax deduction for the costs associated with child care for working parents; if not, why not.

Mr Costello—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) No. The Welfare to Work package, announced in the 2005-06 Budget, included $210 million over four years to significantly increase the number of child care places available to support parents with participation obligations.

(2) There is a considerable research literature on the effect of child care costs on labour force participation. Much of the research to date suggests the cost of child care is one of many factors that may influence participation decisions.

(3) The Government has greatly improved the affordability of child care through the introduction of both the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and the Child Care Tax Rebate.

In addition, the Welfare to Work package also included additional funding for the Jobs, Education and Training child care programme, which will assist 52,000 low income families in meeting the ‘gap’ in child care fees, ensuring that the cost of child care is not a barrier to moving from income support to employment.

(4) The Government has enacted the Child Care Tax Rebate to provide a 30% rebate for the costs associated with child care for working parents.

Centrelink: Surveillance Services
(Question No. 2553)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 1 November 2005:

(1) Are private investigation companies engaged by Centrelink to provide surveillance services; if so, in respect of each company used during 2004-2005, (a) what is its name and address, (b) what sum was it paid, and (c) how many cases were referred to it.

(2) How many of the cases referred to private investigation companies resulted in people (a) having their benefits reduced or cancelled and (b) being prosecuted for fraud.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Yes, Centrelink does engage private investigation companies to provide surveillance services. Further detail is provided in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>Trading Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Paid in 2004-05</th>
<th>Number of Cases Referred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M G Baker Investigation Services</td>
<td>Inkelen Pty Ltd</td>
<td>PO Box 1220 Osborne Park WA 6916</td>
<td>$55,592.59</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowmont Investigative Consultants Pty Ltd</td>
<td>PO Box 826 Springwood Qld 4127</td>
<td>$19,408.68</td>
<td>83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Investigations Pty Ltd</td>
<td>Windsor Manor Pty Ltd</td>
<td>PO Box 1008 Smithfield Qld 4872</td>
<td>$11,729.71</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) How many of the cases referred to private investigation companies resulted in people (a) having their benefits reduced or cancelled and (b) being prosecuted for fraud.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Yes, Centrelink does engage private investigation companies to provide surveillance services. Further detail is provided in the table below.

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<thead>
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<th>Trading Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Paid in 2004-05</th>
<th>Number of Cases Referred</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IAA Industrial Accident Assessors Pty Ltd</td>
<td></td>
<td>PO Box 496 Altona North Vic 3025</td>
<td>$89,509.69</td>
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<td>Jendate Pty Ltd</td>
<td></td>
<td>PO Box 242 Belmont NSW 2280</td>
<td>$112,769.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maurice J Kerrigan &amp; Associates</td>
<td></td>
<td>PO Box 2079 Richmond South Vic 3121</td>
<td>See below</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maurice J Kerrigan &amp; Associates</td>
<td></td>
<td>PO Box 1053 Nerang Qld 4211</td>
<td>$145,480.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kingswood Investigations Pty Ltd</td>
<td></td>
<td>PO Box 711 Kent Town SA 5071</td>
<td>$133,784.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meridan Services Pty Ltd</td>
<td></td>
<td>Box W2014 Perth WA 6001</td>
<td>$0.00*</td>
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<td>Network Investigations Wrekton Pty Ltd</td>
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<td>GPO Box 150 Hobart Tas 7001</td>
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<td>Panther Investigations Pty Ltd</td>
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<td>PO Box 3239 Belconnen ACT 2607</td>
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<td>Probe Investigations Pty Ltd</td>
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<td>PO Box 2196 Caulfield Junction Vic 3161</td>
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<td>Warner &amp; Associates Pty Ltd</td>
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<td>PO Box 7189 Hutt Street Adelaide SA 5000</td>
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<td>Weston &amp; Associates Pty Ltd</td>
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<td>PO Box 1028 Thuringowa Central Qld 4817</td>
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<tr>
<td>M &amp; A Investigations Daprell Pty Ltd</td>
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<td>PO Box 77 Sutherland NSW 1499</td>
<td>$163,289.54</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* Note: funds were paid in the current financial year not 2004–05
** Note: engaged in two states, amounts paid are totalled into one figure.

(2) (a) During the 2004-05 financial year, there were 1,036 reductions to customer payments (including suspensions and cancellations) where surveillance was used to collect evidence as a part of the investigation process.

