COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

House of Representatives

Official Hansard

No. 3, 2007
Monday, 26 February 2007

FORTY-FIRST PARLIAMENT
FIRST SESSION—EIGHTH PERIOD

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SITTING DAYS—2007

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- **SYDNEY**: 630 AM
- **NEWCASTLE**: 1458 AM
- **GOSFORD**: 98.1 FM
- **BRISBANE**: 936 AM
- **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—EIGHTH 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, Ms Ann Kathleen Corcoran, Mr Barry Wayne Haase, Mr Michael John Hatton, the Hon. Duncan James Colquhoun Kerr SC, Mr Harry Vernon Quick, the Hon. Bruce Craig Scott, Mr Patrick Damien Secker, 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—Mr Anthony Norman Albanese MP
Deputy Manager of Opposition Business—Mr Kelvin John Thomson 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—Mrs Kay Elizabeth Hull MP
Whip—Mr Paul Christopher Neville MP

Australian Labor Party
Leader—Mr Kevin Michael Rudd MP
Deputy Leader—Ms Julia Eileen Gillard MP
Chief Opposition Whip—The Hon. Leo Roger Spurway Price MP
Opposition Whips—Mr Michael David Danby MP and Ms Jill Griffiths Hall MP

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<td>Wood, Jason Peter</td>
<td>La Trobe, Vic</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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<td>Deputy Prime Minister</td>
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<td>Treasurer</td>
<td>The Hon. Peter Howard Costello MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Defence</td>
<td>The Hon. Warren Errol Truss MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>The Hon. Dr Brendan John Nelson MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Health and Ageing and Leader of</td>
<td>The Hon. Alexander John Gosse Downer MP</td>
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<td>the House</td>
<td>The Hon. Anthony John Abbott MP</td>
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<td>Attorney-General</td>
<td>The Hon. Philip Maxwell Ruddock MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Education, Science and Training and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women’s Issues</td>
<td>The Hon. Julie Isabel Bishop MP</td>
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<td>The Hon. Malcolm Thomas Brough MP</td>
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<td>The Hon. Ian Elgin Macfarlane MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service</td>
<td>The Hon. Joseph Benedict Hockey MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate</td>
<td>Senator the Hon. Helen Lloyd Coonan</td>
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<td>Minister for the Environment and Water Resources</td>
<td>The Hon. Malcolm Bligh Turnbull MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Justice and Customs and Manager of Government Business in the Senate</td>
<td>Senator the Hon. Christopher Martin Ellison</td>
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<td>Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation</td>
<td>Senator the Hon. Eric Abetz</td>
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<td>Minister for the Arts and Sport</td>
<td>Senator the Hon. George Henry Brandis SC</td>
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<td>Senator the Hon. Nigel Gregory Scullion</td>
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<td>Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer</td>
<td>The Hon. Peter Craig Dutton MP</td>
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<td>Special Minister of State</td>
<td>The Hon. Gary Roy Nairn MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Vocational and Further Education</td>
<td>The Hon. Andrew John Robb MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Ageing</td>
<td>Senator the Hon. Santo Santoro</td>
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<td>Minister for Small Business and Tourism</td>
<td>The Hon. Frances Esther Bailey MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads</td>
<td>The Hon. James Eric Lloyd MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence</td>
<td>The Hon. Bruce Frederick Billson MP</td>
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<td>Assistant Minister for Environment and Water Resources</td>
<td>The Hon. Dr Sharman Nancy Stone MP</td>
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<td>Assistant Minister for Health and Ageing</td>
<td>The Hon. Christopher Maurice Pyne MP</td>
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<td>Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance and Administration</td>
<td>The Hon. John Kenneth Cobb MP</td>
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<td>Senator the Hon. Richard Mansell Colbeck</td>
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<td>The Hon. De-Anne Margaret Kelly MP</td>
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<td>The Hon. Teresa Gambaro MP</td>
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<td>Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister</td>
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<td>Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer</td>
<td>The Hon. Christopher John Pearce MP</td>
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<td>The Hon. Sussan Penelope Ley MP</td>
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<td>Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education, Science and Training</td>
<td>The Hon. Patrick Francis Farmer MP</td>
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<td>Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>The Hon. Gregory Andrew Hunt MP</td>
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SHADOW MINISTRY

Leader of the Opposition
Kevin Michael Rudd MP

Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Shadow Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations and Shadow Minister for Social Inclusion
Julia Eileen Gillard MP

Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for National Development, Resources and Energy
Senator Christopher Vaughan Evans

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Communications and Information Technology
Senator Stephen Michael Conroy

Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and Water and Manager of Opposition Business in the House
Anthony Norman Albanese MP

Shadow Minister for Homeland Security and Shadow Minister for Territories
The Hon. Archibald Ronald Bevis MP

Shadow Assistant Treasurer and Shadow Minister for Revenue and Competition Policy
Christopher Eyles Bowen MP

Shadow Minister for Immigration, Integration and Citizenship
Anthony Stephen Burke MP

Shadow Minister for Industry and Shadow Minister for Innovation, Science and Research
Senator Kim John Carr

Shadow Minister for Trade and Regional Development
The Hon. Simon Findlay Crean MP

Shadow Minister for Service Economy, Small Business and Independent Contractors
Craig Anthony Emerson MP

Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Urban Development and Consumer Affairs
Laurence Donald Thomas Ferguson MP

Shadow Minister for Transport, Roads and Tourism
Martin John Ferguson MP

Shadow Minister for Defence
Joel Andrew Fitzgibbon MP

Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Heritage and Shadow Minister for the Arts
Peter Robert Garrett MP

Shadow Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, Shadow Minister for Defence Science and Personnel and Shadow Special Minister of State
Alan Peter Griffin MP

Shadow Minister for Justice and Customs and Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate
Senator Joseph William Ludwig

Shadow Minister for Sport, Recreation and Health Promotion and Shadow Minister for Local Government
Senator Kate Alexandra Lundy

Shadow Minister for Families and Community Services and Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Reconciliation
Jennifer Louise Macklin MP

Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs
Robert Bruce McClelland MP

Shadow Minister for Ageing, Disabilities and Carers
Senator Jan Elizabeth McLucas

Shadow Minister for Federal/State Relations and Shadow Minister for International Development Assistance
Robert Francis McMullan MP

Shadow Minister for Primary Industries, Fisheries
Senator Kerry Williams Kelso O’Brien
and Forestry
Shadow Minister for Human Services, Housing, Youth and Women
Shadow Minister for Health
Shadow Minister for Superannuation and Intergenerational Finance and Shadow Minister for Banking and Financial Services
Shadow Minister for Education and Training
Shadow Treasurer
Shadow Minister for Finance
Shadow Attorney-General and Deputy Manager of Opposition Business in the House
Shadow Minister for Public Administration and Accountability, Shadow Minister for Corporate Governance and Responsibility and Shadow Minister for Workforce Participation
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence and Veterans’ Affairs
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Environment and Heritage
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Treasury
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Education
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Industrial Relations
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Industry and Innovation
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Northern Australia and Indigenous Affairs
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition (Social and Community Affairs)

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Nicola Louise Roxon MP
Senator the Hon. Nicholas John Sherry
Stephen Francis Smith MP
Wayne Maxwell Swan MP
Lindsay James Tanner MP
Kelvin John Thomson MP
Senator Penelope Ying Yen Wong
Anthony Michael Byrne MP
The Hon. Graham John Edwards MP
Jennie George MP
Catherine Fiona King MP
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John Paul Murphy MP
Brendan Patrick John O’Connor MP
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The SPEAKER (Hon. David Hawker) took the chair at 12.30 pm and read prayers.

COMMITTEES

Education and Vocational Training Committee

Report

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (12.31 pm)—On behalf of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, I present the committee’s report of the inquiry into teacher education entitled *Top of the class: report of the inquiry into teacher education*, together with the minutes of proceedings and evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mr HARTSUYKER—Teacher education is undeniably important to the social and economic wellbeing of Australia. Research has found that the quality of teaching a student receives is the most important factor influencing their achievement. This means that better quality teacher education has the potential to improve the effectiveness of the entire school system. Investment in teacher education can increase the academic performance of students, reduce the need for remedial programs and ease the negative social and economic consequences of educational underachievement.

It is important to state that the teacher education system is not in crisis—it currently serves Australia well, but it could do better. The committee’s recommendations suggest improvements at every stage of teacher education. Each recommendation is worth while as a stand-alone measure but together the recommendations constitute a powerful reform package.

The first two recommendations are aimed at creating a sound research base for teacher education. The committee is concerned that there has been little previous work to establish what is meant by ‘quality’ teacher education and recommends a longitudinal study of teacher education to assess the effectiveness of different models. To assist in putting education on a sound research base, the committee also recommends that a specific educational research fund, modelled on the NHMRC, be established to provide funding for high-quality research into teacher education.

One of the committee’s key recommendations is that a national system of accreditation of university teacher education courses be established. This system would be based on a national set of professional teaching standards, which would also guide state and territory teacher registration authorities. The accreditation of teacher education courses by a national body would provide for greater consistency and rigour and would facilitate the portability of teaching qualifications.

Teacher education already attracts many high-achieving students; however, the committee recommends extra funding to increase the diversity of entrants to teacher education. There is also an imbalance between the numbers of students in particular teacher education courses and the number and types of teachers needed—for instance, most states report an oversupply of primary school teachers but an undersupply of secondary maths and science teachers. The committee recommends a more tightly focused allocation of places in teacher education courses to meet demand.

Practicum is an area which frequently presents problems for universities. While practicum is highly valued by students, it is also frequently criticised because of the weak links between theory and practice and the
variable quality of supervision. Length and quality of practicum varies significantly from university to university. The committee recommends the establishment of a national teacher education partnership fund to establish collaborative approaches to practicum, research, induction and professional development. The committee also recommends a rethink of the current funding for practicum. The actual costs of providing practicum need to be accurately determined, and universities should be paid a separate amount which fully covers the practicum component.

The transition from university to becoming a teacher is an area that has previously been neglected, with induction of new teachers generally being the responsibility of the employing school. The committee recommends that the Australian government encourage, by partially financing, a year-long, structured induction program for beginning teachers. The program would include an allocated mentor and a 20 per cent reduction in the beginning teacher’s face-to-face teaching load.

Teacher education does not end at graduation. Teachers must continue learning throughout their careers. Hence, the committee recommends that all teachers commit to ongoing professional learning and that this be a requirement for renewal of registration. Ongoing professional learning could be rewarded if it were linked with higher levels of registration and pay. Much of the educational research that is being done in Australia does not easily find its way into teaching practice; therefore, the committee supports a feasibility study into the establishment of a national clearing house for educational research by Teaching Australia.

Finally, the committee recommends a range of funding measures to put teacher education on a sounder financial footing. While the committee considers that universities should retain the flexibility to determine the distribution of funds allocated to them, there should be greater transparency in the system and they should be required to report on expenditure in greater detail. The committee recommends that the Commonwealth contribution rate for education be increased significantly and that the impact on teacher education of capping the student contribution rate be evaluated. There is widespread concern that the cost of providing teacher education is underestimated.

This report is by no means the first inquiry into teacher education. During the last two decades, over 80 reports on teacher education have been produced. In seeking to make an original contribution where so many have preceded us, the committee has stepped back to look at the whole system from a national perspective. The committee’s aim was to make a number of practical and achievable recommendations that would address the most pressing and longstanding issues in teacher education. I commend this report to the House. (Time expired)

Mr SAWFORD (Port Adelaide) (12.36 pm)—I am pleased to support the comments of the member for Cowper in the tabling of the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training entitled Top of the class: report of the inquiry into teacher education. I acknowledge the excellent work of the chair and the members of the committee. However, I want to particularly highlight the outstanding work of the secretariat, and it is good to see three of them here in the House today. The committee secretary, Jan Holmes, is to be congratulated on her professionalism, enthusiasm, strength and perseverance in putting together a most lucid and professional report. Well done, Janet.

The chair’s strength of listening, patience and preparedness to allow the report to
evolve on the evidence available proved to be a solid foundation for what could be a watershed report for not only teacher education but also education generally. There is no doubt in my mind that, over the last 30 years, we as a nation have dropped the ball on many aspects of education. Technical and vocational education, literacy and numeracy in our primary schools, mathematics, science and physical education are examples; teacher education is another. Twenty-five reports in 20 years have sent many mixed messages.

We should be investing more in the basic foundation for any improvement in education in a very competitive world. There is no doubt that a dollar spent on teacher education provides a return on every other dollar this nation invests in education. If we cannot get teacher education right, we diminish every other initiative and every other expenditure in education. Education is a trinity. Firstly, it is a set of ideas. It is the impact of mind upon mind. Secondly, it is a process that should enhance the quality of relationships between teachers, children and parents. Thirdly, it is a program—and the quality and balance of the educational curriculum and pedagogy are crucial. All three depend on the quality of the teacher.

Thirty years ago, Australia was regarded internationally as a beacon for education in the world. We were ‘top of the class’. It is time we regained that prominence. The implementation of the recommendations contained in this report would be very strong beginning points for not only teacher education but also education generally. The report recommends a national system of teacher accreditation. There is no doubt whatsoever that, with the internationalisation of education, Australia needs a national approach. Education debates in this country are more often than not non-productive. Claims and counterclaims made by so many are simply not substantiated. Teacher education is a case in point. As the chair pointed out, it is not in crisis; however, with wise investment it could be better. One glaring omission is the lack of evidential research and data underpinning education policy.

Three of the report’s 12 recommendations focus on research. Firstly, a longitudinal study should be commissioned into the effectiveness of different models of teacher education. Secondly, a specific education research fund should be established on a model similar to the National Health and Medical Research Council. Thirdly, the proposal by Teaching Australia to conduct a feasibility study into the establishment of a national clearing house for education research ought to be supported. In other words, let’s stop guessing. Let’s get serious about education, and let’s stop burdening teachers with every untested whim, fad or fashion.

Researchers Skillbeck and Connell tell us that selection for teaching should draw upon the wide cultural diversity of Australian society. In practice, this does not occur. Too many selected entrants for teacher education are increasingly middle-class, metropolitan and female. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of those attributes. However, it is desirable, as recommendation 4 states, that a teacher education diversity fund of $20 million be established to encourage more diversity in entry to teacher education: people from Indigenous, lower socioeconomic, non-English-speaking, cultural, rural and remote backgrounds, and males in primary education.

I have already mentioned that any investment in teacher education will have a return on every other dollar invested in education. The 12 recommendations to increase our investment in teacher education are modest and minimal and are in the national interest to return Australia’s reputation internation-
ally to where it ought to be: 'top of the class'.

Other recommendations tackle practices and partnerships, teacher induction and ongoing professional learning. Overall, the 12 recommendations provide a sensible and common-sense set of pathways to allow teacher education in Australia to be world class. The report is balanced and even and has a pluralistic approach. I commend the report to the House. (Time expired)

The SPEAKER—The time allotted for statements on this report has expired. Does the member for Cowper wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (12.41 pm)—I move:

That the House take note of the report.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mr SCHULTZ—The report addresses a matter of critical importance to Australia’s rural industries. A highly skilled rural workforce is vital to the economic future of Australia. Maintaining and enhancing those skills in a dynamic and highly competitive international environment requires investment in world-class training, extension and research services. Only by making such investment will our rural industries remain at the forefront of international agriculture and forestry.

Despite this, the evidence received by the committee during its inquiry indicated that there are severe skills shortages in rural industries and significant gaps in our capacity to respond to those shortages. First and foremost are the negative perceptions surrounding agriculture and forestry. Although these are dynamic industries with strong prospects, they are widely perceived as sunset industries with little to offer ambitious and capable people.

In truth, Australia’s rural industries offer a wide diversity of career options, ranging from farmhands—with the freedom to move within and between industries—through to machine operators with specialised skills and business managers and research scientists. Agriculture is not just farming, and forestry is not just cutting down trees. The community needs to be educated as to the role agriculture and forestry play in our society and the diverse career prospects open to those who seek them.

A more coherent approach needs to be taken to the provision of rural skills training and education. The committee recommends the development of a national strategy on
rural skills training, encompassing the school, vocational education and training, and higher education sectors. The strategy would rationalise providers, focus limited resources and provide for greater articulation between the various sectors.

The committee also identified a need to reform the regulatory framework governing vocational education and training, at least as applied to rural skills training. The current framework is inflexible and unresponsive and fails to take into account the particular needs of rural skills training in terms of costs, volumes and the often informal nature of rural expertise. The framework has also failed to meet the specific needs of individual rural industries, leading some to take control of their own training needs. The very success of these industry initiatives demonstrates the need for change.

The need for increased investment in research and the dissemination of research outcomes through extension are a matter of priority. While Australian research in agriculture and forestry is world class, there is a concern that much of the research being done is not reaching farmers. The links between research and extension must, therefore, be enhanced. There is also concern that the research skill base is being undermined by an emphasis on short-term funding mechanisms and an ageing researcher population. The committee recommends a greater emphasis on long-term research and greater stability of funding and employment for researchers.

The provision of rural extension services has undergone enormous change in recent times, as state governments move out of this field and private operators move in. There is a concern that this process of transition has created gaps in the availability of services and a loss of corporate memory and career opportunities amongst extension professionals. The committee has called for the development of a national extension framework to address these issues. The provision of high-quality extension and advisory services is essential to the progress of rural and regional Australia.

I take this opportunity to express on behalf of the committee our gratitude to all those who participated in the inquiry and to the staff of the secretariat. On behalf of the committee, I commend the report to the House.

Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (12.47 pm)—I congratulate the member for Hume on his chairmanship of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry inquiry and on bringing together the committee’s report Skills: rural Australia’s need. I am pleased to speak to the tabling of this report and, in doing so, draw attention to the skills needs of rural Australia. As a member of this parliament who represents the largest rural electorate in Tasmania, I am well aware of the importance of this issue. The recommendations in this report are broad in their range but also concise in their focus—and they need to be. In most cases, the needs of rural Australia are peculiar to particular regions and, therefore, the plan to address those needs should also be specific.

The committee received 117 submissions from government, peak bodies and individuals. There were also 22 public hearings, through which we received further submissions. The recommendations in the committee’s report are listed under five categories: rural skills—a critical issue; rural skills education and training; regulatory framework for VET; the availability and adequacy of research; and provision of extension and advisory services.

A skilled rural workforce is critical to our economic future. Rural industries, like most industries—if not, in fact, all industries—are
facing a skills shortage and a skills gap. There are difficulties in attracting and retaining skilled workers and, in addition to this, the agriculture workforce in this country is older than the Australian workforce in general. Perhaps one of the most important issues is the need to collect comprehensive and consistent national data, in order to address the skills shortage.

The committee is concerned that the current allocation of government resources is neither sufficient nor appropriately targeted, due to inadequate data collection and analysis. That is why it has recommended that the Australian government consult with the states, territories and industry bodies to review and revise the Skills in Demand List survey and that this should be reviewed on an annual basis. It is also important to develop national strategies in a variety of areas—such as promoting the role of agriculture and forestry within Australian society and promoting agriculture and forestry within primary and secondary schools. Again, these initiatives should be developed by the Australian government in conjunction with the state and territory governments.

While the overall number of women working in rural industries has grown, there was a steady decline in the number of young women entering the agricultural workforce from 1971 until 2001. That is one reason that the committee has recommended that the Australian government coordinate programs with the state and territory governments to enhance the role and contribution of women to Australian agriculture and to assist them to participate in rural skills training. Similar strategies should also be developed for older workers.

The Australian government also needs to acknowledge the role of technology in rural areas and in rural enterprises. The committee has recommended the further development of communications services in rural and regional Australia. This includes access to high-speed broadband services for rural and remote communities.

We need to encourage people to work in the rural workforce. We need to show that there is a wide range of career opportunities available within rural industries. We need to ensure that the knowledge of those older workers working in rural industries is passed on to the next generation of rural workers. I commend this report to the House—not just to sit on a shelf but to be implemented. Our rural future is at stake. We need young people to be in training now to deal with the massive changes that are going on in the world today.

I congratulate the staff involved. There were some staff changes during this inquiry and there were difficulties in getting together. I commend them for pulling together and for coming up with this very good report, which I certainly hope both sides of the House will give consideration to in their policy considerations.

The SPEAKER—The time allotted for statements on this report has expired. Does the member for Hume wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a later occasion?

Mr SCHULTZ (Hume) (12.52 pm)—I move:

That the House take note of the report.

The SPEAKER—in accordance with standing order 39, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for a later hour this day.