(b) The Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions prosecuted 125 Centrelink cases for fraud during the 2004-05 financial year, where surveillance was an element of the investigation process.
**Australian Defence Force: Combat Capability**  
*(Question No. 2571)*

Mr McClelland asked the Minister representing Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 November 2005:

1. Is it the case that many new long-range air-to-ground missiles (JASSMs) on the market have a range of 60 km or more and that Australia’s current fixed air defence systems at the 16th Air Defence Regiment are capable of interception at only 7 km.

2. What is the current Air Force strategy for neutralising JASSMs and does the acquisition of the new JSF feature in future strategy in order to drive enemy aircraft too low to fire them (as performed by other nations).

3. Does the ADF still intend to deploy the new mobile RBS 70 units to the 16th Air Defence Regiment.

4. Has the ADF considered the redeployment of the new RBS 70s to units to ‘hollow’ Air Defence capability gaps that need to be equipped in infantry units; if so, has there been an investigation into the potential benefits or shortcomings of doing so.

5. Is it the case that the net personnel and capital savings, including for support staff to the 16th Air Defence Regiment, would be enough to fund up to three or four new rifle companies.

6. Is it the Government’s priority to address the significant shortcomings in the ADF’s combat capability, especially given the range and duration of its current deployments; if not, will the Government investigate this air defence question with a view to maximising its efficiency and potential.

Mrs De-Anne Kelly—The Minister for Defence has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

1. Yes.

2. The Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) will have significant air defence and strike capabilities. In the air defence role, the JSF is capable of detecting, tracking and destroying enemy aircraft and long-range cruise missiles.

3. Yes.

4. No. Such redeployment would only create the need for additional administrative and maintenance resources. If required, elements of the 16th Air Defence Regiment can be attached to other Australian Defence Force (ADF) units for deployment on operations or training.

5. The number of officers and soldiers posted within the 16th Air Defence Regiment approximately equates to four rifle companies. However, any plan to redistribute the Regiment’s people and equipment across the Army would leave the ADF with no ground-based air defence capability with which to protect existing units.


**Global Peace Operations Initiative**  
*(Question No. 2572)*

Mr McClelland asked the Minister representing the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 November 2005:

1. What is the nature of Australian discussions with the United States in respect of the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI).
(2) What issues is the Government taking into account in deciding on Australia’s involvement and what is the timeline for a decision on the project.

Mrs De-Anne Kelly—The Minister for Defence has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) Government officials held informal discussions at the working level with officials from the United States (US) State Department and the US Department of Defense on the US Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI). The discussions were preliminary and aimed at ascertaining the nature of GPOI, the US expectations of our involvement and the intended outcomes for the region. Since these matters were clarified, discussions have progressed to consider possible options for cooperation. This culminated in an agreed approach to explore cooperative opportunities that were announced at the Australia-US Ministers’ (AUSMIN) meeting in Adelaide on 18 November 2005.

(2) GPOI is primarily a funding program for global and regionally-based bilateral and multilateral engagements designed to strengthen peace operations capacity, interoperability and coordination. The US expressed its interest to work with Australia in the Asia Pacific region owing to our expertise and well-established programs in the region. Any involvement in GPOI will be consistent with the Government’s policy objectives in the region. On 18 November 2005, at the AUSMIN meeting, the Government agreed to explore opportunities for cooperation with our neighbours and allies through GPOI.

Commonwealth Games
(Question No. 2577)

Mr McClelland asked the Minister representing the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 November 2005:

(1) Which ADF units will be deployed to Melbourne for Commonwealth Games security and where will the units be based.

(2) How many (a) Army Blackhawk helicopters and (b) RAAF fast jets will be deployed to Melbourne for Commonwealth Games security.

(3) How long does it take for counter-terror response unit based at Holsworthy to deploy to Melbourne.

(4) How many counter-terror response units in Sydney are on ready response at any one time.

(5) Are the logistics units based at Victoria Barracks in Melbourne adequately trained to deal with a potential terrorist threat as first response.

(6) Will the ADF’s contribution to the Commonwealth Games response include the capacity to respond to chemical and biological emergencies.

(7) Has the Government considered whether ADF units should be permanently based in or around Melbourne for counter-terrorism response.

(8) What is the estimated cost of permanently stationing two navy patrol boats at Hastings in Western Port Bay.