MAIN COMMITTEE
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Committee
Reference
Mr SCHULTZ (Hume) (12.52 pm)—I move:
That the order of the day be referred to the Main Committee for debate.

Question agreed to.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Aged Care

Mr Ticehurst (Dobell) (12.52 pm)—by leave—On behalf of the member for Macquarie, I move:

That the House:

(1) recognises the pressures of an ageing population;
(2) acknowledges the enormous contribution made by senior citizens throughout their working lives;
(3) recognises the need to provide quality care for the frail aged in our community;
(4) welcomes the progress made in this area in recent years; and
(5) welcomes the Government’s recently announced package of further measures to help provide community-based and residential care for our frail aged.

Ageing and aged care are pressing issues not only for my electorate of Dobell but also for Australia and for countries around the world. We can see this easily when we look at the scale of demographic change that is now pressing upon us. We can expect Australia's population to continue ageing for at least the next half a century, barring unforeseen changes in net migration or the fertility rate. At the same time, the proportion of young people is expected to fall and the percentage of over-65-year-olds will go up by around 15 per cent at mid-century. This illuminates the range of issues that will confront Australia in the decades ahead. It will not just be a matter of building more and better old people’s homes or providing better care. All that is important, of course, but an ageing society, and fewer young people, means a smaller intake of new employees for the workforce. It means an older workforce. There are important implications for productivity, national competitiveness, and managing pensions and retirement.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the enormous contribution made by senior citizens to our country. Over their working lives, senior Australians have contributed to continuing economic growth and helped make Australia one of the most prosperous and successful economies in the world. They are the custodians of our cultural heritage. The Howard government continues to recognise the enormous contributions made by senior Australians through the National Day for Older Australians.

In terms of the provision of quality aged care, the first point I would make is that tomorrow’s older Australians are the baby boomers. In comparison with some earlier periods, they have lived through a time of rapid social and political change. They are, I believe, more independent in outlook, more affluent and more demanding in their expectations. They will change the way we think about care and how we deliver care. For a start, the baby boomers will want to retain their independence as long as they are able. That means staying in their own homes while they can and having care delivered there.

We have heard that message loud and clear, and we have responded by increasing our support for community care in the government’s recently announced Securing the Future of Aged Care for Australians package. Some 7,200 additional community care places will be delivered over the next four years, at a cost of $411.7 million. These additional places will take Australia’s aged care ratio from the current target of 108 places per 1,000 people aged 70 and over to a record 113 places per 1,000 people aged 70 and over in 2011. This compares with around 93 places per 1,000 people when the government was elected in 1996. Where residential aged care is concerned, we believe these
baby boomers will insist on better facilities, higher levels of comfort and amenity, and more flexibility in how they live and how they are cared for. Again, this change is happening now. When I attend or open a new home, an extension or a refurbishment on the Central Coast, I am always impressed by the fact that the provider has understood that it is catering for a future clientele whose expectations are of a different order.

The new package allocates $1 billion to increasing government payments for residents of aged-care homes. Additional care funding will be targeted to those with the highest care needs, while residents with moderate asset levels will also receive extra accommodation support. The $1.5 billion package of reforms will ensure that the aged-care industry can deliver quality, choice and affordability in care as Australia’s population ages. We have come a long way in transforming Australia’s aged-care sector when you consider that only 10 years ago there was no accreditation system, no independent quality checking, fewer than 5,000 community care packages and 29,000 fewer residential places.

Today the Australian aged-care industry can rightly claim to have the highest standards of accommodation and care anywhere in the world, and older Australians and their families have a wider range of options to choose from when the time comes to access aged-care needs. This funding package is, of course, in addition to funding allocated in previous budgets, including $2.2 billion committed to aged care in the 2004-05 budget—the largest single investment in aged care by any Australian government. Alternatively, Labor has not been able to come up with an aged-care policy at all, despite promising one over two years ago. Labor’s ageing policy discussion paper shows a complete lack of understanding of current aged-care policy and programs. The Australian government is committed to addressing the challenges of an ageing population and will ensure that the increasing number of older Australians, now and in the future, have access to the right level of care. *(Time expired)*

**The SPEAKER**—Is the motion seconded?

**Mrs Gash**—I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

**Ms BURKE** (Chisholm) (12.58 pm)—Our population has been slowly ageing for the last 35 years. Since the 1970s, the number of people aged over 65 has increased by 143 per cent. In the four decades to 2045, the number of Australians aged 80 years and over—the bulk of aged-care residents—is projected to jump from 680,000 to 2.6 million. I know this is the reality in my electorate of Chisholm, where I have a significant aged population. The shift in the proportion of people aged over 80 in the next 35 years from 13.1 per cent to 24.8 per cent will be more marked than in the past due to the relatively lower growth of younger age groups.

In the immediate future, the rapid growth of the population aged 80 years and over will put enormous pressure on aged-care programs and facilities. Most of us see people come through the doors of our electorate offices facing this problem every day. So we know what the situation will be for the population in the immediate and long-term future. There are no surprises. The policy challenge is to prepare for these changes. The Treasurer released his great *Intergenerational report* some time ago, but we still have not seen great action on this front.

The government has conducted numerous reviews into aged care, but we still have not seen a great deal happen over the last 10 years. While I welcome the government’s announcement of $1.5 billion in funding for aged care over five years, and this motion
before the House today, we have waited 10 years or until the sector is at crisis point—beyond crisis point—for it to happen. It has taken the government far too long to act, and it is a burden for the community and for those aged people who are sitting in acute care hospital beds and for the families who are trying to care for them. I spent last week moving my father from hospital into respite care and I can speak from firsthand experience about the traumas of trying to achieve this end.

In 10 years the Howard government has presided over a serious decline in the number of aged-care beds available. When Labor left government in 1996 there were 92 beds for every 1,000 people aged 70 years and over compared with only 85.6 now. In 1996 there was a surplus of 800 beds compared with a shortage of nearly 5,000 now. For the last 10 years the aged-care industry has been waiting for a decision to be made by the government on funding arrangements. Since 1997 there has been deep concern in the sector about whether they will be able to continue to provide aged-care services with government funding arrangements that they have been receiving. Three years ago Professor Warren Hogan, in his review of pricing arrangements in residential aged care, said that funding increases had to happen. The government has only acted now. The Howard government has created this aged-care funding mess. Bronwyn Bishop, who was minister for the portfolio at the time in 1997, planned to introduce bonds for all aged-care residents. But faced with a backlash from voters, who did not want to sell the family home for this purpose, the government retreated. Since that time we have had review after review but no action. As a result, no action has been taken to fix the problem. We have ended up with a patchwork funding system that does not work. And we are still waiting for a response to the Hogan review in respect of pricing.

While I welcome additional community aged care, because most people want to stay in their home and services in homes are greatly needed, the truth is that when people need a residential aged-care bed they need it straightaway and generally cannot wait. The government has consistently failed to provide sufficient residential aged care for frail and elderly Australians, and this continues with the latest measures announced by the government. While government members can wax lyrical about the progress that has been made in this area over the last few years, I can safely say that it has been too long coming and it is not good enough. There are still huge problems in the sector.

The 2005-06 Productivity Commission report on government services released in January shows that waiting times to get into a residential aged-care bed have increased significantly over time. Over 28 per cent of people who have been assessed as requiring a bed wait three months or more to actually receive one compared with 15 per cent in 2000. So, even though the Howard government continually claim that they have provided more aged-care places, they have failed to keep residential beds in proportion to the increased number of frail elderly in Australia. Many government reports have indicated that there is a crisis and a shortfall in places.

We have also seen the lack of provision of funding and skills within the area. We have seen numerous reports of exploitation of care workers who have been brought from overseas to work in nursing homes, because we simply have not provided enough aged-care nurses within the sector. And nor is there pay parity for those individuals. Attracting and retaining staff in aged care is one of the biggest issues facing aged-care providers. Under
the Howard government, aged-care workforce planning is nonexistent and aged care is being compromised by the lack of trained aged-care workers. We should be providing the greatest benefit to our elderly Australians, who have looked after us in our greatest times of crisis. The elderly within my community are Australia’s great backbone, and we should be respecting them. (Time expired)

Mrs GASH (Gilmore) (1.03 pm)—I rise to support the motion by my colleagues the member for Macquarie and the member for Dobell because this motion seeks to address an issue of particular concern to me in my electorate of Gilmore. Gilmore is a coastal electorate along the South Coast of New South Wales and the towns along our coastline are an attractive destination for persons contemplating retirement. This is not something new; it has been the case for a number of decades. The consequence is that the drift of retirees to the South Coast has given us an above average demographic of aged persons. It has been estimated that the population of the Shoalhaven grows by about 2,000 people each year, and aged persons or those approaching retirement figure significantly. This has placed tremendous pressure on existing infrastructure such as health services, aged-care accommodation and indeed the ability of the families of aged members to meet on a regular basis. Add to this the recognition that the population of Australia generally is ageing and it is clear that the way we provide social support needs to reflect the times we live in—and indeed the times we are moving into.

In 1998 the Australian Society for Medical Research said:

The ageing of the Australian population will bring important social and demographic changes to our country. With average life expectancies of both men and women steadily increasing, the burden of illness is now being dramatically shifted to the aged. The ASMR is especially pleased the Minister recognises that the time frame of the impact of a National Strategy for an Ageing Australia stretches from the present and over the next twenty to fifty years.

Since that statement was made, this government not only has developed a comprehensive policy in its approach to addressing the issue of ageing but has also put its money where its mouth is—and rightly so. It is time to give back to senior citizens, who have worked all their lives to make this country what it is today. And if it is quality care that is needed then we are obliged to deliver the best care that this country can afford.

In Gilmore, we have been very fortunate in the support we have received from the federal government. For example, since July 1995 and up until June last year, Gilmore received in excess of $300 million worth of aged-care places. I will add here that prior to us coming into government in 1996 Gilmore was not even recognised in aged care, let alone as a location where it was required. This represents a 101 per cent increase in places and a massive 165 per cent increase in funding. Among the more significant contributions since 1995 include: almost $18 million going to the Blue Haven Nursing Home in Kiama; the Illawarra Retirement Trust and its many facilities in Gilmore receiving almost an extra $100 million over these last 11 years; Osborne Nursing Home in Nowra being the beneficiary of over $30 million and the Shoalhaven Nursing Home being the beneficiary of over $35 million; Chesalon, also in Nowra, receiving over $23 million; and the whole region benefiting from smaller but significant amounts. And it continues to do so. What better example of what this government is doing for aged care than Gilmore?

There has been support in the form of more aged-care places and aged-care services across Australia, with an increase of almost 8,000 new places following the an-
announcement on 19 December 2006 by the Minister for Ageing, representing an annual recurrent investment by this government of almost $206 million. An additional $38.6 million has also been allocated in capital grants to assist aged-care service providers to build or maintain quality residential facilities for older Australians. Recurrent expenditure for residential aged care is expected to rise from $2.5 billion in 1995-96 to $5.6 billion in 2006-07.

To enable more older Australians to receive aged-care services, the coalition government has increased the aged-care provision ratio from 100 to 108 operational places for every 1,000 people aged 70 or over, which is to be achieved in 2007. In 1996 flexible care was provided through 400 multipurpose service places and Extended Aged Care at Home packages. Now flexible care is available through over 5,560 places. I repeat: that is an increase from 400 places to 5,560 places. We have made additional provisions for those that care for the aged and frail in our communities. This government has been able to dramatically increase services to the aged through many avenues mainly because the economic affordability arrived at through sound economic management since 1996.

In closing, let me reiterate that the aged-care package of $411.7 million recently announced by the Prime Minister will provide more and better community care and many other extended services as well. If this is not a strong affirmation of our commitment to aged care in Australia then I don’t know what is. However, I am yet to hear from the Labor Party what their policy is for aged care. (Time expired)

Ms HALL (Shortland) (1.08 pm)—At the commencement of my contribution to this debate on aged care, I would like to recognise the outstanding contribution of senior citizens throughout Australia. They make an enormous contribution to voluntary groups. Senior citizens are overly represented in the Shortland awards that I give each year. The Lake Macquarie Citizen of the Year, Bert Reay, is a sprightly 70-odd-year-old man who is involved with Sailability. The Central Coast Australian of the Year Australia Day Award recipient is also a senior citizen.

It amazes me that any member of the Howard government would have the audacity to come into this House and praise the Howard government’s record in aged care. The Howard government has turned an 800 aged-care bed surplus into a 4,613-bed shortage. And it is saying that it is doing a great job. In actual fact, the Howard government should hang its head in shame. Australia has an ageing population. People are living longer and having fewer children.

The Shortland electorate, which I represent in this parliament, is the 10th oldest electorate in Australia. Dobell is the 29th oldest—and the member for Dobell has spoken in this debate. Robertson, which is also on the Central Coast, the area that I come from, is the fifth oldest. Charlton is the 50th oldest. Newcastle is the 16th oldest, and I think Paterson is the 13th. I come from a very old area and I am very interested in ensuring that my community and my constituents have access to aged-care beds.

In the Hunter there is a 390-bed shortage and on the Central Coast there is 596-bed shortage, whilst in Bennelong—the electorate of the Prime Minister—there is a surplus of 1,119 beds. I think that this is a disgrace. The Productivity Commission’s Report on government services 2006 released in January this year showed some very interesting things. It showed that the government’s announcement in May 2005 that it would provide 88 aged-care beds for every 1,000 people over 70 years of age still has not been achieved. In July 2005 it was 85.2 beds and
in June 2006 it was 85.6 beds. When the government came to office, there were 92 beds for every 1,000 people over the age of 70 years. That is hardly something to be proud of.

The government keeps claiming it is providing more aged-care places when, in actual fact, it just fudges the figures. It is claiming that the number of places that have been allocated is the actual number of beds. In actual fact, the number of operational beds in residential care facilities is far fewer than the number that has been allocated. The latest figures I have seen in my area have shown that on the Central Coast one out of six beds was a phantom bed or a non-operational bed or a bed that exists only on paper. In the Hunter it was one out of 10 beds and I think on the North Coast of New South Wales, in those particular figures, it was one in five beds.

In 10 years the Howard government has failed in the area of aged care. This report also showed that the waiting time to get into residential care facilities has increased drastically: 28 per cent of people are now waiting over three months, whereas in 2000 it was 15 per cent. I think that the government really needs to be honest with the Australian people. The $1.5 billion that it announced earlier this year—(Time expired)

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

Dental Health

Mrs ELLIOT (Richmond) (1.13 pm)—I move:

That the House:

(1) notes that:

(a) since the abolition of the Commonwealth Dental Program, waiting lists for dental services have increased dramatically;

(b) an increasing number of Australians are unable to afford private dental treatment and are waiting years for dental care; and

(c) poor dental health can contribute to a deterioration in overall health; and

(2) calls on the Government to:

(a) acknowledge that the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing inquiry of November 2006, The Blame Game, recommended that the Federal Government should fund dental services;

(b) reinstate a Commonwealth dental program; and

(c) end the ‘Blame Game’ and work cooperatively with the States and Territories to ensure that services are delivered.

Here we are yet again talking about dental health and dental health care. It is certainly an issue that I will keep speaking about until the government takes some responsibility for this and does something. It certainly is very disappointing that this government does not take its responsibility for the dental health of its citizens seriously. This is despite the fact that a Commonwealth dental scheme is certainly very urgently needed throughout this nation.

A recent ACOSS national report on the state of dental care explains that it is not just low-income Australians who cannot afford to go to the dentist. ACOSS estimates that 40 per cent of Australians cannot access dental care when they need it. In my electorate of Richmond, I hear stories every day of locals who have been waiting for years to have basic dental work done. Some are in extreme pain, some are barely able to eat or speak, some have their dentures simply falling out of their mouths and some even have to resort to pulling out their own teeth. This is clearly
unacceptable and, indeed, I believe it is quite shameful.

As I said, every day people raise issues with me—particularly elderly people who are certainly in extreme pain. Elderly people and young families cannot afford to see a private dentist; it is these people who have been abandoned by this government. Yet it seems that MPs on the other side of the House refuse to take up the fight for their constituents. It seems they are happy for people in their electorates to wait years to have their teeth fixed.

Instead of telling the Prime Minister and Minister for Health and Ageing that they need to invest in dental care, what do those on the other side of the House do? They spend their time buck-passing and carping on about the states. That is all we tend to hear from the other side. State and territory governments have invested in dental care, but they need the federal government to fulfil its responsibility. But the Howard government consistently refuses to do this. Time and time again it has refused to do so.

Just to enlighten coalition members, I draw their attention to section 51(xxiiiA) of the Australian Constitution, which gives the federal government responsibility for dental health. It might be good if they brushed up on that to see exactly where the responsibility for this important area lies. But instead of taking this responsibility seriously, the Howard government scrapped the $100 million a year Commonwealth Dental Health Scheme in 1996. This is despite the Minister for Health and Ageing saying:

The Keating government’s program did reduce waiting times, no doubt about that.

So perhaps the health minister can explain to the 4,000 people in my electorate of Richmond who have signed my petition calling for the Commonwealth funding to be restored just why he refuses to take responsibility for their dental health. And it is not just the dental health of local people that the health minister is putting at risk. Indeed, recent studies have shown that poor dental health can lead to a range of general health problems. These include strokes, heart disease and chronic infections. And it can also make diabetes difficult to manage.

By not providing adequate public dental health care and not training enough dentists, the federal government is putting the health of Australians at risk. In the recent report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing inquiry entitled *The blame game: report on the inquiry into health funding*, it was recommended that the federal government should fund dental services. This committee noted this in its blame game report, so why can’t the government acknowledge it? Why is it so hard for members opposite to acknowledge that fact? It is time to stop the buck-passing and reinstate a Commonwealth dental program. Let us end the blame game and let us see the federal government working cooperatively with the states and territories to ensure that services are delivered and to ensure there is adequate health care for all of those who need it throughout our communities.

In contrast to the Howard government and their absolute inaction on this very important health issue, federal Labor have been very proactive in this area. We announced that we would restore federal funding for dental care and we are currently examining a range of options for a broad based Commonwealth system offering free dental care on a means-tested basis. Indeed, a Rudd Labor government will focus on prevention and early intervention, taking the pressure off waiting lists and tackling our dentist shortages. We are doing this because we acknowledge that it is a federal government responsibility to provide dental health care and that the How-
ard government is not meeting that obligation.

I call on coalition MPs to support this motion and stop blaming everybody but their own government for this problem. This is an issue that requires national leadership; it is not about blaming. It is very easy for the government to stand here and blame the states in relation to this, but this is not about blaming; it is about fixing the problem. So I call on government members to support this motion. I call on them to have the Commonwealth dental scheme back in place and to work with the states to make sure we have adequate dental health services for all Australians who so desperately need it. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—Is the motion seconded?

Ms Owens—I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (1.18 pm)—It will not come as any surprise to the honourable member for Richmond that I do not, in any way, shape or form, support the motion on dental health currently before the chamber. The only way that I would support such a motion would be if the Commonwealth were to take over the administration of health nationally from the states, given the fact that the states right around the country—including in my home state of Queensland—have comprehensively failed in this area.

You cannot have a situation in a federation where there is supposedly a division of powers between the Commonwealth and the state governments but whenever the states drop the ball and do not meet their constitutional obligations they come cap in hand to the Australian government and say, ‘Well, it’s now your responsibility to fund dental services,’ in this particular case, or for that matter in other areas. In fact, there is an increasing tendency in Australia for everyone to contact the Commonwealth government when states are letting down the community.

The reason we have such a large number of mendicants coming to the doors of the Treasurer and the Prime Minister wanting Commonwealth funding is that this government, over the last 10 or 11 years, has shown responsible economic management and the government therefore has the economic ability—now that Labor’s debt has been paid back—to fund extra services. And this is what the government has been doing. But you have to draw the line somewhere and if Federation is to mean anything then one ought to recognise that the provision of dental services in the public area ought to be the responsibility of the states of Australia.

We have a situation where, for a short period between 1994 and 1996, the Commonwealth dental program existed but it was never intended to be a takeover of funding responsibilities for dental health. It was simply a short-term program to address the growing waiting lists that people were experiencing as a result of the dilatory approach of various state governments.

We also ought to recognise that every last cent of the goods and services tax goes to the states. This should give the states the ability to spend extra money on roads, schools and hospitals. In fact, we have a situation where the level of government who has constitutional responsibility for a particular area has now the economic wherewithal to fund that responsibility. Before the goods and services tax came in, before our new tax system was fully established, we had a situation where the government that spent the money was not always the government that raised the money.

When one looks at the amount of money going to the various states as a result of the GST, there is absolutely no excuse for the states not to provide adequate dental health
services for needy Australians. In New South Wales the goods and services tax will put $10.9 billion in the current financial year into the coffers of the New South Wales Labor government, compared to $10.3 billion the year before. In Queensland, the figure this year is $7.9 billion, up from $7.6 billion the previous year. Victoria received $7.7 billion in the last financial year, and this will increase to $8.5 billion this year.

The Commonwealth dental plan ended in 1997, when waiting lists returned to manageable levels, but unfortunately the states have introduced no initiatives to address the underlying problems and waiting lists are once again growing. The states have acknowledged that dental care is their responsibility, and it really is important that state governments right around the country meet that constitutional responsibility and do away with the appalling situation where dental health is not being addressed.

It is a sad indictment that the member for Richmond finds it necessary to stand in the parliament just before the looming state election to talk about the federal government picking up this state responsibility. Labor has had years to fix the problem and has not, and it really ought to be recognised by the people in New South Wales that the state Labor government has failed. The alternative government, Mr Debnam’s coalition, has pledged to spend an extra $208.5 million on public dentistry, and I hope this fact is recognised when the New South Wales state election comes along. I know that the member for Richmond is simply playing politics. I know that she is trying to divert attention from the woeful performance by the state Labor government, but she has no credibility. (Time expired)

Mr GEORGANAS (Hindmarsh) (1.23 pm)—I too rise to support this motion on dental health. I have raised the need for a Commonwealth funded dental health scheme on many occasions in this place before. The need for such a scheme is undeniable. This government abolished the Commonwealth dental scheme in 1996, and by the year 2000 Australians were waiting up to five years to see a dentist. The Commonwealth dental program placed $100 million a year into public dental services. Then in 1996, with the end of the program, this government took that funding away and left millions of Australians without access to public dental care.

Well over half a million Australians, approximately 650,000, are on waiting lists for public dental care. Some have been waiting for years to see a dentist. For some the waiting times are longer than three years. I have constituents who see me on a regular basis and who are in extreme pain waiting a year to two years before they see anyone to look after their teeth. In South Australia, though, thanks to increased funding by the state government, waiting periods have been reduced to less than two years, which is still clearly far too long for anyone that has dental issues.

Federal Labor has also devised a plan to fix the state of Australia’s public dental system. Australians deserve a dental care system that provides them with the services they need. Throughout Australia the number of people on the dental waiting lists has increased by 42 per cent since the Commonwealth Dental Health Program was axed. The federal government say that dental care is not their responsibility. That is what we have heard time and time again. They say that it is up to the states. Once again I would like to refer to section 51 of the Australian Constitution, which clearly states:

The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to—amongst other things—
That is clearly stated in section 51. The Australian Constitution explicitly states that dental care is a federal government responsibility. The federal government need to stop playing the blame game we have seen time and time again and they need to start taking responsibility for Australia’s dental health.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing report appropriately named *The blame game* recommended on page 74 in recommendation 3 that the federal government supplement dental care for those in disadvantaged positions. I call upon the health minister to act on that recommendation from *The blame game* report. Australia has had repeated budget surpluses year after year, and that is good. It is astonishing, though, when you think that this government cannot find it in its heart to fund a federal dental program. In 1994 we had the Commonwealth Dental Health Program. In 1996 under this government that program was axed.

There is also a huge skills crisis in the dental industry. Australia needs an additional 120 graduates a year before the dental labour force will be self-sufficient. Without the skills in Australia’s workforce our dental system is not going to improve. This government has not invested in relieving Australia’s skills crisis and now, with the shortage of dentists in Australia, Australians will be forced onto longer waiting lists for treatment.

Adding to the demand is the fact that the progress made in children’s oral health during the nineties is now being reversed. In coming years these children will need more ongoing dental care than the generation who were going through school last decade. The number of children under six years of age being admitted to hospitals for dental care increased by 95 per cent between 2000 and 2005. The deterioration in the dental health of Australian children—surprise, surprise—has coincided with the Howard government ending the Commonwealth dental scheme. People on pensions are more likely than the rest of the population to have decay and are twice as likely to have lost teeth through decay; 44 per cent of concession holders aged between 45 and 64 avoid or put off going to the dentist because of the cost.

I feel like a broken record because I have stated all this time and time again, but this government just is not listening. The prolonged waiting lists for dental care have the potential to lead to more serious illnesses, such as blood infections, malnutrition and cardiovascular disease. Cardiovascular disease is Australia’s leading cause of death, so ignoring the dental care needs of Australians is a life and death matter. The community is sick of the federal government trying to play the blame game and passing the buck to anywhere but itself.

The situation is already bad enough, but with the supply of dentists increasingly failing to meet demand the situation is only going to get worse. We need more dentists and therefore more training places for dentists, and we need a national dental health program as a matter of urgency. Clearly not one person in this country can ever expect this current government to provide dental services. I am committed to a federal dental scheme. I will fight for such a scheme and will continue to do so until such a program is funded.

(Time expired)

**Mr JOHNSON (Ryan)** (1.28 pm)—I am pleased to speak in the Australian parliament today as the federal member for Ryan—a wonderful electorate in the western suburbs which I very proudly have represented from November 2001 and will continue to represent very strongly here in the House of Representatives. I am delighted to be able to speak on this motion on dental health be-
cause it really does give me an opportunity to reflect for those who might be listening — and I see that there are some young Australians visiting the parliament and I welcome them to their national parliament — on how grossly incompetent and absolutely neglectful the state and territory governments of this country are in terms of their responsibilities.

The state and territory governments of this country are up to their necks in scandal and corruption. It is little wonder that they are not able to focus on the quality of service delivery in a whole host of areas — notably, of course, in the service delivery of public dental health care. This is a responsibility of the state and territory governments. Quite frankly, members opposite, from the Labor Party, are playing the blame game, and they are shirking their responsibilities. I am appalled that so many Australians — in particular, I am quite concerned that many elderly Australians and many Australians on lower incomes — are having to wait ridiculously long periods of time to access dental care. It really is not good enough for a country of our wealth and prosperity. But let us make no mistake about who actually is to blame in this context. It is not about blame of itself; it is about the allocation of responsibility. We live in a federation that involves the division of responsibilities. The national government has responsibility for things like defence, immigration, customs and, of course, foreign affairs. These are within the remit of the national parliament. On the other hand, the states have a mandate to look after local roads, local schools, local hospitals and local courts. It is this division of government responsibility that defines our federal structure. For it to work, both the federal government and the state governments must keep their end of the deal.

Unfortunately we are seeing, right across this country, in every state, that the Labor governments of those states are simply not keeping their end of the deal. Quite frankly, I do not believe that they have the abilities or the talents to govern, and I say this across the board. So it is little wonder that the states are continuing to expect the federal government to step in and clean up their incompetence. We all know that the states are swimming in GST that this government implemented as part of the sweeping taxation reforms in the late 1990s. Queensland alone is swimming in $8 billion of GST. Every single dollar of revenue that has arisen in the marketplace goes to the state governments. As I said, there is $8 billion of GST for Queensland
alone. I recollect, I think, that the Premier of Queensland was the first Premier to sign on to this treasure of cash coming his way. He could not sign fast enough, because he knew that this was cash for him to spend on services in his state. Unfortunately, he is not meeting his responsibilities. *(Time expired)*

**Ms OWENS** (Parramatta) *(1.34 pm)*—I could be forgiven for thinking that I had accidentally ended up in a state parliament. All I have heard for the last few minutes is the state opposition having a great time. This is the federal parliament. What I would like to know is why, every time dental care is raised in the federal parliament, all we get from the government is pure politics—politics, pure politics, and nothing but politics. Sure as hell, it has nothing whatsoever to do with the truth. It is about finding someone else to blame, pointing the finger, deflecting attention from their own failures, finding anyone else to blame—anything but taking responsibility for the parlous state of dental health in this country.

Many people ask me why a person would ever get into politics. I have to say that sometimes, sitting in this parliament, I wonder that myself. But my answer is quite simple: many in this parliament did not get into politics; we got into governance. Politics is a rather unfortunate necessary evil at times, but most of us are here for governance, for responsibility, for caring about this nation and for actually doing the job. But unfortunately, from the government, when it comes to dental care, we do not get governance; we get pure politics and only politics.

Let us have a look at the state of dental health while the government plays politics with this important issue. Advances made in children’s oral health during the early nineties are well and truly being reversed. Children at school now will need greater ongoing care than the generation who were going through school in the last decade. Demand by eligible people is expected to increase by around 30 per cent over the next 10 years, compared to about 14 per cent in the general population, and that is specifically because of the neglect by the federal government over the last 10 years. The neglect of children now will cost them, and us all, more in the future. All taxpayers will pay for the failure of this government to accept its responsibility.

Let us just talk about that for a minute. Is it a state or a federal issue? We heard the member for Fisher talking about the states taking on their constitutional responsibility. Actually, the Commonwealth Constitution refers to dental health as a Commonwealth responsibility. What about the federal government taking on its constitutional responsibility? Secondly, it was the federal government, the Howard government in 1996, as one of its first acts in this parliament, that made the choice for the federal government to withdraw from dental health and leave it to the states—a choice made by this government. And now it tends to blame the states for the choice that it made. This was a federal responsibility for the last years of the previous government. It was this government that chose to return all the responsibility but not the money to the states.

*Mr Johnson interjecting*—

**Ms OWENS**—Oh, yes, we have more blame at the moment. It is pure politics. Try some governance when it comes to dental health. You are the government; you are responsible. Don’t point the finger at everyone else; you are the government.

*Mr Johnson*—The federal government should be spending money on air conditioning.

**Ms OWENS**—After 10 years, it is about time you took the responsibility that you should—that you accepted that you are the
government and stopped playing state opposition.

Mr Johnson interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—Order! The member for Ryan!

Ms OWENS—Go and join the state opposition if that is where you want to be.

Mr Johnson interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Order! The member for Ryan is warned!

Ms OWENS—You are in the federal parliament. You are responsible. You are the government; do your job.

Mrs De-Anne Kelly—Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The speaker should not use the expression ‘you’.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—There is no point of order.

Ms OWENS—Let us look at the state of our trained dentists. At the moment, the average age of dentists is over 50. Within the next four years we will see a shortfall of about 1,500 dental care providers and yet we are graduating only 250 dental students a year. We would need to increase that by about 120 a year to meet demand, so in the years to come access to dental services will become even more difficult. After 10 years of the Howard government, there are 500,000 people on waiting lists for dental care. The previous Labor government spent $100 million a year on a scheme, and during that time 1.5 million Australians accessed the scheme. Yet, as one of its first acts, this federal government junked it and now blames everybody else for the decision it made.

Studies by the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council show that children from poor groups have twice as many rotten teeth as those from wealthy groups—and what do we get from the government? We get pure politics. Twenty per cent of the population—the poorest—have 80 per cent of the disease, and we get more politics from the federal government. There is no responsibility, just blame and politics. (Time expired)

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (1.39 pm)—I rise to address the private members’ business motion on dental health put forward by the member for Richmond, who I note is no longer in the chamber. It is important to note as a parliament the concerns she raises—they are real concerns—but we have to focus on who has responsibility for the dental care of all Australians. It is true that oral health care and overall health and well-being are intrinsically linked. However, the argument of the member for Richmond, who has left the chamber—I am quite surprised; when you put up a private member’s motion you would normally stay in the chamber to hear other contributions—is fundamentally flawed. In fact, I find it quite amusing that she is calling for the blame game to stop.

It is widely understood that, under the national health agreement, state and territory governments have a responsibility for the management of dental health care in their communities, yet the member for Richmond is calling on this federal government to stop blaming the states for the appalling situation with dental health care. The way I see it is that the member for Richmond should not be blaming the federal government for this situation but should start blaming her state colleagues. There is a state election going on right now in the state of New South Wales. She ought to be out there calling on the Labor Party to fix the appalling dental health situation the people of New South Wales are confronted with. But, no, she comes into this chamber and blames this government when it is not our responsibility.

Since the introduction of the GST by this government, the state and territory governments have been receiving a substantial windfall in revenue. Of course, the good eco-
onomic management of this government has also allowed the state and territory governments to have an additional windfall by way of stamp duties because of the strong economy. However, it appears to me—and, I know, to all members on this side of the House—that these windfalls are not being used appropriately. Instead, they are being squandered. Last week the Queensland Premier took out a full-page advertisement in national newspapers promoting his plan to reinstate the Bradfield scheme. It was just another political stunt, using taxpayers’ money to promote the Bradfield scheme in the lead-up to the Prime Minister’s water summit last Friday.

The Queensland Labor government is failing the people of Queensland in dental care. A media release issued in December last year by the shadow minister for health, John-Paul Langbroek from Surfers Paradise, said that over 79,000 Queenslanders are waiting up to seven years and eight months for public dental services. Clearly, just as the Queensland state government fails in healthcare services it is also failing in dental care services. Even the previous health minister was not concerned with fixing the acutely appalling state health and dental care services in Queensland. It is interesting to note that there is now a CJC inquiry into the former minister’s activities whilst he was a minister.

It has never been a Commonwealth responsibility to directly fund dental health services or infrastructure. It is the responsibility of the states and territories. It is about time the Labor Party, when they are in government all around Australia at state and territory level, stopped squandering their budgets and used them for important items like fixing the state dental and health systems. Having one level of government responsible for dental care would ensure accountability.

The Commonwealth does fund several programs to assist with dental services across the country. About 12 months ago, in my electorate of Maranoa, a private health provider in Brisbane received $384,000 to establish a state-of-the-art teledentistry system for the people living in Barcaldine, Longreach and Winton. That private company received the money to assess patients prior to a dentist visiting those towns, which they do for a week in every month. Since dental services are predominately provided by the private sector, the Commonwealth supports dental care with a 30 per cent private health insurance rebate, which is estimated to have cost $438 million for dental services in 2005-06.

(Time expired)

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 1.45 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 43. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Hoxton Park Airport

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (1.44 pm)—On Saturday another serious incident occurred near Hoxton Park Airport, when a light aircraft crashed into a paddock on Cowpasture Road, in an area planned for residential development. The pilot and passenger escaped injury on this occasion, but this is just one more in a string of incidents at Hoxton Park which threaten the lives and property of residents living around the airport.

I was surprised to learn that the following day a new political party was launched at Hoxton Park Airport by Sydney bookmaker Martin Waterhouse. According to press reports, the Provident Party will contest the next election on a platform which includes opposition to the closure of Hoxton Park Airport. Hoxton Park Airport was sold to a private operator in 2003. The owner has the
option to close the airport after September 2008 and apply to use the land for other purposes. Liverpool City Council and the local community, with support from the member for Prospect, strongly support the redevelopment of the site to improve the safety of residents and provide greater local employment opportunities. If I were a punter, I would be saying that Mr Waterhouse’s party is at long odds to win any support in the electorates of Fowler, Prospect, Lindsay or wherever.

Lions Youth of the Year

Mrs MAY (McPherson) (1.46 pm)—Last week I had the privilege of chairing the judging panel for the Lions Youth of the Year contest. This is an annual contest hosted by the Palm Beach-Currumbin Lions Club, and this is the third year I have chaired the judging panel. I was assisted by Mr Barry Ferris, a retired school principal, and Ms Maureen Saunders, from the National Australia Bank, which sponsors of the competition.

The Lions Youth of the Year contest has been held annually since 1964, and its aim is to foster youth development in public speaking. This year’s participants were of a very high standard, which made the judging very difficult. All four participants were interviewed about local and national topics during the afternoon session, and the evening session consisted of answering two impromptu questions, followed by a five-minute prepared speech in front of parents, friends and members of the local Lions branch.

I want to congratulate Vanessa Bath from Elanora State High School, Aaron Santelises from Marymount College, Kiyarni Debnam-Dow from Elanora State High School and Ella Horton from Palm Beach Currumbin State High School on competing in this prestigious event. Each of the participants was a credit to their school and their family. Sadly, there was only one winner. The overall winner was Ms Ella Horton. Ella also took out the public speaking award. Ella will now progress to the zone competition, which will be held on 3 March. I wish her well in her endeavours as she progresses through the competition.

There is no doubt that the youth of this country are extremely competent when it comes to public speaking, and their awareness and knowledge of current affairs is very high. As judges, we were also impressed with the manner in which they volunteered in a number of roles within their local communities. Our country is in great hands for the future. (Time expired)

Human Rights: Vietnam

Mr BOWEN (Prospect) (1.47 pm)—Civil and human rights for the people of Vietnam is an issue which many honourable members are concerned about. Late last year, a cross-section of members from all parties signed an open letter of support for the pro-democratic Vietnamese movement. Since then the situation in Vietnam has worsened.

On 5 February, a group of activists from the Committee for Human Rights in Vietnam and the Vietnam Human Rights Committee were detained. The arrests were linked to their involvement in demanding more religious, political and other rights. Official charges have yet to be laid. On 16 February, Mr Nguyen Phong, the co-founder of the Vietnam Progressive Party, was arrested. On 17 February, his colleague Mr Nguyen Binh Than was also arrested. On 18 February, Father Nguyen Van Ly was arrested in the Archdiocese of Hue.

These are very concerning developments. The situation in Vietnam is taking a turn for the worse when it should be taking a turn for the better. I call on the government of Vietnam to release all political prisoners. You should not be imprisoned for advocating de-
mocracy. In any decent system you cannot be imprisoned for advocating for the rights of your fellow citizens. The advocates of democracy in Vietnam and around the world will not be silenced by these arrests—in fact, quite the opposite. These arrests give the advocates of democracy more cause and more heart to continue their fight. I, on behalf of my colleagues who signed that letter, extend our support to them and our encouragement to keep up the efforts for democracy in Vietnam.

Clean Up Australia Day

Mr HENRY (Hasluck) (1.49 pm)—This Sunday, 4 March, is Clean Up Australia Day. Every year hundreds of thousands of Australians give freely of their time to help clean up their local environment. In my electorate of Hasluck, all three local governments have been enthusiastic supporters of this very important opportunity. The City of Swan has nominated the Helena River and Olive Grove Precinct in Guildford. The riverbanks need a good clean-up before winter rains wash rubbish down into the Swan River. Mr Rob Winchester is the coordinator, and he is looking for volunteers. The Shire of Kalamunda are focusing on the Lower Lesmurdie Falls Regional Park, with coordinator Ruth Haynes organising volunteers to clean up this beautiful 56-hectare reserve.

The City of Gosnells is organising a community clean-up at Pioneer Park, with Mr Toby Rees coordinating volunteers for this activity. Pioneer Park is a beautiful area along the banks of the Canning River and has become the centrepiece of the city’s redevelopment. Indeed, the Prime Minister, only last week, opened the recently completed treetop walk that demonstrates the natural beauty of this area. Along with many residents and local councillors, I share pride in this area.

Clean Up Australia Day encourages not just a sense of pride in our environment but also a strong sense of being part of the community. I encourage all residents of Hasluck to participate in this great opportunity to clean up our environment. The Pioneer Park clean-up starts—(Time expired)

Workplace Relations

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Gorton) (1.50 pm)—Senior managers have given the Work Choices legislation a thumbs down, according to a recent Gold Coast survey. The survey of 300 business managers by a Gold Coast tourism organisation has revealed that a solid majority of them believe that Work Choices is bad for their businesses and their workforce. The survey found that only 17 per cent of respondents said Work Choices would be good for their organisation, 12 per cent said it would be good for them personally, 24 per cent said it would be good for skilled workers and 12 per cent said it would be good for less skilled workers. The survey results also showed that 88 per cent of respondents want four weeks leave each year to be guaranteed by law and not to be allowed to be cashed out, 73 per cent said penalty rates should apply for working overtime, 74 per cent said that penalty rates should apply for working on weekends or public holidays and 88 per cent said there should be protection against unfair dismissal.

Despite the protestations of the government, there is no doubt that not only small businesses but many managers think that Work Choices is both unfair and prescriptive. The survey that has been conducted by a Gold Coast tourism organisation underlines the absolute assertion that Work Choices is bad for small business and for employees. I think the government has to start responding to this survey, talking to managers more often and outlining to managers why it is that Work Choices has been legislated by this
government, because clearly it is unpopular and unfair. (*Time expired*)

Ms Pauline Hanson

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (1.52 pm)—Politics and government are very serious endeavours. I understand that today Ms Pauline Hanson has announced that she intends to run for the Senate at the next federal election. This country has great challenges, and I want to say to the people of Queensland that I encourage them very strongly that this place needs political leaders with vision, experience and good judgement. Pauline Hanson is not one of those figures, and I would very strongly encourage all Queenslanders not to support her bid to run for the Senate.