Mrs De-Anne Kelly—The Minister for Defence has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) A Joint Task Force (JTF) comprising elements of the three Services has been formed to provide security, ceremonial and general support to the Commonwealth Games. In addition, Special Forces units will be deployed to Melbourne and based in Defence establishments within the greater Melbourne area. Headquarters JTF is located in Victoria Barracks Melbourne, with supporting elements also located in the greater Melbourne area.
(2) (a) and (b) This information will not be released for security purposes.
(3) This information is classified and will not be released for security purposes.
(4) The Army's Tactical Assault Group (East) and the Incident Response Regiment maintain a capability to deploy at short notice.
(5) Specialised qualifications and skills are required to properly counter a terrorist threat. These capabilities reside in the Army's Special Forces and Incident Response Regiment.
(6) Yes.
(7) Yes.
(8) The Government has no plans to permanently base two patrol boats at Hastings in Western Port Bay. The Government has previously stated that the new Armidale Class patrol boats will be based in Darwin and Cairns.

Child Support Payments

(Question No. 2604)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 9 November 2005:
How often does Centrelink provide information to the Child Support Agency on (a) change in care and (b) change in payments.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Centrelink provides information to the Child Support Agency electronically each working day.

Taxation Policy

(Question No. 2626)

Mr Fitzgibbon asked the Treasurer, in writing, on 10 November 2005:
In respect of his statement in Question Time on 8 March 2004 that he would be releasing for the first time the letter dated 22 September 2003 from Access Economics to Mr Mark Latham, Shadow Treasurer, will he explain how he came to be in possession of the document.

Mr Costello—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
The document was received in my office from an anonymous source.

Shiavello Pty Ltd

(Question No. 2655)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 28 November 2005:
(1) Did Centrelink engage Shiavello Pty Ltd for a marketing makeover installation at a cost of $9,188.
(2) What other costs were incurred in the marketing makeover.
(3) What is the marketing makeover.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(1) Centrelink has engaged Schiavello Pty Ltd to install furniture at the Epping Customer Service Centre. The amount of $9,188 covered the after hours cost of installation.
(2) In total, $23,848 has been spent on the Epping Customer Service Centre refurbishment for Schiavello furniture and installation, painting, signs and graphics.
(3) The refurbishment is part of Centrelink’s Leasehold Improvement Plan which aims to provide a consistent appearance to Centrelink’s Customer Service Centre receptions and waiting areas across the 329 offices nationwide.
Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity
(Question No. 2681)

Mr Melham asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in writing, on 28 November 2005:

(1) Did the General Conference of UNESCO in 2001 unanimously adopt the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.

(2) Did the General Conference of UNESCO on 20 October 2005 approve the Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions with 148 votes for, two against and four abstentions.

(3) Which States voted against and for what reasons.

(4) Which States abstained and for what reasons.

(5) Which States were represented by their cultural ministers at the conference.

Mr Downer—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Yes.

(2) Yes.

(3) US and Israel voted against the Convention. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is not in a position to provide comment on the voting positions of other UNESCO Member States.

(4) Australia, Honduras, Nicaragua and Liberia abstained. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is not in a position to provide comment on the voting positions of other UNESCO Member States. Australia’s voting position is detailed in an Interpretive Statement (at Attachment A), which was delivered by the Australian delegation to the UNESCO General Conference on 18 October 2005.

(5) The full list of General Conference participants is available on the UNESCO website at:


Attachment A

UNESCO Draft Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions

AUSTRALIAN INTERPRETIVE STATEMENT

UNESCO GENERAL CONFERENCE – COMMISSION IV (CULTURE)
Paris, 18 October 2005

Thank you Mr Chair for the opportunity to present this statement.

Australia is a strong supporter of cultural diversity and agrees with the basic aim of the draft Convention before us. However, Australia regrets that a lack of sufficient negotiating time has prevented UNESCO members from achieving a complete consensus on the text of the draft Convention.

Since the May negotiations Australia has conducted extensive inter-agency consultations and has considered the text very carefully at all levels of Government. I have been asked to register Australia’s concerns about key articles of the Convention and would ask that this statement be entered formally on the record of this meeting.

Relationship to Other Instruments

Australia is concerned that the matters to be regulated by the Convention, and the way in which the text is drafted (particularly in relation to Articles 5, 6, 8, 16 and 20) may allow States Parties to implement measures which conflict with their obligations under other international agreements and standard setting regimes, particularly in the areas of trade and intellectual property.