Of course all Australians can nominate to run for parliament. It is their right in this country, a country that welcomes great democratic participation, but in terms of the ideas, initiatives and the policies that will take Australia into the 21st century we do not want people like Pauline Hanson to run again. I do not think that the people in my electorate of Ryan will give her their endorsement at all. This is a place for serious ideas. We have enough TV celebrities wanting to run for parliament, and I think that Ms Hanson’s contribution to national politics is not something that will take this country into the 21st century. I certainly will be encouraging all the Ryan voters that I come across in the months ahead not to endorse her bid for the Senate.

Defence Minister Brendan Nelson has been accused of “an outrageous hijack” of Australia’s military heritage after likening the Iraq War to the Kokoda campaign of World War II.

In the article Bren gunner Kelly, an 82-year-old veteran of bloody battles of the track, said that his mates fought and died in droves in PNG. He also said in the article:

“It’s fantasy, it’s absurd.”

“... One is speechless because I can’t see any similarities at all. As an old soldier I take exception to it. The article went on to say:

... head of the nonprofit Kokoda Track Foundation Patrick Lindsay said he had been bombarded with complaints from angry Diggers.

Mr Lindsay said it was hypocritical of Dr Nelson to invoke the name of Kokoda in comparison with Iraq ...

In view of the distress caused to many Kokoda veterans who served, fought, suffered and were wounded and to the families of those who died, I table the following notice of motion:

That the House calls on the Minister for Defence to recognise the offence and hurt caused by his remarks likening the Iraq War to the Kokoda campaign and urges him to unreservedly apologise to all veterans of the Kokoda Track and their families.

Kingston Electorate: Mobile Phone Tower

Mr RICHARDSON (Kingston) (1.55 pm)—I rise today to bring to the attention of the House the hard work of a very determined constituent in my electorate of Kingston. Jenny Francis of Christies Beach found out that plans had been submitted to council for approval to build a 24-metre mobile phone tower within 15 metres of her home. Anyone who knows this picturesque area knows that the natural beauty of the area would have been aesthetically compromised
if the tower had been erected. The drive down Beach Road, the view from Rotary Park and the foreshore areas would have been affected by the installation of this mobile tower at this proposed site.

Jenny and the local community were not opposed to the erection of the tower point blank; they simply asked that the tower be located in a more appropriate area. Jenny came to see me to seek support and together we rallied local support to oppose the tower. After collecting over 500 signatures, Jenny and I addressed the City of Onkaparinga’s development assessment panel last week and, as a result of our hard work and the community dedication, we were able to convince the panel to reject the application.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Jenny and all the members of the local community who supported our campaign against the tower. This was a fine example of what can be achieved when the local community band together and get behind their local member. I would like to thank them for supporting me so I could support them.

**Melbourne Jazz International Festival**

**Mr DANBY** (Melbourne Ports) (1.56 pm)—I want to commend the Melbourne Jazz International Festival, which is going to be held from 3 to 12 May. I congratulate Albert Dadon, the creative chairman of the jazz festival, who is going to bring together an incredible range of talent from both here and overseas to make that difference that our city has in continuing the cultural areas.

Bill Shorten said that in the 10 days we are going to have:

... Herbie and McCoy and Chick Corea and Dave Liebman and the eerie talent of Pharaoh Sanders whose saxophone keeps playing long after it leaves his mouth, and Bireli Lagrene, who’s been compared to Jango Reinhardt, the Speedy Gonzales super-talent of Frank Gambale, and the Las Vegas Mass Choir, no less!

On our side of the Pacific ditch, there are James Morrison, Joe Chindamo, Kate Ceberano, Elana Stone and 10 bands from the Victorian College of the Arts and Monash. We will have universes of pleasure to choose from and memories that, when we close our eyes, we can return to for the rest of our lives.

It is going to be good to be there. I commend the Victorian government on its support for the Melbourne Jazz International Festival. I congratulate Bill Shorten on opening the festival the other day and, particularly, Albert Dadon, its chairman, on the incredible array of both overseas and local talent that we are going to have the pleasure of hearing in Melbourne from 3 to 12 May.

**Unity Park BMX Track**

**Mrs DRAPER** (Makin) (1.58 pm)—On Saturday just past, I had the pleasure of representing the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, Mark Vaile, to assist in opening the Unity Park BMX track and clubrooms for our young people in my electorate of Makin.

The new BMX track and clubrooms supported by the Australian government under the Sustainable Regions Program put over $300,000 towards the project together with Salisbury council and Recreation and Sport SA. We relocated the BMX facility to Unity Park from Gepps Cross in order to have an international standard venue for our championship finals, which were held on that Saturday.

The Australian government is proud to be associated with the project, and it is a great example of some of our achievements under the Sustainable Regions Program. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Playford-Salisbury sustainable regions advisory committee chaired by Peter Smith for...
their excellent work in the region. In closing, I would like to recognise the efforts of the City of Salisbury, Cross Keys BMX bike club and the local sustainable regions advisory committee for their roles in bringing this wonderful project to fruition. They were all very proud of their efforts on the day, I can assure you.

Lowe Electorate: Aircraft Noise

Mr Murp hy (Lowe) (1.59 pm)—It is with deep regret that I report that too much aircraft noise has been appearing over my electorate of Lowe. It is scandalous that the government has not implemented the long-term operating plan, and I know this is dear to the Prime Minister’s heart. It is scandalous that they have sold Sydney airport without fixing Sydney’s aircraft noise problems.

The Speaker—Order! It being 2 pm, the time for members’ statements has concluded.

Parliamentary Language

The Speaker (2.00 pm)—On the last sitting day, several points of order were taken and several questions were asked about the withdrawal of unparliamentary expressions. I undertook to consider the matter further. I remind members again of the statement on page 499 of House of Representatives Practice:

The determination as to whether words used in the House are offensive or disorderly rests with the chair, and the chair’s judgment depends on the nature of the word and the context in which it is used.

I considered the expression to which exception was taken on 15 February to be perhaps undesirable but not unparliamentary. I have reached similar conclusions about unedifying descriptions in the past, where there were no objections from either side of the House.

There have been at least five instances in the last 20 years when the identical phrase to the one at the centre of events on 15 February was used to describe a member, without any objection being raised. Furthermore, I remind members that good temper and moderation should be the characteristics of parliamentary language. I also reiterate the point made by several members that, pursuant to standing order 64, members should be referred to by their ministerial or parliamentary office or by their electorate.

Ministerial Arrangements

Mr Howard (Bennelong—Prime Minister) (2.02 pm)—I inform the House that the Minister for Foreign Affairs will be absent from question time today. He is returning from the biennial Australia-New Zealand Foreign Ministers Meeting, in New Zealand. The Attorney-General will answer questions on his behalf. I also inform the House that the Minister for Trade will be absent from question time today and for the remainder of the week. He is in Chennai on official business. The Deputy Prime Minister will answer questions on his behalf today, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs for the remainder of the week.

Questions Without Notice

Qantas

Mr Sw an (2.02 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. What information has the Treasurer sought on the likely impact on the Qantas credit rating if the bid by Airline Partners Australia proceeds?

Mr Costello—Under the Foreign Acquisitions and Takeovers Act, notification is handled by the Foreign Investment Review Board. The Foreign Investment Review Board makes a recommendation to the Treasurer. When the Treasurer receives that application, the decision is made in accordance with the national interest. Until such time as the decision is announced, my own longstanding practice—and that of every other Treasurer, to my knowledge—is to
Mr SECKER (2.02 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. With water and the Murray River being the most important topics in my electorate, would the Prime Minister update the House on the government’s plan to fix the Murray-Darling Basin?

Mr HOWARD—I thank the member for Barker. Last Friday was a great day for the Murray-Darling Basin. I am glad to report to the House that New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory have agreed to the Commonwealth’s plan. Victoria indicated on Friday through its Premier that it was unable to do so, although discussions between Victoria and the Commonwealth go on. It is my hope and, I believe, reasonable expectation that Victoria will see the wisdom of joining the other states in a clear referral of power to the Commonwealth so that the plan can go ahead as originally announced.

This is a historic investment in the irrigation infrastructure of our nation. It involves $10 billion of new Commonwealth money. It involves about $6 billion of that being spent on irrigation infrastructure and about $3 billion being spent on buying back water entitlements, excess water entitlements and overallocations, all of which have occurred on the watch of the states. This is a case of the Commonwealth not only accepting responsibility for something that occurred under the eye of the states but also paying the cost of fixing the problem.

I say to the people of Victoria: it is in your interests that your state government join the rest of the states because Victorian irrigators stand to benefit to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars at the very least from this plan. Victoria has a lot riding on this plan and, if Victoria stays outside the arrangement, Victoria will suffer. I hope that all members of this parliament, on both sides, who represent Victorian electorates will go back to those electorates and encourage their constituents to encourage the Victorian government to join the other states. This is not a time for Victoria to inflict itself with pain and punishment. Let’s not have a self-inflicted wound from Victoria. Let Victoria join the other states and let us go forward with a plan that will rescue the great River Murray, the great River Darling and the whole basin, which is so important to the future of this nation. The plan will deliver long sought after national water security.

Mr RUDD (2.06 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister and refers to the Treasurer’s last answer on the proposed sale of Qantas. Would the Prime Minister explain to the House how the Treasurer’s statement just now that he would not be making a decision on this matter until he received advice from the Foreign Investment Review Board is consistent with the Prime Minister’s statement, reported in today’s Financial Review, that he backs the bid?

Mr HOWARD—That is what the headline said. I did not say that.

Mr BARTLETT (2.07 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Would the Treasurer advise the House of the importance of carefully managing Commonwealth expenditure in the Australian economy? Are there any threats to that management capability?

Mr COSTELLO—I thank the honourable member for his question, and I acknowledge the interest that he takes in economic policy. I can tell him that managing expenditures is vitally important for the Australian economy. If we had not been careful about managing expenditures in this country,
the budget would still be in deficit and we
would be carrying $96 billion of Labor Party
debt. A big part of the economic success of
the last 10 years has been balancing the
budget and repaying Labor debt. That re-
quires careful management of expenditure.

I have watched in amazement over the last
week as the Leader of the Opposition has run
around Australia promising state premiers
every pet project that he can imagine. He
began in Queensland, on 18 February, prom-
ising the Queensland government $408 mil-
lion for a recycled water pipeline. He moved
on to Western Australia, where he promised
money for Gnangara Mound, Canning Dam
and the Harvey irrigation project. He moved
on to divesting Commonwealth royalties
back to the state of Western Australia—

Mr Wilkie—About time too!

Mr COSTELLO—The member for Swan
interjects—one of the voices of Brian Burke
in this parliament. One wonders whether he
has had a phone call telling him when to in-
terject and when not to.

The Leader of the Opposition then moved
on to South Australia, where he promised
money for a desalination plant for BHP in
the Spencer Gulf, and he is moving back to
Queensland at the end of this week to prom-
ise the Queensland government money for
sequestration in relation to the Stanwell
power project. All of this would be serious,
and if he had actually done some work on
any of these projects he could tell you how
much water they use, he could tell you how
much these projects would save and he could
give you some estimate, dollar per litre, of
why this may actually be in the national in-
terest. But when he was asked in South Aus-
tralia how the project for desalination was
going to work, he had no idea of the water
BHP was using and no idea of how much it
would save. He said: ‘It’s 160 from us and
160 from the state.’ Matt Abraham asked
him:

How much from BHP?

Mr Rudd answered:

BHP’s investment is already substantial.

Matt Abraham asked:

In the desalination project, how much are they
putting in?

Mr Rudd answered:

In terms of the precise investments, in terms of
their individual use, those figures I don’t have to
hand.

He did not have to hand how much water
they were using, how much he was going to
save or how much they were going to invest.
The only thing he had to hand was that he
had 160—as he calls it; this Leader of the
Opposition is used to big sums—for the state
of South Australia.

Let me remind the House of one of the
cardinal, iron laws of Australian politics:
never stand between a pot of money and a
state Premier. You will be run down on every
occasion. And if you open up the federal
Treasury to the state premiers, you will be
killed in a stampede. State premiers would
make the running of the bulls look like a cat
race. They would run right over you. The
state premiers see this bloke coming. What
they want is somebody who could open the
federal Treasury, lie down and make himself
a doormat. What better person to do that than
an ex state public servant—somebody who is
used to taking his orders from a state Pre-
mier? You can see why the state premiers of
Australia, gearing up like the bulls for their
run in Pamplona, are licking their lips. This
will be no bullfighter; this will be a doormat
opening the federal Treasury to a rapacious
group of people against Australia’s national
interest.

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I rise on a
point of order. I refer to your ruling before
question time, in which you reminded members of the government to refer to members by their proper names. I would ask you to uphold that.

The SPEAKER—The member will resume his seat. Has the Treasurer completed his answer?

Mr COSTELLO—I have, absolutely.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER (2.12 pm)—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon members of the Interparliamentary Study Program. On behalf of the House, I extend a very warm welcome.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Qantas

Mr RUDD (2.13 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister. I refer to his answer to the previous question, where he said he had been misreported by the Australian Financial Review that he was backing the private equity bid to take over Qantas.

Government members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Members on my right! The Leader of the Opposition will be heard. The Leader of the Opposition will begin his question again.

Mr RUDD—I refer to the Prime Minister’s answer to the previous question, where he said words to the effect that he had been misreported, by the Australian Financial Review, that he was backing the private equity bid to take over Qantas. Prime Minister, could you explain the compatibility of that remark with the statement that you made before?

Mr HOWARD—Very easily. I will quote something else that I said to the Financial Review interviewer. I said:

If the government sought to reflect too much populism on this issue, there would be an understandable backlash in the business community against it.

I understand the view that [Qantas] is an icon, but the personal views of the prime minister or the treasurer or senior ministers shouldn’t be allowed in a free enterprise economy to influence who owns companies …

I regard that as an absolutely unexceptionable statement of an operating principle in the sort of economy that we have, and I am fascinated that the Leader of the Opposition apparently has a different view. I go on to say:

... shouldn’t be allowed in a free enterprise economy to influence who owns companies, provided the law is observed and the rules are obeyed. I am absolutely certain that the Treasurer will ensure that the rules are observed and the law will be obeyed; he will exercise his prerogatives, he will see that the Qantas Sale Act and the foreign takeovers legislation are observed and, as always, he will place the national interest ahead of anything else.

Climate Change

Mr JULL (2.15 pm)—My question is directed to the Deputy Prime Minister in his capacity as Minister for Transport and Regional Services. In terms of climate change, what initiatives are the government taking in relation to the aviation industry?

Mr VAILE—I thank the member for Fadden for his question. Obviously, he is very interested in the issues surrounding climate change and emissions of greenhouse gases. Of course, all transport industries are, at some stage, going to be asked to make a
contribution through changes to the structure of their fuel. We are seeing, for example, in road transport, the roll out of biofuels like ethanol and biodiesel which are helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the overall economy. Obviously, when you think about the growth of aviation travel both here and globally, the aviation industry is going to have a contribution to make.

Along with the technologies that we are investing in, like those in the Low Emissions Technology Demonstration Fund, the $400 million we are investing in solar energy in Australia, and the investment in clean coal technology, we can do practical things with the aviation sector as far as reducing the level of their emissions. It is interesting to note that there is already a process in train as far as international aviation is concerned, called flexi-tracks, where international carriers can identify different routes to travel to take advantage of weather conditions and wind velocity, which can actually save time and save emissions. In a recent example, a flight from Melbourne to Dubai saved 10 minutes travel time and burned 2.7 tonnes less fuel because they identified a better path to travel given the weather conditions. That actually saved 8.2 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions.

One need only think about circumstances in Australia. How often when you have travelled have you arrived at the port of destination and your plane has had to be put into a holding pattern? Planes that are put in a holding pattern burn four to five times as much fuel whilst waiting to land than a plane en route or, obviously, a plane sitting on the ground. We need to better manage the aviation sector so that, if there are going to be delays at the destination end, the plane should be delayed at the port of departure.

There are some very practical real-life solutions that we can implement through processes of management in different industries that will assist our nation meet its greenhouse gas emissions targets. Just as there is no need to close down the coal industry to save the emissions that we need to save in that sector—by introducing and investing in clean coal technology—there is no need to close down the aviation sector or the road transport sector. We just need to deploy better management practices that are focused on limiting and restricting those emissions, which will help make a contribution towards the overall national target.

Interest Rates

Mr Rudd (2.19 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister confirm that official Reserve Bank figures demonstrate that the proportion of household income consumed by mortgage interest payments is already 50 per cent higher today than the peak achieved under Prime Minister Keating?

Mr Howard—Without having the Reserve Bank figures with me, I do not intend to say yes or no to that, but I can say that interest rates were much higher under Prime Minister Keating. I can also say that the value of homes is much higher now than it was under Prime Minister Keating. I can also confirm for the gentleman who sits opposite that, under this government, as a result of the very low interest rates that we have enjoyed over recent times, people have borrowed and invested in more expensive homes and more expensive assets. As I say, without having the figures with me, I am neither going to confirm nor deny it but rather state those facts.

Mr Rudd—I seek leave to table the RBA bulletin statistical table which shows 9.1 per cent of household finances going on housing interest payments in September 2006 compared with 6.1 per cent in September 1989.

Leave granted.
Wool

Mr WAKELIN (2.20 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Would the Treasurer update the House on action the government is taking to assist rural business against damaging secondary boycott activity?

Mr COSTELLO—I thank the honourable member for Grey for his question. I can inform him that the government is very concerned about international boycotts that are being used against Australian wool growers to try to get international buyers to ban the purchase of Australian wool. Australia’s farmers do it tough enough already. They do it tough enough when they are fighting against drought and all of the vicissitudes of the Australian climate. They know that their wool product is the best in the world, and they deserve every help that they can possibly get from government to get their wool to market and their wool purchased by international buyers.

Unfortunately, Australian wool growers are now suffering from secondary boycotts. Secondary boycotts are where somebody tries to get a customer not to deal with a target or a supplier not to deal with the target. Quite often we have seen secondary boycotts in relation to industrial action. The current boycott—which is being organised by a group called PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—is to get the customers of Australian wool growers not to buy Australian wool. One of the spokeswomen for PETA is the pop star Pink. She is protesting about the mulesing of sheep. Whatever Pink’s singer-songwriter credentials are, it is highly unlikely that Pink is an expert on the mulesing of Australian sheep. Anybody who knows the risk of flystrike in Australia knows that the practice of mulesing, far from being exploitative or cruel treatment of sheep, is actually one that is preventative of a far worse fate that could befall Australian sheep.

As a consequence of this, the government will be amending the Trade Practices Act to allow the ACCC to take representative action for secondary boycotts. What that means is that, rather than an individual farmer having to fund the action for their individual damages—which would be a big cost for a small sum—the ACCC can take a representative action on behalf of all Australian farmers to recover damages, which collectively would be a much larger sum. The ACCC can take representative actions for other offences against the Trade Practices Act—why not a representative action for a secondary boycott in contravention of the Trade Practices Act?

The government has previously sought to give the ACCC the power to bring representative actions for secondary boycotts; unfortunately the opposition has voted this down in the Senate, and as a consequence denied this remedy to Australian farmers. The government will be re-presenting these amendments and now that the Labor Party wants to re-establish credentials with the Australian business community, we ask the Australian Labor Party to reconsider, to do something which is obviously pro-business, and to do something to help Australian farmers in this difficult situation.

Interest Rates

Mr RUDD (2.25 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister, and I refer to the RBA table that I tabled after my last question. Based on that table, will the Prime Minister confirm that official Reserve Bank figures demonstrate the proportion of household income consumed by mortgage interest payments has increased by 70 per cent since interest rates started rising in 2002?

Mr HOWARD—The Leader of the Opposition may have tabled the table, but the Prime Minister has not read the table yet.
Mr NEVILLE (2.26 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources. Would the minister update the House on the support delivered to clean coal technology under the Australian government’s Low Emissions Technology Demonstration Fund?

Mr IAN MACFARLANE—I thank the member for Hinkler for his question and for his strong support of the coal industry in Central Queensland—and his support of the electricity industry, the alumina industry, the aluminium industry and all those other industries that he looks after in his electorate so well. Since the Prime Minister’s announcement in June 2004, the Low Emissions Technology Demonstration Fund has been a cornerstone of the Howard government’s climate change strategy. The Low Emissions Technology Demonstration Fund has delivered to date some $310 million to five cutting-edge low-emission projects, including of course some $175 million already put on the table for low-emission coal technologies.