Australia acknowledges that Article 20 was the product of compromise. However, the Article in its current form fails to clarify the relationship of the draft Convention to other international instruments, and...
offers no guidance to assist States Parties in determining what would happen in the event of a conflict between the Convention and other treaties. The potential for inconsistency with other international obligations (including those relating to trade, intellectual property and human rights) is exacerbated by the current definitions contained in Article 4, which do not sufficiently delineate the scope of activities, goods and services covered by the Convention.

**Potential Conflict with domestic laws and policies**

Australia is also concerned that the text as drafted (notably in relation to Articles 6, 8 and 16) could give rise to pressure for Australia to implement policy initiatives which might conflict with government policy and programs, particularly in relation to culture.

Furthermore, Article 16 on one interpretation raises the potential for conflict with Australia’s legal requirements for migration.

Mr Chair,

Australia is a committed member and proud contributor to the work of UNESCO. From the outset, our preference has been for a text to be developed which addressed the need for complete clarity and complementarity with other international instruments. While Australia acknowledges the hard work of many who sought this outcome, unfortunately this text falls short of that need. Australia is therefore unable to support the text proposed and will abstain on adoption of the text.

**Ethanol Producers**

(Question No. 2685)

Mr Martin Ferguson asked the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources, in writing, on 28 November 2005:

Further to the answer to question No. 2461, concerning the Ethanol Production Grants Program, for the financial year ending 30 June

(a) 2003
(b) 2004
(c) 2005

which companies:

(i) applied for, and

(ii) received grants and what sum was granted to each company.

Mr Ian Macfarlane—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) (i) Manildra and CSR

(b) (ii) Manildra - $20,857,998

CSR - $824,942

(b) (ii) Manildra, CSR and Schumer (Rocky Point)

(b) (ii) Manildra - $10,486,262

CSR - $299,656

Schumer (Rocky Point) - $97,138

(c) (i) Manildra, CSR and Schumer (Rocky Point)

(c) (ii) Manildra - $7,671,436

CSR - $559,819

Schumer (Rocky Point) - $414,733

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
Ipswich Motorway  
(Question No. 2743)

Mr Ripoll asked the Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads, in writing, on 29 November 2005:

(1) In respect of the Prime Minister’s statement on 12 November 2005, will he provide the details on where and when the $66 million for a range of interim safety works and planning along the Ipswich Motorway corridor was spent and what part of the $66 million, if any, was spent on studies into the Ipswich Motorway Northern Bypass.

(2) What sum has the Commonwealth Government spent on studies relating to the Ipswich Motorway corridor since 1996, and specifically, what sum has the Commonwealth Government spent since 1996 on studies investigating (a) the full upgrade of the Ipswich Motorway and (b) the Ipswich Motorway Northern Bypass and which organisations were paid for the studies.

(3) Will he provide details on when and how the $10 million to undertake studies to further explore three options for the Ipswich Motorway Northern Bypass, also known as the Goodna Bypass, will be spent and when the studies are expected to be completed.

(4) Is he aware of statements made by the Member for Blair in his community newsletter stating that the Government has committed to build the Goodna Bypass; if so, can he confirm that it is now Commonwealth Government policy to spend $1.1 billion on the eight-kilometre Ipswich Motorway Northern Bypass regardless of the outcome of further studies into this road, including environmental impact studies, geo-technical investigations and community consultation.

(5) Can he explain Commonwealth Government policy on funding the (a) Ipswich Motorway Northern Bypass project and (b) the remaining sections of the Ipswich Motorway from Dinmore to Goodna and Darra to Rocklea, which is estimated to cost only $520 million, and how this will be affected if further studies show that it is (i) feasible and (ii) not feasible to build the Ipswich Motorway Northern Bypass and, in particular, whether it is Commonwealth Government policy to remove the Dinmore to Goodna and Darra to Rocklea sections of the Ipswich Motorway from the national highway network.

(6) Has the Government undertaken a cost benefit analysis on (a) the full upgrade of the Ipswich Motorway and (b) the eight-kilometre Ipswich Motorway Northern Bypass.

(7) Has the Government undertaken a cost benefit analysis comparing the full upgrade of the Ipswich Motorway to the eight-kilometre Ipswich Motorway Northern Bypass; if so, what are the results of this analysis and is it publicly available; if it is not publicly available, can he explain why; if no analysis comparing the projects has been undertaken, can he explain why not.

Mr Lloyd—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) – (2) In December 2003, the Australian Government approved $66m in funding for Ipswich Motorway, comprising $54.9m for interim safety works and $11.1m for concept planning and land acquisition.