Mr IAN MACFARLANE—I have only just started; I have plenty more to come. For example, $50 million has been made available to International Power’s clean coal project at the Hazelwood power station in Victoria. That project is worth some $360 million. Some $50 million has been made available for CS Energy up in Central Queensland, a project worth some $188 million. Also, $75 million has been made available to Fairview’s coal seam methane project, which is worth some $445 million in western Queensland—

Mr Bruce Scott—Hear, hear!

Mr IAN MACFARLANE—I can hear the member for Maranoa saying, ‘Hear, hear!’ Of course, he looks after his resource and coal industries very well. Taken together, these three coal projects are worth about $1 billion. They are working to develop low-emission coal technologies. There are more announcements to come from the LETDF. I know that the other side do not understand how you do business and how business principles apply, but you have to work through business cases to ensure that taxpayers’ money is going to be well spent in developing these technologies.

Mr Kelvin Thomson—There is a standing order, isn’t there?

The SPEAKER—The member for Wills is warned!

Mr IAN MACFARLANE—This government is always open to supporting viable low-emission projects that advance clean coal technology. For example, we have been in close contact with my home state and its government about ZeroGen, which is a low-emission coal-fired electricity generating project. After a couple of meetings in particular—although I have been talking to them for about two years now and so has my department—

Ms Macklin—And they are still waiting.

Mr IAN MACFARLANE—I cannot hear myself think.

Mr Ripoll—You are half right.

The SPEAKER—The member for Oxley is warned!
Mr IAN MACFARLANE—I think all the time, unlike those people, who think that you have to make business decisions quickly. I like to think them through. I will keep going and hope that they hear me. After requesting the detailed submission from the Queensland government owned corporations, the submission has been made by ZeroGen. It is three inches thick. The department received it about a week ago and is currently going through it. On the basis of that, the department will prepare a detailed analysis of that proposal.

I know that those who sit opposite like to make quick decisions and that they do not understand how business works, but without discipline—which you need for effective policy development—Labor use a short cut: they just copy this government’s policies and put them out as their own. Yesterday they announced a carbon copy of our Low Emissions Technology Demonstration Fund.

Mr Tanner interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Melbourne is warned!

Mr IAN MACFARLANE—The Leader of the Opposition may think that reannouncing Howard government policy will score him points with the voters, but his environment spokesman has already let the cat out of the bag on coalmining. He has already said that automatic expansion of the coal industry is a thing of the past. The Leader of the Opposition’s sudden support for the coal industry will not fool the coalminers and it will not stop them worrying about their jobs under a future Labor government.

Interest Rates

Mr RUDD (2.33 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister, and I refer to my two previous questions on mortgage payments as a proportion of household income. Can the Prime Minister confirm that Australian homebuyers pay the world’s second highest mortgage interest rates among comparable developed economies?

Mr HOWARD—It is true that our interest rates are higher than those in some other developed countries. The reason for that is that our economy has been a lot stronger. The very low interest rates that obtained in the United States for a period of time were a direct reflection of the fact that the economy of the United States went virtually into a recession. If you want to chase that kind of situation, you have a very odd idea of good economic management for this country.

I remind the Leader of the Opposition that while he is pursuing issues relating to household debt he ought to read some comments made by the recently appointed Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia, Mr Ric Battellino, who, on 22 August 2006, had this to say—and this is very relevant to the issue that the Leader of the Opposition is pursuing:

... in judging the health of household finances, we should not look at trends in debt in isolation; we need to look at the overall financial position of households. If we do this, we see that households’ financial assets have increased by substantially more than their debt ... As a result, even though household debt has increased, the net financial position of households has improved noticeably.

Very simply, what has happened over the last few years is that because interest rates have been so low—relatively speaking in the Australian experience, and much lower than the crippling levels of 17 per cent for housing interest rates and 21 per cent for small business interest rates that obtained under the former Labor government—people have become emboldened and have gone out and borrowed to the hilt.

The value of housing has rapidly increased and as a result the amount of disposable income consumed by mortgage payments—albeit at lower interest rates to pay for more expensive houses—has risen. That
is simply what has happened: people have put more into housing because they can afford—because of lower interest rates—to borrow more to buy more expensive houses. It stands to reason that the ratio would have gone up. What you have to do, as Mr Battellino pointed out, is have a look at that against the value of your assets. Your liabilities in relation to that asset may be higher, but because your asset value has gone up, your net financial position has improved. That is fundamentally what has happened. Any simple examination of the facts would reveal that to the Leader of the Opposition.

**Iraq**

**Mrs GASH** (2.36 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Defence. Would the minister update the House on Australia’s contribution to training the Iraqi security forces? Is the minister aware of any alternative policies?

**Dr NELSON**—I thank the member for Gilmore for her question and for her very strong support for the Nowra defence community, and the Navy in particular. Shortly after its arrival in Iraq in 2003 and the demise of Saddam Hussein, the Australian Army was involved in providing security along with coalition forces to the Iraqis themselves and has been heavily involved in the training of the Iraqi security forces. Almost four years later, some 136,000 Iraqis have been trained for their own army and about 12,500 of those have been trained by Australian soldiers. For that, amongst many other things, we should be very proud of what our Australian diggers are doing in Iraq.

When I was in Baghdad in August last year, the democratically elected Iraqi Prime Minister spent a considerable amount of time thanking me on behalf of Australia for all that our military has done for the Iraqi people. I asked him if there was anything more that we could possibly do. He said, ‘Of all the things that we admire about you, it is the training that your soldiers provide to ours, and any further assistance in training will be greatly supported.’

Australia’s Defence Force has been training in a variety of things. Training an individual soldier is relatively easy, but training an army and building it up is a much more difficult and complex task. We have been involved in training and logistics, the nuts and bolts of actually building and running an army; in ethics and detainee management; in robust battle tactics; in medical skills; and in the acquisition and management of equipment.

We have also had Australian soldiers north of Baghdad at a place called Taji training the Iraqis in counterinsurgency. In fact, I noticed in the *Army News* edition last week, which goes to all our soldiers, a report under the heading ‘Iraqi skills cultivated’. As an example of this, our battle group, which is in Talil, in southern central Iraq in the Dhi Qar province, sent 100 of its soldiers up to train 750 Iraqi soldiers in an intensive week-long training program. Those 750 Iraqi soldiers have since been deployed to Baghdad to support the Baghdad security plan. They were training them in the conduct of contact drills, vehicle patrols, vehicle checkpoints, house-clearing tactics and first aid.

I am asked about alternative policies. The training that our soldiers provide is about three things. It is about partnership, it is about the building of trust and it is also about practical training in the field. The Leader of the Opposition has said, consistent with wanting to be all things to all people, that he opposes sending any more soldiers to Iraq. The Prime Minister and I announced last week that the Australian government will send another 70 Australian Army trainers to Iraq. Fifty of them will train in logistics and
20 will train Iraqi soldiers and Iraqi officers. Consistent with the way the Leader of the Opposition operates, he then said something for others who might support more training for Iraqis. He said that he would support them being sent to another country, namely Jordan, which is obviously another country that is not Iraq.

I point out the logistics, for example, of taking 750 Iraqi soldiers and training them about clearing checkpoints and a whole variety of on-the-ground military tactics: taking them all to Jordan, booking them into hotels, running them into a lecture theatre and giving them a lecture for a week about how to run security in Iraq. Whilst training some people in countries other than Iraq may be appropriate, training soldiers needs to be conducted in Iraq. The mission in Iraq is essentially to ensure that we train the Iraqi security forces up to the point where they are able to provide essentially for the security of their own people. Our mission and the mission undertaken by the battle group in Iraq, which the Leader of the Opposition thinks he might take out sometime next year, is as much about training as it is about providing support to the Iraqi people to avoid a humanitarian crisis and stopping Iraq from becoming a haven for terrorism which would be driven through the region and, indeed, throughout the world.

**Interest Rates**

Mr RUDD (2.41 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister. I refer to his answer to a previous question where he said that Australia’s interest rates were higher than those of many other economies because Australia’s economic growth record was stronger. Would the Prime Minister explain the basis for his answer when the 2006 OECD report lists Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United States as all having higher economic growth rates than Australia? Prime Minister, given this fact, how do you in fact justify the fact that Australia has the second highest interest rates in the developed world?

Mr HOWARD—In answer to the Leader of the Opposition, you cannot do a valid comparison in relation to that unless you also look at the length of economic growth and the length of the expansion. If you do that, you will find that Australia, of course, is in a much stronger position because we have had something like 15 years of uninterrupted economic growth. Can I just go back to what I said earlier, and that is that Australians are rather interested in relative performance in Australia because most Australians do not experience living conditions in other countries. The truth is that interest rates in this country are demonstrably lower now than they have been for a very long period. Under this government, the average level of interest in Australia are demonstrably lower now than they have been for a very long period. Under the Hawke and Keating governments were much higher than they have been under this government. Nothing can alter that fact. He can hurl all the worldwide comparisons he likes.

We are very happy to have a debate about the relative standard of living in Australia compared with the relative standard of living in other countries. If the Leader of the Opposition wants to have a debate about relative per capita wealth, if he wants to have a debate about the provisions made for the less well-off in this country, if he wants to have a debate about the tax and payment support for people on average wages, we are very happy
to do so. On all of those comparisons, this country is outperforming other nations around the world. I simply say to the Leader of the Opposition that nothing he can say by way of a question to me can alter the fact that interest rates today are demonstrably lower than they were when Labor was last in office. As a result, people have felt able to borrow a lot more and buy more expensive houses. As a result, they pay a higher percentage of their disposable income by way of mortgage repayments, but that higher debt burden is offset by the much more valuable assets they have, so their net financial position is a lot better than it was under the former government.

Workplace Relations

Mr RANDALL (2.45 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. Is the minister aware of the most recent industrial disputes data for the state of Western Australia? Is the minister also aware of support for a return to pattern bargaining? What impact would this have on the Western Australian economy, specifically, and on the national economy?

Mr HOCKEY—I thank the member for Canning for his question. I note that the unemployment rate in 1996 was 9.1 per cent in Canning; today it is 4.8 per cent. I am pleased to report that the latest disputes data confirms that just 0.3 working days per 1,000 employees were lost in Western Australia in the final quarter of 2006. Now, that is a massive 430 times lower than the peak under Labor in 1991. That rate is the lowest rate ever recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It is also the case, of course, that Australia has the lowest level of industrial disputation since 1913—since records were first kept.

That is good for the economy of Western Australia and it is good for the Australian economy. Under Work Choices, the Howard government has said that it is unlawful to take industrial action in support of pattern bargaining. Work Choices is about genuine bargaining, not copycat bargaining. Yet the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, on two occasions now, has refused to rule out, under the Labor Party, the return of pattern bargaining. On Meet the Press on the weekend, and on The 7.30 Report, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition went out of her way not to indicate that the Labor Party would continue with our policy in relation to pattern bargaining.

So the Labor Party believes in the one-size-fits-all approach to industrial relations. Before the Baird committee in Western Australia last week, the Reserve Bank Governor, Glenn Stevens, had pattern bargaining in mind when he said:

I do not think it is any secret that if, for some reason, labour markets became much more rigid, much more prone to very large wage increases, which were not related to productivity and which flowed across industries the way they did many years ago, that that probably would constitute something of a problem for managing resource booms like we presently have.

Dr Emerson interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Rankin is warned!

Mr HOCKEY—So the Reserve Bank Governor is saying that pattern bargaining—one-size-fits-all bargaining—can have a negative impact on the economy. It can push up inflation and it can push up interest rates.

Ms Gillard interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The Deputy Leader of the Opposition is warned!

Mr HOCKEY—So what is the Labor Party’s position? Go straight to the paymaster of the Labor Party, Greg Combet. He said, in November last year, that the ACTU has developed a comprehensive policy which naturally supports the rights of workers,
delegates and the union to pattern bargain across an industry. If you are looking for potential economic vandalism look no further than the Labor Party and its current policy to reintroduce pattern bargaining, because pattern bargaining can have a negative impact on inflation by pushing it up and it can have a negative impact on interest rates by pushing them up. We are about a strong economy; the Labor Party is about protecting its union mates.

**Iraq**

Mr EDWARDS (2.48 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Defence. I refer the minister to his comparison of the battle of Kokoda and Australia’s current engagement in Iraq. Has the minister reflected on his decision to appropriate the memory of Australians who fought and died at Kokoda to underpin the government’s failed Iraq strategy?

Dr NELSON—I thank the member for Cowan for his question and I also thank him for his service to our country, as a former serviceman. In fact, I draw the member for Cowan’s attention to what I actually said, which is on my website. I will repeat some of that for you now.

In 1942 this country was clearly at grave and immediate threat, and a magnificent group of men from a magnificent generation saved this country. And every Australian, whether by birth or by migration, should thank every day those men who fought at Kokoda, as we should also thank the Americans who fought in the Coral Sea, and others amongst our allies who protected and defended our country.

There was not, nor is or should ever be, any comparison in a military sense between our operations in Iraq and what happened in Kokoda. To do so would offend not only the veterans of Kokoda and those who lost their lives but also the men and women who are fighting on Australia’s behalf in Iraq. But in this century, 65 years on, it is much harder to see that our generation and our country as a liberal democracy face threats to our values, freedoms and culture from a global insurgency which is driven by Islamic extremists throughout the world who are doing everything they can to drive a resurgent totalitarianism which is a real threat to our way of life.

There is no comparison, nor should there be, between the battles in Kokoda and Iraq. Iraq and Afghanistan are but two of the theatres in which this struggle is being fought—as it is with counterterrorism through South-East Asia. And as we heard at the weekend, these people are determined to build a caliphate that will extend from Spain through North Africa, through much of the Middle East and into South Asia. So whilst it is understandably very difficult for us, and many Australians, to see that our generation faces very real threats to our way of life—in particular in relation to the Kokoda veterans and those magnificent men who kept our country free—every single Australian, me included, pays nothing but tribute to them and their sacrifices.

**Health**

Mr TICEHURST (2.51 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Would the minister outline to the House how the government is improving preventative health measures and helping to treat chronic disease? Are there any alternative policies, and what is the government’s response?

Mr ABBOTT—I thank the member for Dobell for his question. I regret to inform him and the House that at a conference last week the member for Gellibrand accused the government of ignoring what she called a veritable ‘tsunami’ of chronic disease, which she said was threatening to overwhelm our
system. In making this over-the-top claim, the member for Gellibrand showed her inexperience and her ignorance of how our health system is actually improving.

Ms Roxon interjecting—

Mr ABBOTT—If she just listened, she might learn something. For the benefit of the member for Gellibrand, I inform the House that last year nearly—

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order under standing order 64.

The SPEAKER—As I heard it the minister was referring to the member by the name of her seat. I call the minister.

Mr ABBOTT—For the benefit of the member for Gellibrand, let me remind her and the House that last year nearly 650,000 people—

Ms Roxon—Are you going to get your figures right this time?

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister has the call.

Ms Roxon interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Gellibrand will cease interjecting.

Mr ABBOTT—Last year nearly 650,000 people with chronic illness benefited from GP care plans. More than 250,000 people benefited from team care plans coordinated by their GPs, and these team care plans involved more than half a million allied health consultations. Also last year nearly 250,000 senior Australians benefited from comprehensive health checks under Medicare. This means that the government directed nearly $200 million in Medicare funding towards preventative health and chronic disease. That is nearly $200 million directly targeting preventative health and chronic disease under the policies of the Howard government.

I want to make very clear that the Howard government are spending this money through private doctors and through private health professionals. We are not and we will not spend this money building giant socialist bureaucracies or even Christian socialist bureaucracies—that is not our style. Last week I noticed the Leader of the Opposition, who says he is not a socialist and never has been, and who in the past has repeatedly called—

Mr Crean interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Hotham is warned.

Mr ABBOTT—for the ALP to drop the socialisation objective, rolled over in the face of party pressure. The Sunday Telegraph says:

KEVIN Rudd has rejected a move to drop Labor’s socialist platform at the party’s national conference in April.

I say again: will the real Kevin Rudd please stand up?

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister will refer to members by their title.

Mr ABBOTT—His Queensland Labor colleagues once said that the only socialist thing about him was his haircut—his Depression era haircut.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Members are holding up their own member.

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order under standing order 64 once again.

The SPEAKER—I say to the Manager of Opposition Business I have already drawn that standing order to the minister’s attention. I am sure he is aware of it and he will continue to abide by it.

Mr ABBOTT—I ask for the real Leader of the Opposition to stand up and all we get is the member for Grayndler. His Queensland Labor colleagues said that the only socialist thing about him was his haircut. Why doesn’t
he have the guts to actually repeal the socialisation objective of his party, which he said he would?

Last week the member for Gellibrand said that the threat of chronic illness was as great as the threat of climate change. I say to her: you cannot make apocalyptic claims like that without some serious policies to deal with them. I say to the Leader of the Opposition: if you do not have—

Ms Roxon interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Gellibrand is warned.

Mr ABBOTT—a health policy you are not a serious politician. But what more could we expect from someone whose only practical experience of health was to close 2,200 public hospital beds in Queensland and earn the well-earned nickname of Dr Death, which certainly is not objectionable as far as he is concerned?

Lights Off Australia Campaign

Mr GARRETT (2.57 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the government support Sunrise’s Lights Off Australia by turning off the lights of all unoccupied Commonwealth government buildings on the first Wednesday night of each month? Prime Minister, when will the government take action on the 2006 audit report that only 21 per cent of Commonwealth government buildings have energy efficient lighting installed?

Ms Bird interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Cunningham is warned.

Ms JULIE BISHOP—I thank the member for La Trobe for his question and acknowledge his support for schools in his electorate. The Investing in Our Schools Program is providing $1 billion in extra funding for schools across our nation for much needed infrastructure and educational tools. This $1 billion, $700 million of it for state government schools, is in addition to the record levels of funding that this government has provided for schools across the nation. In fact, in the case of state government schools, the federal government have increased funding by 118 per cent since we came to office, even though enrolments have only increased by just over one per cent. But members will recall that, when we came to office in 1996, we inherited a $96 billion debt from Labor. I understand from the Treasurer that we used to have to find $9 billion each year just to pay the interest on Labor’s debt. Now that that debt has been paid off—we have paid off Labor’s debt—we are in a position to invest more money in our schools.

There has been huge demand for this program across Australia. Fifteen thousand projects have now been funded, and that means that over 6,000 government schools have

Investing in Our Schools Program

Mr WOOD (2.58 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Education, Science and Training. Would the minister provide the House with an update on the Investing in Our Schools Program? How have schools around the country, particularly in my electorate of La Trobe, benefited?

Ms Bird interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Cunningham!

Ms Bird interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Cunningham is warned.

Ms JULIE BISHOP—I thank the member for La Trobe for his question and acknowledge his support for schools in his electorate. The Investing in Our Schools Program is providing $1 billion in extra funding for schools across our nation for much needed infrastructure and educational tools. This $1 billion, $700 million of it for state government schools, is in addition to the record levels of funding that this government has provided for schools across the nation. In fact, in the case of state government schools, the federal government have increased funding by 118 per cent since we came to office, even though enrolments have only increased by just over one per cent. But members will recall that, when we came to office in 1996, we inherited a $96 billion debt from Labor. I understand from the Treasurer that we used to have to find $9 billion each year just to pay the interest on Labor’s debt. Now that that debt has been paid off—we have paid off Labor’s debt—we are in a position to invest more money in our schools.

There has been huge demand for this program across Australia. Fifteen thousand projects have now been funded, and that means that over 6,000 government schools have
received funding under the program. About $650 million has been provided to date to government schools, and that represents 90 per cent of government schools—so almost 90 per cent of all government schools in Australia have benefited under the Investing in Our Schools Program.

The member for La Trobe asked about his electorate. I know he will be delighted to learn that over 100 projects have been funded in his electorate—that is 40 government schools—and we have invested some $4.6 million in his electorate. I know members on both sides have similar stories, because this program has assisted almost 90 per cent of government schools.

Last week, the Prime Minister announced an extension to this program. On top of the $1 billion, we have announced a further $181 million in funding for the Investing in Our Schools Program—$127 million will be allocated to government schools.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister has the call. The minister will be heard.

Ms JULIE BISHOP—Thank you, Mr Speaker. This means that schools that have not yet been successful or have only received a small amount of funding can now apply for the opportunity to receive up to $100,000 in funding.