Interim safety works include:

- Strengthening of Warrego Highway rail overbridge (completed in January 2005).
- Strengthening of Bullockhead Creek culverts (completed in March 2005).
- Ramp improvements at Progress Road interchange (presently at Tender stage).
- Ramp improvements and installation of traffic signals at Centenary Highway interchange (completed in June 2005).
• Realignment of Ipswich Motorway at Granard Road interchange to provide left hand exit lanes off the northbound lanes on to Granard Road (in progress).
• Intelligent Transport Systems such as variable message signs and closed circuit television cameras (in progress).
• New bridges over Woogaroo Creek as part of early works to facilitate traffic management during construction of Logan Motorway interchange (in progress).
• Concept planning and land acquisition include:
  • Detailed planning, concept design and specialist studies associated with the full six lane upgrade of Ipswich Motorway.
  • Property acquisition under Queensland Government hardship guidelines.
  • Provision of $500,000 for a feasibility investigation into a Northern Option (completed in April 2005 by Maunsell Australia).

The Queensland Government is yet to submit a reconciliation of expenditure associated with the interim safety works and concept planning and land acquisition.

(3) The scope and timing of the $10 million detailed investigations into a Northern Option are yet to be confirmed. The Department of Transport and Regional Services will develop a project brief in cooperation with the Queensland Government Department of Main Roads.

(4)–(5) The Australian Government has committed $10 million for detailed investigations of a Northern Option. No final decisions can be made until these investigations are progressed.

(6)–(7) The Queensland Government Department of Main Roads (QDMR) commissioned a cost benefit analysis of its preferred six-lane upgrade of the Ipswich Motorway in 2003. Using a 7% discount rate, this analysis calculated a Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of 2.43 and a Net Present Value (NPV) of $578 million. This analysis was based on a capital cost of $593.5 million (including contingencies) in 2003 dollars. The capital cost was reviewed by engineering consultant, Maunsell Australia, for QDMR in 2005 and adjusted to $1,098 million (including contingencies) in 2005 dollars. This increase in capital cost would significantly affect the BCR and NPV. The Ipswich Motorway Northern Option feasibility report by Maunsell Australia, which was completed in April 2005, estimated capital costs ranging from $820 million to $1,137 million (in 2005 dollars) for the three alignments identified as being potentially feasible. Maunsell Australia calculated for these options, BCR ranging from 1.4 to 1.9 and NPV ranging from $368 million to $531 million.

Cost benefit analyses for the Queensland preferred six-lane upgrade is presented in planning reports prepared by the QDMR. Cost benefit analyses for the Northern Option feasibility study is presented in reports that are publicly available on the QDMR web site.

Child Support Payments

(1) Is he aware that a non-custodial father paying child support for his children living in another State is not allowed a reduction in child support payments if he incurs court costs in order to fight for access to his children in the event his ex-partner has a return order made against him.

(2) Can he explain why the Child Support Agency does not recognise this as a legitimate expense so that the father is able to have access to his children.
Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Yes.

(2) The Child Support Agency is required to follow the legal precedents made by the Federal courts. The Federal Magistrate’s Court recently made a decision that it is for the courts to determine what legal costs are payable for contact proceedings and those costs should not be considered by Child Support Agency when determining the appropriate amounts of child support payable.

Medicare

(Question No. 2753)

Mr McClelland asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 1 December 2005:

Has the Health Insurance Commission undertaken research on the quality of service in specific Medicare offices and, in particular, the waiting time of customers at the Hurstville Medicare office; if so, how have waiting times varied since 10 October 1997.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Medicare Australia has undertaken qualitative and quantitative customer service and satisfaction research each year since 1984 for consumers and since 1991 for medical practitioners and pharmacists. In 2004 and 2005 Medicare Australia did not undertake qualitative research as part of its customer satisfaction research. However quantitative research was undertaken. The aim of the quantitative research was to capture and continue tracking customer satisfaction levels.

Medicare Australia does not conduct customer satisfaction research at individual Medicare office level. Research has been focused on general customer satisfaction.

Medicare Australia introduced a Service Charter in 1999, which outlines its obligations and standards of service, as well as benchmarks against which service performance can be measured including a performance indicator which aims to keep waiting times in Medicare offices below 10 minutes. Customer waiting times have been measured in the Hurstville Medicare Office as well as all other Medicare offices since 1999-2000.

The methodology is based on manual counts at a number of specified times, considered to be indicative of customer flows. Initially queue times were measured, in all Medicare offices each Friday at 10.00am and 1.00pm. The times selected were considered to be when the majority of offices are very busy and most likely to have high levels of customer traffic.

Since the commencement of extended business hours, the process has been increased to three days per week, Monday, Thursday and Friday at 10.00am, 1.00pm and 3.30pm.

The information below demonstrates the results for the Hurstville Medicare office for the current financial year and the two previous financial years. Records dating back to 1997 have been destroyed in accordance with our records management and archiving policy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Number of Queue times recorded</th>
<th>Times recorded &gt; 10 mins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005/2006 YTD</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/2005</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/2004</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Medicare

(Question No. 2754)

Mr McClelland asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 1 December 2005:

Which Medicare offices have been opened since 10 October 1997 and what were the criteria applied to determine the location of these Medicare offices.

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
The Medicare offices which have opened since 10 October 1997 are:
- Rosebud, VIC opened for business 24 June 2004
- Fountain Gate, VIC opened for business 5 July 2004
- Palmerston, NT opened for business 2 March 2005
- Leichhardt, NSW opened for business 3 March 2005
- Joondalup, WA opened for business 3 March 2005
- Elanora, QLD opened for business 16 March 2005
- Cranbourne, VIC opened for business 17 March 2005
- Tuggerah, NSW opened for business 22 June 2005
- Maroochydore, QLD opened for business 8 August 2005
- Wynnum, QLD opened for business 8 August 2005
- Gungahlin, ACT opened for business 19 September 2005
- Tuncurry, NSW opened for business 2 November 2005

Factors which were considered to determine these locations included:
1. The availability of other claiming lodgement methods such as: Medicare Australia Access Points and Medicare Australia Online claiming.
2. The cost of establishing and maintaining new Medicare offices.
3. The proximity to other Medicare offices and the potential impact a new office might have on the workload of other Medicare offices.
4. The current bulk billing level in the area.
5. The volume of claims lodged by customers in the area and the nature and level of different types of billing by doctors in the area.
6. Suitable site for the Medicare office - considerations include transport and security of staff and customers.

Medicare
(Question No. 2756)

Mr McClelland asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 1 December 2005:
Is the Government considering opening any new Medicare Offices; if so, what criteria are being applied to determine whether a Medicare office is to be opened in a particular location.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
I am advised that Medicare Australia is not considering opening any new Medicare offices at this time.

Centrelink Payments
(Question No. 2780)

Ms Hoare asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 5 December 2005:
(1) For 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, how many persons resident in the (a) electoral division of Charlton and (b) postcode area (i) 2259, (ii) 2264, (iii) 2265, (iv) 2267, (v) 2278, (vi) 2282, (vii) 2283, (viii) 2284, (ix) 2285, (x) 2286, (xi) 2287, (xii) 2289, (xiii) 2290, and (xiv) 2305 received a Centrelink benefit.
(2) For 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, how many persons resident in the (a) electoral division of Charlton and (b) postcode area (i) 2259, (ii) 2264, (iii) 2265, (iv) 2267, (v) 2278, (vi) 2282, (vii) 2283, (viii) 2284, (ix) 2285, (x) 2286, (xi) 2287, (xii) 2289, (xiii) 2290, and (xiv) 2305 were overpaid a Centrelink benefit.
(3) For 2003–2004 and 2004–2005, how many persons resident in the (a) electoral division of Charlton and (b) postcode area (i) 2259, (ii) 2264, (iii) 2265, (iv) 2267, (v) 2278, (vi) 2282, (vii) 2283, (viii) 2284, (ix) 2285, (x) 2286, (xi) 2287, (xii) 2289, (xiii) 2290, and (xiv) 2305 received incorrect advice of an overpayment of a Centrelink benefit.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) (a) Information regarding the number of Centrelink customers by payment, in the electoral division of Charlton for the financial years requested can be obtained via the Department of Human Services Website, at the following link:


(b) For the 2003–04 and 2004–05 financial years, the selected postcodes had the following Centrelink customers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Postcode</th>
<th>2003–04</th>
<th>2004–05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2259</td>
<td>13,350</td>
<td>13,817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2264</td>
<td>4,404</td>
<td>4,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2265</td>
<td>1,505</td>
<td>1,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2267</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2278</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2282</td>
<td>3,327</td>
<td>3,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2283</td>
<td>7,099</td>
<td>7,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2284</td>
<td>3,497</td>
<td>3,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2285</td>
<td>6,917</td>
<td>6,773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2286</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2287</td>
<td>8,493</td>
<td>8,497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2289</td>
<td>4,853</td>
<td>4,711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2290</td>
<td>9,370</td>
<td>9,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2305</td>
<td>3,214</td>
<td>3,094</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) (a) For the 2003–04 and 2004–05 financial years the following residents in the electoral division of Charlton had a debt raised as a result of overpayment of a Centrelink benefit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electoral Division</th>
<th>2003–04</th>
<th>2004–05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlton</td>
<td>17,266</td>
<td>14,852</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) For the 2003–04 and 2004–05 financial years the following residents in the nominated postcode areas had a debt raised as a result of overpayment of a Centrelink benefit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Postcode</th>
<th>2003–04</th>
<th>2004–05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2259</td>
<td>5,060</td>
<td>4,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2264</td>
<td>1,371</td>
<td>1,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2265</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2267</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2278</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2282</td>
<td>1,285</td>
<td>1,074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2283</td>
<td>2,312</td>
<td>2,009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2284</td>
<td>1,114</td>
<td>950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2285</td>
<td>2,415</td>
<td>2,133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Centrelink Customers with a Debt Raised
Financial Year by Electorate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electorate</th>
<th>2003-2004</th>
<th>2004-2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2286</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2287</td>
<td>3,069</td>
<td>2,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2289</td>
<td>1,610</td>
<td>1,382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2290</td>
<td>2,998</td>
<td>2,785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2305</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>895</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1. The information in these tables relate to customer numbers, not number of debts. Some customers may have more than one debt.
2. Figures include debts that were automatically waived on determination and FAO reconciliation debts.
3. Figures exclude debts raised on behalf of other government agencies.

(3) The information is not available.

Centrelink Overpayments
(Question No. 2782)

**Ms Hoare** asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 5 December 2005:

(1) Can he explain the processes in place at Centrelink to ensure that where an overpayment occurs correct advice is despatched to the recipient.

(2) How many persons resident in the electoral division of Charlton received incorrect advice of an overpayment in (a) 2003-2004 and (b) 2004-2005.

(3) For (a) 2003-2004 and (b) 2004-2005, how many overpayments to persons resident in the electoral division of Charlton were made as a result of a genuine mistake by the recipient and, of these overpayments, how many were upheld by Centrelink’s (i) original decision maker and (ii) authorised review officer after an appeal.

**Mr Hockey**—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Once a debt has been identified and investigated, it is calculated. Centrelink has developed system based tools to assist in the correct calculation of a customer’s debt. The customer must be formally advised of the existence of a debt through issue of a notice (Account Payable) before any recovery action can be taken.

Centrelink procedure is that where appropriate and where possible, debt-raising staff will advise the customer beforehand that an Account Payable is being sent to them. An example of where it is not appropriate to contact the customer would be where a customer is under investigation for fraud. In some cases Centrelink attempts to contact the customer but is unable to do so.

The Account Payable notice advises the customer of:

- the date of which the notice was issued;
- the reason the debt was incurred, including a brief explanation of the circumstances that led to the debt being incurred;
- the period to which the debt relates;
- the outstanding amount of the debt at the date of notice;
- the day on which the outstanding amount is due and payable (i.e. 28 days after the issue of the notice);
- the options available for repaying the debt;
• contact details for enquiries concerning the debt;
• the possibility that payments may be reduced to help recover the amount payable; and
• their right of appeal against the decision to raise the debt.

(2) The information is not available.
(3) The information is not available.

Centrelink Services
(Question No. 2794)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 7 December 2005:

(1) Which services that are currently provided by Centrelink staff are to be provided by staff at Medicare offices in future.
(2) Can he explain the reasons for the changes.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Family Assistance services, including claims for payments, access to advice and the ability to make enquiries, are being progressively made available in Medicare Offices, with all these offices having this service available by December 2006. Previously the full range of Family Assistance services was available only from Centrelink Offices.

(2) Families will have easier access to family assistance payments, claims and advice through the network of Medicare Offices as well as Centrelink offices. In many cases the location of the Medicare Office is more convenient for families to access, for example located in a shopping centre and close to public transport.