I do acknowledge the support of the Leader of the Opposition for this program. He said it was a very practical and useful program. But this does beg the question: why is it that the state governments are not investing in their schools? This program has highlighted the chronic neglect of state government schools, and the funding has gone to fix some very basic items in government schools. In the 2006 budget, while the Australian government increased funding for government schools by 11 per cent, the state governments only increased it by four per cent. Had the states matched the federal rate of funding, there would have been an extra $1.4 billion in 2006 for government schools. I call on the Leader of the Opposition to join the government in asking state governments to properly invest in their schools, as we are doing.

Parliamentarians’ Entitlements

Mr ANDREN (3.02 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Is he aware of government MPs using taxpayer funded allowances to openly advertise and campaign in adjoining electorates, such as this ‘Working for Lithgow’ ad by the member for Macquarie, who has received—

Government members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Members on my right! The member for Calare has the call, and he will be heard.

Mr ANDREN—Such as this ‘Working for Lithgow’ ad by the member for Macquarie—

Mr Pyne interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Sturt is warned!

Mr ANDREN—who has received not one vote from electors in Calare and to whom at least one minister is now referring my constituents in Calare. Prime Minister, is this what you mean by governing for all Australians: governing through coalition members and ministers misusing their authority and privileges of office?

Mr HOWARD—In reply to the member for Calare: there is no misuse of entitlements, none whatsoever. In 2006 the Australian Electoral Commission did redistribute the boundaries of federal seats in New South Wales, and the use of MPs’ entitlements in the new portions of electorates is covered by
the Remuneration Tribunal determinations and accepted conventions. The Remuneration Tribunal has since 2001 explicitly allowed for the use of the postage entitlement to communicate with residents of an adjoining or nearby area following a redistribution. This is the advice I have received. Similarly, the printing allowance may by convention be used in the new areas. Furthermore, I am advised that MPs are permitted to travel on scheduled services to the new areas and may use their privately plated vehicle to travel to and within the new areas.

I am advised that the member referred to—and that is obviously the outstanding, wonderful and redoubtable Chief Government Whip, the member for Macquarie—is within the guidelines and conventions surrounding the use of the entitlements. All I can say, in the spirit of fair electoral contest, is that I think the people of Lithgow will warm to the member for Macquarie.

Mr Andren—I seek leave to table the document.

Leave granted.

Older Workers

Mr LAMING (3.05 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Vocational and Further Education. Would the minister inform the House how the government is helping older workers to gain work skills? How many workers have potentially benefited so far, Minister?

Mr ROBB—I would like to thank the member for Bowman and acknowledge a longstanding interest in education and training. In today’s world, people need access to training and education throughout their life—training, retraining and reskilling. In this respect, it is anticipated that in the future the demand for university qualifications will be roughly in balance with the current supply of university education—that is, around 20 per cent of the workforce. By contrast, in the future, it is anticipated that over 60 per cent of jobs will require vocational and technical education, vocational and technical qualifications, yet only 30 per cent of the working population have those qualifications.

This is why as a government we have increased real spending in vocation and technical education by over 88 per cent since we took office. It is not the virtually flat funding so disingenuously claimed by the Leader of the Opposition in this place two weeks ago. There has been a more than 88 per cent real increase in spending in the last 11 years. That is why we also announced, late last year, a package of measures worth over $840 million to train people in mid-career. Among the measures are 30,000 training vouchers a year with a value of up to $3,000. So far, since this program started on 1 January this year, with some 530 registered training authorities contracted to provide over 4,400 different courses, we have had over 3,000 vouchers issued in the last six weeks. That is a very high demand and a very important initiative. It is also why in this package we have decided to provide up to $13,000 in wage subsidies for those taking mid-career apprenticeships. We are also providing incentives for higher technical skills and much more.

But why are we in this position, where we are now providing billions of dollars to train people in mid-career? Why are we providing support and encouragement to people who are in their late 20s, throughout their 30s and in their early 40s—people who should be at the peak of their productive capacity? Why are we training people in this age group? It is because these people are the people who finished their early education throughout the eighties and much of the nineties. If each year through the eighties and early nineties the number of people who finished an apprenticeship was equal to the number who finished apprenticeships last year—142,000 young Australians—we would have in Aus-
Australia now over one million more trained people in technical and vocational education. We would have over one million more people able to deal with the skills challenge that this country faces. This is Labor’s lost generation of tradesmen and tradeswomen—people in their late 20s, their 30s and their early 40s, who never got the opportunity to get a technical and trade education. This is Labor’s legacy of 13 years of neglect and denigration of the trades. These are the people—a whole generation of parents and their children—who were made to feel that a trade qualification is somehow second-class, because of Labor’s rhetoric through all those years.

Labor are still in denial. In the education revolution document put out by the Leader of the Opposition—it is 27 pages—how much do you think there is on technical education? There are four paragraphs out of 27 pages. They are still in denial. Just last month the member for Rankin, the shadow minister—listen to it—for service economy, small business and independent contractors said, of all things, ‘I think we can very easily overstate the importance of trades.’ Labor are still in denial. This government and the country must place a priority on training Labor’s lost generation of tradesmen and tradeswomen.

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

MR GEORGE MILLER

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

MR GEORGE MILLER

Mr Howard (Bennelong—Prime Minister) (3.11 pm)—On indulgence, I know I will meet with the approval of all members in extending to George Miller, the great Australian director, the congratulations of the Australian parliament in light of the fact that Happy Feet has won the best animated feature at the Academy Awards. It is a wonderful Australian achievement, and I know that all members will join me in extending congratulations to George Miller.

Mr Rudd (Griffith—Leader of the Opposition) (3.12 pm)—Also on indulgence, on behalf of our side of the House I also extend to George Miller and his team congratulations on winning this Oscar. George is a Brisbane boy. It is terrific when you have got someone like that being awarded a significant award such as the Oscar, someone who has already done such films as Mad Max, Lorenzo’s Oil and Babe. This is a great outcome for George Miller. It is a great outcome, also, for the film industry, and we congratulate all those concerned with Happy Feet.

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER

Rulings

Mr Albanese (3.13 pm)—Mr Speaker, I have a question to you, and it concerns your ruling which you laid out prior to question time concerning the events in the parliament on 15 February 2007. Part of the concern that I do not think you have addressed goes to the fact, which Hansard will record, of, at about 3.21 pm on that day, my raising an objection about a remark being withdrawn and your directing the Leader of the House: ‘Then the minister will withdraw that last accusation.’ Part of the concern that we on this side of the House raised was the fact that the Leader of the House responded, ‘I am a little confused.’ That was his response to your direction that the remark be withdrawn.

Mr Speaker, as you pointed out in quoting House of Representatives Practice, it is up to the chair to determine whether or not language is offensive or disorderly. In that ruling you clearly indicated that it was disor-
orderly language. You clearly asked the member to withdraw it, and he refused to do so and defied your ruling. Because of that, parliament was disrupted by a number of points of order for at least another 10 minutes. It is still an issue today. I ask you to reflect on that matter and report back to the House. I indicate to you on behalf of the opposition that we certainly do not regard the term that was used as being parliamentary or appropriate in this House. It was used again today.

Mr Abbott—It may assist the House if I indicate to the member for Grayndler that, if the Leader of the Opposition finds the term objectionable, I will certainly withdraw it. But, as I have said before, will the real Kevin Rudd please stand up, rather than getting the member for Grayndler to do his dirty work for him.

The SPEAKER—The Leader of the House would be well aware that he should refer to members by their electorate or their title.

Mr ALBANESE—We are now getting back into a situation whereby your position, as the custodian of the rules and proceedings of this House, is being drawn into question. It is not up to the Leader of the Opposition to object; it is up to you to determine, in accordance with the section of House of Representatives Practice that you read into Hansard prior to question time today, whether indeed language is parliamentary or not. It quite clearly is not parliamentary language. You indicated that. The Leader of the House defied you, as he did just then, in his response.

The SPEAKER—The Manager of Opposition Business has raised his question. He is seeking a response from me and I will respond to him now.

Mr Danby—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I want to draw your attention to section 92(b) of the standing orders. It says: When the Speaker’s attention is drawn to the conduct of a Member, the Speaker shall determine whether or not it is offensive or disorderly.

The SPEAKER—I thank the member for his assistance. I remind all members that I made a statement at the beginning of question time to cover this specific area. I said, amongst other things, that I had done some research. I said the previous sitting Thursday that, had the individual member found something offensive, I would give consideration to asking that it be withdrawn. I have ruled on the issue and I do not propose to revisit it.

Rulings

Mr ALBANESE (3.17 pm)—Mr Speaker, I raise with you a separate question, which is whether or not it is in order for someone, upon being asked to withdraw an offensive comment, in accordance with your ruling, to defy that ruling.

The SPEAKER—I can check the Hansard, but as I recall I said that, if the member found it offensive, I would consider asking for a withdrawal. I do not propose to revisit the issue. I made a statement at the beginning of question time to cover this issue.

Mr Albanese—Can I take it that that precedent will be followed in future?

The SPEAKER—I have given a statement. I refer the member to the statement I made at the beginning of question time and, in particular, to page 499 of House of Representatives Practice. I will reiterate the words. It says:

The determination as to whether words used in the House are offensive or disorderly rests with the Chair, and the Chair’s judgment depends on the nature of the word and the context in which it is used.

Mr Albanese—Yes, Mr Speaker, and you did that—

The SPEAKER—I will not have the point debated. If you wish to raise a ques-
tion, that is in order, but it is not a matter for debate.

Rulings

Mr ALBANESE (3.18 pm)—Mr Speaker, I am raising a question with you. My question is very simple: is that a precedent that you will follow—that is, upon being asked to withdraw by you it is acceptable for a member to not do that?

The SPEAKER—I say to the Manager of Opposition Business that we have discussed this. I have given a statement today. I do not propose to revisit proceedings from a previous day any further.

PETITIONS

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

Nuclear Reactors

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

This petition of citizens of Australia calls on the Parliament to urge Government members to:

(1) Table all environmental evidence and other studies supporting the proposal to build a nuclear reactor in Western Australia;
(2) Identify which bodies in Western Australia have been consulted over such a proposal;
(3) Advise on what consultation has taken place with the community in Western Australia over the proposal;
(4) Identify all the sites in Western Australia under consideration for the construction of this nuclear reactor; and
(5) Advise what safeguards will be put in place to prevent terrorist attacks against nuclear facilities in Western Australia.

by Mr Edwards (from 30 citizens)

Mammograms

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

The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House that free mammograms are not accessible by breast cancer survivors despite the increased risk of breast cancer. Access to free mammograms is also being denied to women over 70 years of age in some parts of Australia. Your petitioners therefore ask the House to ensure that mammograms are free to all women in Australia regardless of age or medical history.

by Ms Hall (from 19 citizens)

Health: Outer Metropolitan Doctors Scheme

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

Request that the House take immediate action to address the chronic shortage of doctors in the Lake Macquarie and Hunter areas.

Your petitioners therefore respectfully request that the House do everything in their power to ensure that the greatest effort is made, as soon as possible, to address the chronic shortage of doctors in the Lake Macquarie and Hunter areas.

by Ms Hall (from 22 citizens)

Dental Health

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

This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House, the long dental waiting lists and under funding of our public dental system.

Your Petitioners therefore ask the House to:

• Re-introduce the Commonwealth Dental Scheme and restore funding to public dental health,
• Reduce waiting times for public dental health services, and
• Train more public dentists.

by Ms Hall (from 141 citizens)

Australia Post: Services

To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament.
The petition of residents and businesspeople of Balmain East draws the attention of the House to the facts that:

- The Balmain East area is under-serviced in terms of Australia Post services, especially the capacity to purchase postage stamps and related items.
- There is significant change occurring in Balmain East that is likely to be increasing demand for local postal services. In particular, there is growth in the number of small businesses and “SOHO” (single operator home office) businesses.
- The Balmain East Newsagency is very well situated for the provision of postal services, as it is very close to a bus stop and on the walking route for many commuters heading to the local ferry. At present, it attracts some 1000 customers per week and receives some 20 requests per week about postal services.
- The Balmain East Newsagency has applied for a PostalPoint merchandising unit and had its application rejected by Australia Post.

Your petitioners therefore ask the House to review Australia Post’s stance and support the provision of a PostPoint merchandising unit in the premises of the Balmain East Newsagency.

by Mr Hockey (from 218 citizens)

**East Timor**

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

The petition of certain citizens of Australians draws to the attention of the House:

The UN’s Independent Commission of Inquiry for Timor-Leste report recommends that two escaped prisoners, Major Alfredo Reinado (ex-military leader) and Commander Vicente Railos be prosecuted as they are “reasonably suspected of having committed crimes against life and the person.”

These two rebel leaders are still free and are not being held accountable for their alleged crimes. East Timor society remains paralyzed because armed groups, led by men such as these, remain at large.

Your petitioners therefore request the House:

To call on the Australian government to order the Australian military command within East Timor to arrest these two fugitives so that they can be brought to trial for their alleged crimes.

by Ms Plibersek (from 10 citizens)

**Immigration: Asylum Seekers**

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

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

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

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

We, therefore, the individual, undersigned attendees at St Martin’s Anglican Church, Belgrave Heights Vic 3160, petition the House of Representatives in support of the above mentioned Motion.

AND we, as in duty bound will ever pray.

by Mr Wood (from 13 citizens)

Petitions received.

**Responses**

The Clerk—A ministerial response to a petition previously presented to the House has been received as follows:

Dear Mr Harris

I refer to your letter dated 5 December 2006 which provided me with a copy of the petition lodged by Mr JP Murphy MP in the House of Representatives on 4 December 2006. In accordance with standing order No. 212(b), I lodge the following written response in answer to the petition.
Many modern businesses operate internationally necessitating the movement of information across national boundaries. It is common banking practice to perform certain back-office and IT operations overseas. Overseas service providers require access to the data needed for that service. It is important therefore that Australia has mechanisms in place to protect personal data when it is transferred offshore.

In Australia, regulation under the Privacy Act 1988 plays an important part in ensuring that businesses have effective practices to ensure that a customer’s personal information is protected both in Australia and overseas. The National Privacy Principles (NPPs) in the Privacy Act impose privacy obligations on the private sector, including banks and financial institutions. The NPPs were designed to balance an individual’s right to privacy with the legitimate use of their personal information by the private sector. The NPPs extend to certain acts and practices that private sector organisations undertake outside Australia. The Act is designed to ensure that an organisation does not avoid its NPP obligations simply by moving personal information overseas.

NPP 4 requires an organisation to take reasonable steps to protect the personal information it holds, including protecting the personal information from misuse. NPP 9 only permits the transfer of personal information of Australians to foreign countries in limited situations. The transfer can occur only where:

- the Australian company reasonably believes that the foreign company is subject to a law, binding scheme or contract that effectively imposes principles substantially similar to the NPPs
- the individual consents to the transfer, or
- it is necessary for the performance of a contract between the individual and the Australian company.

These principles ensure that Australian businesses proactively protect personal information, by for example, imposing contractual obligations on foreign companies they deal with about the handling of personal information.

Section 5B (the “long arm” jurisdictional rule) provides for the Privacy Act to operate extra-territorially thus affording protection to personal information transferred overseas within the same Australian organisation. This is subject to any local laws that conflict with the Privacy Act.

A failure to establish adequate protections to prevent personal information from being misused overseas may be a breach of the Privacy Act. A breach of the Act can be investigated by the Privacy Commissioner. When the Commissioner receives a complaint, she will investigate it and try to conciliate a mutually acceptable outcome. If the Privacy Commissioner finds a privacy breach she can issue a determination that can include the payment of compensation to people whose privacy has been breached.

Currently the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) is undertaking a comprehensive Inquiry into the operation of the Privacy Act. As part of this Inquiry, on 9 October 2006 the ALRC released its first Issues Paper, which considers the issue of protecting personal data sent off shore. I am aware that many Australians have concerns about the transfer of their personal information overseas. I urge petitioners to make a submission to this inquiry to ensure that their views about the transborder flow of personal data are taken into account in any future law or policy reform in this area. The ALRC will be providing me with its report on 31 March 2008, and I will be giving due consideration to any recommendations made in that report.

Privacy and security issues surrounding the transfer of personal information between countries is also being discussed in a number of international fora, including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). As a member of the APEC Privacy Sub-group, Australia is considering ways of addressing these issues on a regional level. The Privacy Sub-group is currently working towards developing models for the international implementation of the APEC Privacy Framework. The Privacy Framework sets out nine privacy principles which provide clear guidance and direction to businesses operating in APEC economies. The Privacy Framework promotes a consistent approach to information privacy protection across APEC member economies, while avoiding the creation of unnecessary barriers to information flows.
During APEC 2007, the Attorney-General’s Department will host a series of privacy seminars focusing on Cross-Border Privacy Rules and regulator investigation and enforcement issues. The aim is to increase regional cooperation and coordination on privacy issues thereby guaranteeing minimum standards of privacy to personal information flowing across international borders.

Yours sincerely
Philip Ruddock
from the Attorney-General, Mr Ruddock, to a petition lodged on 4 December by Mr Murphy (from 3,523 citizens).

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS
Housing

Mr CADMAN (Mitchell) (3.21 pm)—I move:

That the House condemns the New South Wales Government for presiding over the highest amount of State and local government taxes and charges levied on the cost of a new home and for having the largest shortfall of broad hectare land provision of any State or Territory—putting the dream of home ownership out of the reach of New South Wales families.

This motion relates to the cost of housing and the damage that state governments are doing to the aspirations of young Australians. The incredible cost in taxes is wiping out the dream of homeownership for thousands of young Australians. The most important and cherished purchase that anybody will make is their home. After years of saving to get a deposit of five or 10 per cent, struggling young Australians, particularly in New South Wales, are finding that the task is beyond them and is getting further and further out of their reach. It is a deplorable situation. It is punishing young home buyers, limiting family size and, I believe, destroying their aspirations. All of this is imposed by a callous and greedy government.

For instance, in Sydney from 1990 until now land has risen from about 40 per cent of the total cost of the house-land package to well over 60 per cent. More than half the cost of a new home can be attributed to the land cost and more than half the cost of that land is state taxes, taxes imposed by the avaricious New South Wales government that are destroying the dreams and aspirations of the youngsters of New South Wales. The Australian house-land package is more expensive than in Las Vegas and Sacramento, the capital of California, but in Sydney it is more expensive than in Honolulu, San Francisco, Miami and even New York. Who would believe that the state of New South Wales could create a situation where house and land in our state is more expensive than in New York?

Home owners are seeking to establish a life for themselves, but let us analyse the taxes on a block of land: stamp duty to purchase the block for development is about $2,000 per block; stamp duty on the sale to the home buyer is about $17,000; water board section 73 tax is $12,000; council section 94 ranges from about $48,000 to $65,000—let’s say an average of $40,000; let’s be generous to local government—state infrastructure levy on north-western and south-western Sydney is $33,000; and GST is $35,000—all of which goes to the state government. There is a total cost on a block of land in taxes alone of $142,000 for every block sold in these new development areas.

It is an incredible charge, an incredible cost. Young people are being asked to borrow money to pay taxes to the New South Wales government. They are borrowing money not just over all of the state but in these new development areas. These taxes are being set aside to pay for schools, pay for railway lines and buy health services and hospitals in these new areas. Never before has a current generation been required to pay for current requirements. In a total period of 10 years, the additional money paid out in
interest by young people will amount to $45,000 just to cover the costs of state taxes.

Interest alone works out at around an additional $96 per week, purely attributable to borrowing enough money to pay for those taxes. It is about $376 extra per month to pay for state taxes on every mortgage for every young person in New South Wales who is buying a block of land. It is a criminal activity. Australians want to marry. They want security and they need to own their own homes because it provides better health, greater security for bringing up their kids and greater self-confidence, and they move less frequently. It is a better lifestyle, a more confident and happier lifestyle, being destroyed by the current government of New South Wales.

The SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

Mrs Markus—I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Mr Bowen (Prospect) (3.26 pm)—Once again we see members opposite reducing this House to a talkfest about state governments. People in Australia expect this parliament to be a chamber of the great contest of ideas between this side and the other side to debate federal matters, matters which we were elected to discuss, and policies which we were elected to implement. Yet this government has reduced this debating chamber to a talkfest about state governments.

State issues are important. Local issues are important. That is why the Australian people pay for eight state and territory parliaments to debate state issues. If members opposite feel so strongly about state issues they are entitled at any point to run for preselection for the Liberal Party for their relevant state seats, but they do not. They do not get that the Australian people are sick of the blame game. They do not get that the Australian people are sick of this parliament being used for political pointscoring. We have a state election in New South Wales in a few weeks time and conveniently this motion came onto the books. They do not get that the Australian people are sick of this type of pointscoring.