Pine Gap Defence Facility
(Question No. 2808)

Mr Melham asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 December 2005:

(1) Further to the answer to question No. 1687 (Hansard, 5 September 2005, page 163), and question No. 1807 (Hansard, 6 September 2005, page 134), why were United States Congressional committee staff provided with classified briefings on the operations of the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap, while such a briefing was denied to security cleared members of the committee staff of the Australian Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and the Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD.
(2) Why did the Government treat Australian parliamentary committee staff differently from their United States counterparts.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) The Australian Government does not determine the extent to which staff of United States Congressional committees are briefed on the operations of the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap. The Australian Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD (now the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security) do not consider the operations of the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap. The access of those committees and thus of their staff to information on Pine Gap is determined accordingly.

(2) Due to the different relationships between executive government and the legislature in the US and Australian systems, the US approach to access to sensitive intelligence matters and Congressional committees may well differ from the practice in Australia.
Successive governments in Australia have taken the view that, as members of the executive are also members of the legislature, legislative transparency of activities at Pine Gap is sufficiently provided for by ensuring that those members of the legislature who are in relevant executive positions or in relevant opposition offices are fully briefed on the facility and its capabilities.

The staff of parliamentary committees are briefed on intelligence matters in accordance with the work of the committee concerned and with Australia’s obligations for the protection of intelligence information.

**Australian Defence Satellite Communications Station**

(Question No. 2809)

Mr Melham asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 December 2005:

Further to the answer to question No. 2326 (*Hansard*, 1 November 2005, page 142), what is the value and duration of the contract(s) awarded to L3comm (ESSCO) for the provision of antenna radome maintenance at the Australian Defence Satellite Communications Station at Geraldton, W.A.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

The contract is worth approximately $24,000 per annum, and commenced on 24 January 2000 and is for the life of the radomes, with an estimated end date of 2011.

**Signals Intelligence Reports**

(Question No. 2810)

Mr Melham asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 December 2005:

(1) Is the Minister of the Department of Defence aware of the United States National Security Agency’s announcement on 30 November 2005 that it has declassified a large number of previously classified signals intelligence reports and other intelligence papers concerning the Vietnam War, specifically the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.

(2) Did the United States Government consult with the Australian Government before the National Security Agency decided to release these signals intelligence reports.

(3) Does the Defence Signals Directorate hold any signals intelligence and/or other classified material relating to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and will the Government review this material with a view to its early release.

(4) What specific programs are in place to declassify post Second World War historical intelligence records held by the Defence Signals Directorate.

(5) Have any post Second World War signals intelligence reports been declassified by DSD to date; if so, to what matters do the declassified reports relate.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Yes.

(2) No.

(3) No.

(4) The Defence Signals Directorate does not have any specific programs in place to declassify post Second World War historical intelligence records. However, Defence responds to a large number of public access requests under Section 40 of the Archives Act 1983. As part of this process, the Defence Signals Directorate reviews and provides public disclosure advice on the access status of signals intelligence and communications security material.

(5) No.
Australasian Satellite Services  
(Question No. 2812)  
Mr Melham asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 December 2005:  
(1) During what period was the Australian company Australian Satellite Services engaged in the construction of two 10 metre and two 22 metre satellite Earth Stations at the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap.  
(2) How many Australian Satellite Services personnel were employed at Pine Gap during this construction project.  
Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:  
(1) 1997-99.  
(2) Australian Satellite Services was under contract to a United States firm. The company advises that five personnel or subcontractors were employed during the construction project.

Colmar Brunton Social Research Pty Ltd  
(Question No. 2824)  
Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 8 December 2005:  
Did the Child Support Agency engage Colmar Brunton Social Research Pty Ltd to provide market testing at a cost of $49,500; if so, what services were provided under the terms of this contract.  
Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:  
Yes, CSA did engage Colmar Brunton Social Research Pty Ltd to provide market research at a cost of up to $49,500. CSA commissioned Colmar Brunton to conduct research to test customer views regarding future CSAonline services. This includes testing the look, feel and user friendliness of the online service.

Overseas Property Office Program  
(Question No. 2838)  
Mr Rudd asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in writing, on 8 December 2005:  
(1) Does the Overseas Property Office’s five year rolling program include plans to buy more land overseas.  
(2) What major expenditure and capital works will the Overseas Property Office undertake in 2006 and will he provide a breakdown of the expenditures and capital works.  
Mr Downer—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:  
(1) Yes.  
(2) Information on current and projected expenditure on major capital works being undertaken in the overseas property estate in 2006 is on the public and parliamentary record.