The Australian people expect federal governments and state governments to work with each other. It is about time members opposite respected and understood the fact that there are eight state and territory Labor governments in this nation, and the Australian people do not expect the time of this parliament to be used to constantly shift blame and blame the states for every problem facing this nation. It is about time members opposite came into this House and took a bit of responsibility. If they feel that the opposition in New South Wales is doing such an appalling job at holding the New South Wales government to account then they should do something about it and not abuse the time of this parliament.

But I am happy to talk about the housing prices in Western Sydney and in Sydney generally. I am happy to talk about the relative impact of state and federal policies. I am happy to talk about people in Western Sydney losing their homes in record numbers because of the four interest rate increases since the last election. I am more than happy to talk about it. Ninety per cent of the 77 suburbs in south-western Sydney experienced falls in housing prices in the last financial year and 83 per cent of the 93 suburbs of greater Western Sydney represented by the member for Mitchell, the member for Greenway, me and many others have experienced the same. What are the impacts of this?

People who borrowed huge amounts of money and took John Howard at his word that interest rates would remain at record lows have seen the value of the houses they
paid for fall. They now have negative equity. The impact of the last four interest rate increases is not just eating up more mortgage repayments but driving housing prices down across swathes of Western Sydney. Of course, we see people spending less because they now owe more on a house that is worth less, which is seeing higher unemployment.

We hear the member for Mitchell talk about state taxes. Stamp duty represents three per cent of the median dwelling price but interest rate increases have added nine per cent to mortgage repayments—and not a word from the member for Greenway, not a word from the member for Mitchell. Instead we see this talkfest attacking state governments. No wonder the Australian people are saying they have had enough of the blame game.

The member for Mitchell opines about the alleged lack of housing land releases in New South Wales. He would have some credibility if the federal government were engaged in urban affairs. He would have some credibility if the federal government had not abolished the department of housing and urban affairs on its election in 1996. The government would have had a right to talk about these things if they had become involved, but they vacated the field and now blame the state government.

Apparently not enough land has been released in New South Wales for the member for Mitchell. Apparently the 66,000 new homes in the north-west growth sector and the 115,000 homes in the south-west growth sector are not enough. They are completely out of touch with the Australian people, who expect governments to work with each other and not to blame each other. They are completely out of touch with the reduction in housing prices in Western Sydney, which do not benefit people trying to get into the housing market because they are also dealing with higher interest rates. They are completely out of touch when they come in here and use words such as ‘avaricious’, ‘callous’ and ‘criminal activity’ about the elected government in New South Wales. If the member for Mitchell feels that way, he should run for preselection for one of the state seats. He refuses to do so because it is easy to criticise but hard to contribute. (Time expired)

_Mrs MARKUS_ (Greenway) (3.31 pm)—Today I rise to address an issue of great importance to the people of New South Wales and indeed to my electorate of Greenway. The New South Wales state Labor government presides over the highest amount of taxes and charges levied on the cost of a new home and the largest shortfall of broad hectare land release provision of any state or territory.

Let me remind the members opposite, and particularly the member for Prospect, how the fall in house prices actually came about in New South Wales. Let me remind him about the introduction of vendor tax, the increase in land tax and the policy decisions of the state Labor government that have impacted on the price of housing in New South Wales and particularly Western Sydney. Let me remind the member for Prospect that investors are fleeing the state of New South Wales for other states because they know there is a better tax environment in those states.

These two issues which I will talk about today, and which this motion addresses, are paramount in placing the Australian dream of homeownership out of the reach of New South Wales families and individuals. The number of new lots released in New South Wales 15 years ago was 7,931. Last year it was only 2,780, which is a 65 per cent decrease. The member for Prospect wants to
debate ideas, but has he checked his facts? Is he talking about solutions? The average lot size in New South Wales 15 years ago—under Liberal Premier Nick Greiner, may I add—was 600 square metres. Last year it was 450 square metres, a 25 per cent decrease. The average price for a lot in New South Wales 15 years ago was $75,000; last year it was $310,000—a 400 per cent increase. The New South Wales state taxes and charges and the large shortfall in the release of broad hectare land are instrumental factors in that unnerving statistical picture.

I will first address the burdening taxation and regulation placed on new home buyers by the state Labor government. At their core, New South Wales land and property taxes are restrictive and inequitable. It has become more difficult to enter the property market in New South Wales and families and individuals have been driven out of the state to more tax-friendly environments. In New South Wales, state government related taxes, fees, levies and compliance costs have increased over $100,000 in the last five years—unequivocally the highest increase of all states. These costs are often more than the cost of the land on which the house sits.

Local infrastructure levies applied to new home buyers are now levied at a rate far in excess of the actual cost of essential housing infrastructure, such as water and sewerage. In Sydney, total levies now amount to $68,233, where the actual cost of the infrastructure is estimated at only $1,752. Environmental compliance costs have also added to the costs of new housing for little measurable ecological benefits. New housing accounts for only two per cent of the total housing stock, but it is bearing close to 100 per cent of the compliance burden. As I have mentioned in this chamber previously, vendor tax is purely a structural tax, and it is a tax of paradoxes. When it was introduced to New South Wales, it was estimated to raise $690 million a year as well as to act as a disincentive to buy and sell property. This was supposed to help ease the pressure on the property market, but, in the following financial year, the tax was estimated to have raised only $367 million.

I will share an example of the state Labor government’s mismanagement of land provision. In 1998, the New South Wales Department of Planning identified over 29,000 home sites that could be developed adjacent to the Richmond railway line, but the state Labor government has not yet taken any action towards developing them. Many hundreds of families could walk to an existing railway station. This region has been sidelined for 10 years so far in favour of other developments where there is no such existing infrastructure—in fact, a railway has to be built at great cost to service the north-west sector. When will this happen? Ten years? Twenty years? I suspect never.

Housing Industry Australia’s Executive Director, Chris Lamont, last week said in one of our local community newspapers:

It is simply too easy to blame interest rates and heightened consumer demand for the housing affordability crisis. The cause of the problem lies in an undersupply of ready-to-develop land, the multiple planning hoops developers must jump through in order to get a building completed, and the fact that State and Local Governments—particularly the state Labor government in New South Wales—regard housing as a cash cow to be milked to underwrite their budgets.”

Due to this overtaxing by the state and the mismanagement of broad hectare land release, the federal government has stepped in to give a significant helping hand to those Australians trying to purchase their first home. The federal government’s First Home Owners Scheme has provided over 926,000 grants to families and individuals to assist
them to purchase their own homes. The federal government has committed $4.75 billion over five years to the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement to provide funding to assist those whose needs for appropriate housing cannot be met by the private market.

(Time expired)

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (3.36 pm)—I welcome the opportunity to address the very important issue of housing affordability. In doing so, I also want to say that this debate is not about housing affordability; it is about the New South Wales state election. It is about the Howard government seeking to shift its responsibilities onto someone else. It is not about defending the Australian government or state and territory governments. It is about having a real debate about ending the blame game.

Let us go to the issue of housing affordability because it is about time we all accepted that there is a national crisis. The reality is that the average household cannot afford to buy the average home. A report released today by the Residential Development Council offers a bleak picture for Australia's youth, with only one property expert in 14 believing that members of generation Y will be able to buy their own home. A survey by the council showed that only seven per cent of industry insiders believe that generation Y—those born between 1978 and 1998—would be able to overcome surging house prices and land shortages to buy their own family home.

The survey stated:

More than 40 per cent believed members of Generation Y would be forced to continue living with their parents before being forced to rent or live in share accommodation.

The truth is that Australia now has the least affordable housing of six developed countries surveyed by US consultants Demographia. This reality does not just spell economic problems in a cornerstone of our national economy. It also drives a spear into a long-held Australian dream: homeownership, which is entrenched in our national culture—and so it ought to be. We are now experiencing the worst housing affordability in at least a quarter of a century. This is coupled with low vacancy rates and soaring rents which, combined, lead to a crisis that could undermine society's foundations. If people cannot afford to buy a home and there is nowhere for them to rent, where are they going to go and what are they going to do? The issue of homelessness becomes an even bigger crisis—something that was debated in the last week that parliament met.

The Howard government should be told that there are no quick fixes. It is no longer acceptable to blame state and territory governments. The Howard government's theory is that wholesale land releases would increase supply to a point that would pull down demand. If only it were so easy. Such ill-thought out solutions ignore the fact that housing affordability, particularly in New South Wales, is a complex combination of costs, supply and demand, inflation pressure and infrastructure services. It is also related to a change in expectations. What the previous generation thought was appropriate when purchasing a home has changed dramatically. People expect all the available services from the day they move into a particular subdivision, and this considerably increases the cost of providing homes at an affordable price. More often than not, because of the failure of the Australian government to invest in infrastructure, the responsibility for providing the infrastructure which is expected by householders falls to state, territory and local governments.

Where is the Howard government in the debate about urbanisation? Where is the Howard government in the debate about providing infrastructure as the cities sprawl to the outer suburbs of capital cities such as

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Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne? As usual, it is missing in action. It just says, ‘That’s not our responsibility; it is the responsibility of state governments.’ It is about time we said to the Australian government: end the blame game; show some leadership; sit down and try to work out how to work with state and territory governments on this complex issue. There is no quick fix. It is about all of us pulling our weight. It is about us working with the private sector and public developers to increase housing affordability in Australia. Urban development has been ignored by the Howard government for far too long. It is now time to act. The Labor Party is going to act with practical policies in the lead-up to the next election. We are about ending the blame game. The Howard government is about continuing to do nothing while saying that it is someone else’s responsibility. Front up to your responsibilities, Mr Prime Minister. Don’t continue to make speeches while doing nothing for ordinary people. (Time expired)

Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (3.41 pm)—I am incredulous at the hypocrisy of the Australian Labor Party in this debate. I know that some people would say it takes a degree of naivety to be incredulous at the hypocrisy of the Australian Labor Party, but I am. The reason that I am dumbstruck is that the member for Prospect and the member for Batman have said: ‘Let’s end the blame game. It’s about the time the Howard government put its money on the table and did something to correct infrastructure needs in regional and metropolitan centres.’ That is the exact line we have heard from members of the Australian Labor Party.

Newsflash to the Australian Labor Party: it was this very government that introduced the GST—not because it was politically popular but because it provides growth revenue to the state Labor governments. The fact is that state Labor governments are awash with cash from the GST. In Queensland alone, I know that the Beattie Labor government has a windfall gain of about $750 million to do something to ease housing affordability. And that is before we even get onto the issue of stamp duty. The reality is that the Australian Labor Party are not concerned in the slightest about this issue.

If Labor really cared about housing affordability, if Labor were genuinely concerned about making it easier for Middle Australians to buy their own homes, if Labor really had it as part of their policy, then maybe they would do something about their horrendous and obnoxious stamp duty charges at state government level. What we know is that state Labor governments—I am talking about the Beattie Labor government in Queensland and the Iemma Labor government in New South Wales—are gouging more stamp duty from ordinary working-class Australians than ever in our nation’s history. That is the legacy of the Australian Labor Party. That is the record of the Australian Labor Party. They are big on talk but they are slow on action. The Australian Labor Party are now gouging $9.6 billion in stamp duty out of the hands of ordinary, hardworking Australians who are scrimping for every dollar they can to own a home. The Australian Labor Party, the Iemma government, the Beattie government, the Bracks government—all these Labor governments—are happy to take every last dollar in stamp duty, plus GST. They are happy to take every last dollar. In fact, under state Labor governments, stamp duty has increased from $5.3 billion in 2000-01 to $9.6 billion now.

So let me put on the table what the Labor Party’s record is. Let us cut through the rhetoric and look at performance. The performance of state Labor governments is shameful. The opposition know it, and that is why they are too embarrassed to stand up in this place and defend the near doubling of
stamp duty and the record haul of GST. That is what the opposition have to do if they are really serious about housing affordability.

But don’t just take my word for it; I am happy to go to the experts. Let us look at what the Property Council of Australia say in their national housing infrastructure cost study. The Property Council of Australia undertook a study, and the findings of that study are very illuminating. The findings of that study show that the second most significant component of new housing costs after construction is, in fact, government related taxes, levies, fees and compliance costs—and those are not federal government charges; they are charges that are levied at a state government level and at a local council level.

The Property Council of Australia found that charges in Sydney were up 466 per cent, charges in Brisbane were up 279 per cent and charges in Melbourne were up 40 per cent. So, thanks to state Labor governments, we see charges increasing by over 450 per cent. The Iemma government and the Beattie government are ripping every last dollar out of the hands of ordinary Australians with their horrendous stamp duty costs and they are also pocketing every last cent of GST. Shame on the Labor Party for the hypocrisy to come in here and pretend that they have any policy solution whatsoever for solving this crisis.

Mr Murphy (Lowe) (3.46 pm)—Shame on all the government members. The Howard government is opportunistically and cynically using parliament’s time to breathe a gasp of oxygen into the debilitating campaign of Peter Debnam. There can be no doubt that the dream of homeownership is slowly falling out of reach of many middle and lower income families, particularly young families. First home buyers in Australia now spend more than 30 per cent of their disposable income on a mortgage. The average monthly repayment for a first home buyer of $2,300 is an all-time high.

My electorate of Lowe, in the inner west of Sydney, has one of the highest proportions of households in Australia suffering from mortgage stress. If things are so good, and if the economy is so good, as the Treasurer keeps telling us, why are so many families in my electorate of Lowe sinking one-third of their disposable income straight into their mortgages? I can assure the member for Mitchell that the release of land in Greater Western Sydney and the abolition of infrastructure levies will not solve the housing affordability problems faced by families in my electorate.

The motion put to us today is disingenuous and reveals that the Howard government seek to completely abrogate their responsibility and blame someone else. That is the truth. The government say that it has nothing to do with them—but it does. Four interest rate rises since the last election mean that Australians are paying a higher proportion of their income on mortgage interest repayments than ever before. If the government are serious about putting the dream of homeownership back in reach of ordinary New South Wales families, they can start by addressing the skills crisis—not blaming the price of bananas or pointing the finger at each of the states.

If we are to seriously discuss the dream of homeownership, why are we not discussing matters that the Howard government can control? Why are we not discussing the Howard government’s failure to address Australia’s skills crisis—a crisis which has increased the cost of building a home and has put upward pressure on interest rates? Why are we not discussing the implementation of a national settlement strategy, so that all levels of government can plan for changes in population, housing demand and demograph-
ics? If this debate is to amount to something more than an exercise in cynical political opportunism, we should discuss innovative ideas, such as shared equity arrangements, better targeting the first home owner grant and investing in Australia’s infrastructure. It takes strength and leadership to pursue these ideas. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the Howard government has chosen to take the easy option of passing the buck and then playing the blame game.

Despite a serious imbalance between the state’s revenue-raising powers and expenditure responsibilities, the New South Wales government has shown far more interest in this critical issue than a cashed-up federal government which is raking in record levels of tax. New South Wales has the most generous package of first home buyer concessions and grants in Australia. It has provided $651 million worth of grants and concessions to 57,862 first home buyers. It has abolished the vendor duty and zoned 33,000 greenfield lots since 2003. The land is there but it is not being released because of the increases, and threats of further increases, in interest rates—as the member for Mitchell and other government speakers know. That there has been a drop in the value of land in Western Sydney proves that mass land releases on the city’s fringes are not the issue.

If the member for Mitchell has his way, many battlers could be left with a mortgage debt that is higher than their property value. The member for Mitchell also condemns the state government for raising funds to invest directly in infrastructure and essential services. History has shown—and the member for Mitchell should know this only too well—that the quick fix solution of releasing vast tracts of land without infrastructure and essential services does not work. Land releases must go hand in hand with infrastructure planning and funding.

To move a motion in this House which is solely critical of the New South Wales government, while ignoring the failures of the federal government on a wide variety of matters, is breathtaking hypocrisy and double standards. True to form, the Howard government is all too willing to bag the New South Wales government for the housing affordability crisis while it ignores its own negligence and failure to address the underlying issues causing this crisis.

The dysfunctional nature of state-federal funding arrangements is putting New South Wales under enormous financial stress, yet the New South Wales government has still used its limited means to promote the interests of homebuyers. Rather than sitting on money that belongs to the people of New South Wales, the Howard government should be investing in skills, infrastructure and other measures that will alleviate pressure on homebuyers. It is hypocritical for a cashed-up federal government—which is doing little—to condemn a state government which is being squeezed financially but doing a lot more for homebuyers.

I condemn this motion. Parliament’s time would be far better spent debating the merits of a shared equity scheme and targeted first home owners grants—not opportunistic, flawed criticisms of the New South Wales government. It is time the Howard government stopped playing politics and started acting as an agent for aspiring homebuyers.

(Time expired)

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

CHILD CARE

Ms KATE ELLIS (Adelaide) (3.51 pm)—I move:

That the House:
(1) supports a universal right to early learning for all Australian four-year-olds through the introduction of an entitlement to 15 hours of play-based learning per week, for a minimum of forty weeks per year, delivered by a qualified teacher;

(2) is committed to providing extra financial assistance to build additional childcare centres on primary school grounds and other community land in partnership with childcare providers;

(3) calls on the Government to increase the number of fully-funded university places in early childhood education to address the shortage of childcare provision across Australia;

(4) calls on the Government to introduce a 50 per cent HECS remission for 10,000 early childhood graduates working in areas of need;

(5) calls on the Government to eliminate TAFE fees for childcare trainees; and

(6) supports the transfer of responsibility for early childhood education and childcare into the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training with a new Office of Early Childhood Education.

I move this motion because it is time for this government to treat seriously the childcare issues that so many Australian families are grappling with on a daily basis. It is long overdue. This motion calls on the House to draw attention to Australia’s childcare crisis. I call on the government to support Labor’s solution to this crisis.

When it comes to child care and early childhood education, the Howard government is nothing short of delusional. So out of touch is the Treasurer that his own department is denying the existence of a childcare crisis. The Treasurer needs to start listening to the normal Australian families in his electorate—or in any Australian electorate. If he does, he will find a mum down the street who desperately wants to return to work but cannot see the incentive to do so when she is paying such high childcare fees and finding it so difficult to find a place. He will find a couple, too, who have been told that there are plenty of childcare places available to them—although they may be 100 kilometres or more down the road.

The real situation is that Australian parents are not being ‘too choosy’ when it comes to child care, as the Treasurer’s department has argued. In fact, they are facing enormous difficulties in finding childcare places. Just because places exist at some childcare centres does not imply that they are accessible. As the member for Jajajaga has pointed out on numerous occasions, what good is a place in Tamworth if you live in inner Sydney? The shortages that exist in Australia’s childcare system today are not ‘a function of consumer choice’, as the Treasury paper has argued, but real shortages caused by a lack of funding and a lack of trained childcare workers and teachers. Thousands of parents across Australia are desperate for a childcare place and do not appreciate being told by the Howard government that there are plenty of places.

Particularly in the areas of long day care and care for babies, Australia is facing a childcare crisis. On the issue of early childhood education for our youngest Australians, Australia is significantly lagging behind in investment by international standards. According to the OECD, Australia spends just 0.1 per cent of GDP on preschool education, compared with an OECD average of 0.5 per cent. An unsurprising result of this underinvestment is that Australian participation in early childhood learning is extremely low by international standards. According to the OECD, Australian children aged three and four are being left behind at an age that is critical for brain development and early learning and clearly predicts ongoing educational achievement.
The solution to this crisis must be multi-faceted. Firstly, the government must introduce a universal right to early learning for all Australian four-year-olds and address the underinvestment in this critical area to ensure that Australian children are no longer left behind by international standards at this critical age of development. The Labor Party will achieve this by introducing an entitlement to 15 hours of play-based learning per week, for a minimum of 40 weeks per year, delivered by a qualified teacher.

Secondly, the government must provide the additional financial assistance necessary to build more childcare centres. Labor have a clear policy that would put 260 childcare centres on primary school grounds to end the double drop-off, as we know how frustrating that can be for parents.

Thirdly, the government must work to train more teachers and provide incentives for people to train as childcare workers. The government needs to work harder at recruiting and training staff. This should be achieved by increasing the number of fully funded university places in early childhood education, a very wise start; introducing a 50 per cent HECS remission for 10,000 early childhood graduates working in areas of need, which is Labor’s policy; and eliminating TAFE fees for childcare trainees. We on this side of the House intend to encourage young people into childcare training to address this shortage.

I urge the government to stand behind Labor’s new childcare policy and to really start investing in our children’s future. The key issues here are that Australian children should be provided with the best possible opportunities for education and care and that child care should be of the highest quality, be affordable and be available. Labor have devised a plan to address each of these issues, and I urge the government and members opposite to support it.

Ms Livermore—I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (3.56 pm)—As the member for Ryan, representing the western suburbs of Brisbane, I am again delighted to speak in the House of Representatives on this important topic. Child care and early learning are of course very important issues for all parents in this country, and they are certainly important to parents in the electorate of Ryan.

I know that the member for Adelaide is new to this parliament, and I am sure that she is trying as hard as she can to make a contribution to the national debate, but I think I would rather be backing the Treasurer’s skills and abilities over those of the member for Adelaide. This motion has some seven or eight points. Unfortunately, in the time allotment of only five minutes we cannot address each one of them. I want to take the opportunity in the few minutes I have to enlighten the member for Adelaide, because I think this motion really reflects how misguided the member for Adelaide is—as are many of her colleagues on the opposition benches. Parliament really does require serious people, not just people who are going to make uninformed and ill-considered points.

The first point I want to draw to the member for Adelaide’s attention is that I think it would be worth her checking her understanding of our system of government and the federal-state dichotomy. If she were really aware of policy matters then she would, first of all, understand that TAFEs are not the responsibility of the Commonwealth government. TAFEs are not the responsibility of the Commonwealth government. One of the points she made was to call for the Commonwealth to call upon the TAFEs of our country—which, as I say, are managed...
by the state governments—to eliminate fees. TAFEs are the responsibility of the state governments. So she is calling upon the national government of this country to call upon the state governments to do something about early childhood learning. Of course that is important. But to say we have the power to actually remove TAFE fees is quite incorrect. That is something that she might want to brush up on.

This government focuses on early childhood learning very much. Those of us who are parents would have a focus on that. I am delighted to say that I am a parent. I have a 7½-month-old child, whom I love dearly: young Ryan Andrew Johnson. As a parent, it is very important for me to be aware of the opportunities that the federal government is creating for the children of our nation. The federal government is spending some $9.5 billion over four years to support parents like me who use child care. There are some 600,000 funded places available and over 800,000 children are using government subsidised child care. I would have thought that we would all be very complimentary about something like this; I would have thought that we would all be telling our constituents exactly how hard the federal government is working to maximise opportunities for children eligible for these places. But the opposition is not in the business of commending the government when it comes up with good ideas, initiatives and policies.

In addition to these matters, the Howard government has announced an extra $120.5 million over four years for child care in the 2006-07 budget. This is real money that will make a real difference. The member for Adelaide may need to be made aware that these are some of the biggest changes to child care since the introduction of the childcare benefit in 2000. These are really significant policy announcements by the government, not some on-the-run motions and on-the-run policies that we are now becoming familiar with from those opposite. I recommend that she get a bit more of an understanding of this issue. I know that she is probably well meaning, but her contribution would have had far more substance if she was aware of the Australian government’s activities and policies in this very important area. We should all know that from 1 July last year the Australian government removed the cap on the number of CCB approved places for outside school hours and family day care. This means 99 per cent of childcare places will be uncapped, and that is very important for the people of Ryan. (Time expired)

Ms LIVERMORE (Capricornia) (4.01 pm)—I want to congratulate the member for Adelaide on bringing this very important motion before the House. Investment in our kids and in early childhood education is of critical importance to not only the future of those young people but also the future prosperity of Australia. That link between early childhood education, human capital and economic performance is now well understood and accepted. The World Bank, the OECD, the Economics of Education Review and James Heckman—who is a Nobel laureate in economics—are organisations and individuals that are not discussing education as some kind of abstract pursuit. They recognise education as a key economic driver, one that makes a real difference to a country’s productivity and prosperity. The results of their research into what can be achieved through education are encouraging and inspiring and send a very strong warning to Australia. Despite all the evidence of its critical importance, we are just not doing enough to get our children in this country off to the right start when it comes to their education. Failure to invest in early childhood education—in the learning that takes place before children start their formal schooling—is a
wasted opportunity for the child and ultimately for the country.

Apart from being precious members of our families, our children are also incredible assets to this country. We now know from recent developments in brain research the extraordinary capacity for young brains to learn and absorb. One researcher in this field, Jack Shonkoff, describes children as being born ‘wired for feelings and ready to learn’. He says, ‘During this early period of life brain cell growth and wiring of connections drives remarkable linguistic and cognitive gains.’ In other words—as every parent knows—children are sponges. They want to learn, and we need to give them every opportunity to satisfy that urge to learn and explore and develop.

Building on this research into brain development is the work of Nobel laureate James Heckman, who concludes that learning starts before formal education begins and sets the foundation for success or failure at school and life. But what should really get governments reaching for the playdough and for the chequebook is James Heckman’s emphasis on the exponential impact of quality early childhood education. Investing in early childhood education brings benefits at that early stage of life that continue to benefit the child throughout each stage of his or her education. Early learning means later educational experiences have greater impact. This is echoed by the World Bank statement that ‘it is never too early to start investing in our children’s future but it can easily become too late’.

Sadly, in Australia, when it comes to investment in early childhood education, we seem intent on testing out that theory. Participation rates and investment in early childhood education in Australia are low by international standards. OECD figures from 2005 show that more than one-third of four-year-olds did not receive any pre-primary education. This is partly explained by further OECD figures which place Australia almost at the bottom of the league table of about 30 developed countries when it comes to spending on pre-primary education. In fact, we are at the very bottom. That is not good enough for our children. It robs them of opportunities and it risks our nation’s future prosperity.

That is why a Labor government will make early childhood education a priority. We have made it clear through a number of policy announcements—and I might mention for the member for Ryan’s benefit that they are very detailed policy announcements—how we would do that. But, as the World Bank says, it is never too early to start investing, so today’s motion invites the government to act now and take up those proposals. As the member for Adelaide’s motion sets out, it starts with the universal right to early learning for all four-year-olds. All four-year-olds would be entitled to 15 hours of play based learning per week for a minimum of 40 weeks delivered by a qualified teacher. These early learning programs could be provided through existing preschools and kindergartens or through childcare centres and family day care schemes. An investment of $450 million to assist centres with this initiative will mean that there is no increase in fees and charges to parents as a result of the expansion of learning programs.

Quality early childhood education starts with great teachers. We need a major commitment in Australia to building up our workforce in this area. That is why Labor’s plan includes a significant investment in the education of early childhood teachers and childcare workers. That means 1,500 new fully-funded university places in early childhood education, a 50 per cent HECS remission for 10,000 early childhood graduates working in areas of need and, as we have heard, no TAFE fees for childcare trainees.
Once again, I congratulate the member for Adelaide on putting this important motion on the Notice Paper. This is an investment that our country needs and that our children deserve. *(Time expired)*

Mr CADMAN (Mitchell) *(4.07 pm)*—This government is absolutely committed to the wellbeing of child care of all types, whether it be preschool, long day care, family day care or any of the multiplicity of childcare services available in this country. This government has worked with the states to provide an extensive and comprehensive service. In fact, at the COAG meeting in July—less than a year ago—it was agreed that the four priorities for human capital reform were early childhood, diabetes, literacy and numeracy and child care, which form part of a national reform agenda announced on 10 February 2006. Senior officials are to complete specific reform proposals for COAG’s consideration. In many of the proposals put forward by the honourable member for Adelaide today, it is absolutely critical that the states come along and agree and endorse the process, but there is no mention of COAG and a cooperative approach. It is all about a Commonwealth takeover.

The suggestion is that the Commonwealth completely take over all preschool services in Australia. I do not know how, from a Commonwealth perspective, we could ever run that. I do not know about your electorate, Mr Deputy Speaker Somlyay, but I cannot imagine a public servant from Canberra going to Maleny, Nambour, Palmwoods or any place like that in your wonderful district and having a look at some of the preschool centres and judging whether they are operating effectively. The program that has been established by this government is an accreditation scheme that is administered by the states and funded in a cooperative manner.

We have heard the Australian Labor Party say today that they are the only ones who can work with the states. This government is working with the states. It is drawing up initiatives in cooperation with the states to cover all types of early childhood services. The national agenda for early childhood is an evidence based policy framework for early childhood—from the antenatal period up to age 6—covering the whole spectrum and all the services that involves. The motion moved by the member for Adelaide will reward the states—particularly New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland—that have neglected their responsibilities for funding preschool services.

According to the *Report of government services 2007*, the national rate of preschool participation in 2006 was 85.7 per cent. Again we have the problem of New South Wales not performing, not delivering and not living up to its promises. New South Wales continues to have the lowest participation rate at around 60 per cent compared with the national average of 85.7 per cent. According to the childcare census of 2004 across Australia, 45 per cent of Australian government approved LDC centres provide an in-house preschool program run by qualified early childhood teachers.

There is little information about the quality of these services, and it is up to the state governments to bring them into line or to modify them in line with their goals. It is not something that can be done from Canberra. It is not something that should be a takeover, as is proposed by the member’s motion. These proposals would involve the assets of third parties, including state governments and non-government schools of all types. I do not know how you are going to put that in place and say, ‘We want to involve your assets. This is our plan and we are going to involve ourselves in what you are doing.’
The call to eliminate TAFE childcare fees is again something for the state governments. No state government invests as much in or cares as much about TAFE and encourages skills, trades and others in technical and further education than this government. In nominal terms, funding has increased from $878 million in 1995-96 to an estimated $1,269 million in 2006-07. Those increases are directed to child care in part and to the training of childcare and preschool teachers.

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (4.12 pm)—I commend the member for Adelaide on this excellent motion on child care. It is very ironic that the government is constantly criticising the opposition for its lack of policies, yet when we come up with very detailed and soundly based policies—

Mr Cadman—Stop the blame game; work with the states!

Mr DANBY—Those opposite are interjecting from the background. Child care is something that people in my electorate certainly know about, with the 1,200-place shortage in long day care that we have in the city of Port Phillip. This motion proposes 15 hours of play based learning per week for a minimum of 40 weeks by a qualified teacher, extra financial assistance to build additional childcare centres on primary school grounds, more fully funded university places in early childhood education and the introduction of 50 per cent HECS remission for 10,000 early childhood graduates working in an area of need and supports the transfer of responsibility for early childhood education and child care to DEST and a new office of early childhood education.

Child care is an area where there are clearly inequities all over Australia. I know in my electorate that there is an acute shortage of spaces. We have a problem with high real estate prices and even many private childcare operators are unable to set up in that area because the cost of capital is too high. Of course, the federal government has neglected its responsibility for capital funding in this area for a long time. In the mid-1980s, with various schemes that the Labor government had, a lot of community based child care was set up with federal funding and buildings were established. Nothing has been put into them since then.

In some areas of the outer suburbs, we have private child care, such as the ABC group, opening and shutting according to demand in particular suburbs. I noticed in the Herald Sun the other day that a lot of parents were very agitated about the fact that the only resource that they had in their area was commercially based child care, but because it was run on commercially based decisions, when enrolment slipped below 50 per cent of the places in that childcare centre, they closed down the entire facility. What would happen if we did this with schools? If school enrolments dropped in some suburbs, would we close the entire school and expect the children to go off somewhere else?

I suggest to the parliament that early childhood education is as important as school education and we certainly have to do a lot to assist those who make contributions to our society by taking the relatively poorly paid jobs that we have in child care at the moment. There are some excellent ideas in this dissenting motion, such as the 50 per cent HECS remission for 10,000 early childhood graduates and extra financial assistance to build childcare centres on primary school grounds.

In my electorate, far from the blame game that the member for Mitchell talks about, the state government has taken the initiative of building a childcare centre on the grounds of the Elwood Primary School, which is to be called the Elwood hub. That will do what the former Leader of the Opposition, the current...
Leader of the Opposition, the member for Adelaide and all of us on this side want—and that is to stop the dreaded double drop-off that parents have to face, racing off to one part of Melbourne or Sydney and then racing off to another. So that they can productively participate in the workforce or in other areas, these mothers and fathers are all trying to get their kids to different places in time.

It is a very important, positive and constructive idea that the opposition has had: at many primary schools around Australia, where mothers or fathers are dropping off their kids to early education, they can drop off the little ones at the childcare centre in the area, or the same building, at the same time. At the Elwood hub this is going to be done very successfully. There are 90 full-time, long day care centre places being built. It is an example of the state government working with the City of Port Phillip to make up for the inadequacies of the federal government. The federal government has put no capital expenditure into this centre and has not addressed the issue of the crying need in the inner and middle parts of the cities of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane for child care—long day care in particular—that parents are facing. I commend the member for Adelaide for this excellent and detailed policy idea. (Time expired)

_Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP_ (Mackellar) (4.17 pm)—In the few minutes that are available to me I note that I find the motion somewhat confused in that it mixes up the need for early childcare education and child care per se. They are two entirely different functions. The training of the people involved in each differ according to the need.

I will address the question of the need for early childhood learning. It is quite clear that already government policy is to support that concept. Looking at the data that are available, 85.7 per cent of children—that is a national figure—participate in preschool education. The really bad figure is that in New South Wales only 60 per cent of children get access to preschool education. That certainly is a very damning statistic for New South Wales, which is slipping on every indicator. It is at the bottom of the heap on every indicator.

In relation to the childcare issues, the thing that has been completely missed—and I listened to the last speaker talk about the need for bricks and mortar, the cost of land and building more childcare centres—and the bottom line is that we have to think more broadly than that. We have to think of the types of child care that suit parents, rather than parents having to suit the needs of the buildings of childcare centres, which are institutions. They are a good institutions, but they are still institutions.

We need to look at the concept of in-home carers, where families can share an in-home carer, who would have to be properly trained—I suggest they would be vocationally trained to a level 2 certificate. Where there is a home-like arrangement you do not have to pay for the land or the bricks and mortar because they have already been paid for and yet you can get a suitable outcome for families. For instance, where there may be children who are two, four and 13, the two- and four-year-olds can be in their own home, the four-year-old can be looking forward to going to preschool and the 13-year-old can have someone to come home to when they return from school.

The government has put in place some very good policy with regard to child care. The evidence about the availability of people to be teachers and childcare trainees is that probably there is pretty good policy in place to provide enough to meet the needs of parents and children, but keeping them in that
area of child care is more difficult because they take the training and then leave. I am afraid that these policies of reducing HECS or reducing the cost of TAFE—which we have always been in favour of, right across the board—will not keep them in the area of child care or early childhood education. That requires a different policy setting.

As I said, in these few moments I have available to me, I think it is important to note that it is government policy to have that available to all children in that last year before they go to school for preschool education, that child care is something quite different and that it needs to meet the needs of individuals, not the other way round. So rather than simply talk about centre based care being institutional care, we need to look outside the square and look at ways that we can provide care that people want—that is, perhaps using in-home care providing the coverage of CCB and CCTR to a whole range of care that currently misses out.

I think the motion needs to be rethought because government policy is already established in many of the areas but the committee report, entitled Balancing work and family gives a good way ahead for improvement to occur.

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

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Question proposed:
That grievances be noted.

Lyons Electorate: Health

Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (4.21 pm)—I wish to alert the House to an ongoing issue that is of particular concern to the residents of my electorate. As the largest electorate in Tasmania, Lyons contains some of the most isolated populations. However, although Tasmania looks small to many who may merely consult a map, it is in fact about twice the area of Switzerland, and my electorate covers over 60 per cent of that area—which I guess means that my electorate is bigger than Switzerland. On the other hand, Tasmania has nowhere near the population of Switzerland and, as I said before, there are some isolated populations. These communities seem to be continually fighting to keep their services. Rest assured that I have been there beside them and will continue to be so.

A fight that I continually seem to be part of is the fight for GP services. Once again, this is an area where the federal government has failed—at a time when the federal Minister for Health and Ageing is going around saying that he wants control of hospitals because the states are not managing them properly and he wants to see outcomes. Well, I want to see outcomes too, for the people of Lyons. None of Tasmania’s largest hospitals are in Lyons. People in Lyons have to travel to have surgery. People in Lyons have to travel for some specialist services. And some have to travel to see a GP.

The government do not have a plan to help fix this. They want to take over the hospitals. They want to blame the state governments for the way they run hospitals. Instead of doing something about the problems in health, they want to blame. You cannot blame the states for the situation with GPs, because that is an area where responsibility lies fairly and squarely at the federal government’s feet. The government have failed to provide enough training of medical students to ensure that we have enough GPs. After 11 years, the responsibility for this rests with them. Of course, it is not only GPs that they have failed to train enough of; it is also nurses and allied health workers, and the list goes on.
Many areas in my electorate now rely on foreign doctors. But even they often struggle to obtain a provider number. They are only allowed to work in a district of workforce shortage. This is fair enough. But what if the area in which they want to work is a small one and is seen as only offering enough work for part-time practice? What if that doctor wants to work full time? What if they agree to work part time in the district of workforce shortage and make up the hours to full time with some part-time work in an area close by? Unless that area is also an area of workforce shortage, they cannot.

This happened to one of the communities in my electorate towards the latter part of last year. As a result, the local hospital acute care beds were closed. Without a doctor to manage the admissions and care of the patients, the beds had to be closed. Of course, it is not just the acute care of members of the community that suffers; the general health and wellbeing of people also suffer. After all, we know that prevention is better than cure—at least, those of us on this side of the House are aware of this.

We heard recently of the potential economic burden of not facing the reality of climate change. Labor has also put forward a policy on educational revolution, on the basis that it makes good economic sense as much as it is a social issue. We also believe health is an economic issue. Some 70 per cent of the total disease burden in Australia and 78 per cent of all deaths fall within just six disease groups. These are: cardiovascular problems, cancers, injuries, mental problems, diabetes and asthma. In all of these cases, improved health promotion and prevention strategies could prevent the disease concerned or reduce its impact.

In 2004-05 only 1.7 per cent of the recurrent health expenditure was directed to areas such as health promotion and prevention. In 2001 about one million Australians had type 2 diabetes. It is estimated that by 2031 the number will be three million—that is a three-fold increase. According to Access Economics, in 2005 the net cost of type 2 diabetes was $11.6 billion. That is roughly the cost of running Medicare and that is more than the cost of the package put together by the government to fix the Murray-Darling Basin water issue. And this is the cost of just one disease. But that is how they work, and we all know that. They wait until someone gets sick and then decide to fix the problem, just as they waited for the river system to be sick before they decided to do anything about it—until there was an election year and they decided that they had a political problem so they found some money to throw at it.

They have a narrow view of what health actually is. The World Health Organisation sees health as ‘more than just the absence of disease’. The government have failed to put enough emphasis on the economics of preventable illness. Australia has a ‘sickcare’ system rather than a healthcare system. They have failed to deliver a healthcare system to Australians and to those in rural areas. Healthy populations drive wealthier economies. Health is linked to workforce participation. It is also a major factor in determining productivity among workers. Doctors do more than just treat the ill. The general practitioner plays a significant role in assisting people to stay well, and we should recognise that fact. Because of their isolation, rural communities always suffer more.

The government has failed my electorate as much as any in its failure to develop a long-term plan with long-term goals and long-term solutions to ensure that communities receive all the levels of health care that they deserve—from general practice to preventative programs. We need a government with some vision, some awareness and some strategies for the long-term future. This is a
shameful approach by this government to rural health. My electorate of Lyons grieves.

Veterans: Citizenship

Mr SCHULTZ (Hume) (4.28 pm)—Mr Speaker, I take this opportunity today to speak to you about an issue, which should be of great concern to all members, regarding the immigration status of Australian war veterans. I will begin with a matter which I have already raised with the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship as well as the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs. I am thankful that both these ministers have already acknowledged my concern and the issue has subsequently been resolved with the veteran being granted Australian citizenship. However, I would like to make known my disappointment that the system, past and present, is demonstrably inadequate to the point where we are unnecessarily punishing people who have, and are, demonstrating their commitment to our country.

The issue was first raised in a letter titled ‘Forgotten hero’, which was published on 10 August 2005 in the weekend Daily Telegraph. The letter described the plight of Mr James Riddle, an ex-Royal Marine who served with the Royal Australian Regiment in Vietnam yet was subsequently denied Australian citizenship. The letter referred to the deplorable treatment by the Australian government of Corporal Jim Riddle, a former sergeant in Her Majesty’s Royal Marines, who left the corps to join the Australian Army with the aim of serving in Vietnam, which he did, and in doing so lost his right to qualify for a Royal Marines pension. Mr Riddle served for over 800 days on operational service in Vietnam, where he suffered internal and leg injuries as a result of a grenade explosion.

Mr Riddle was welcomed to Australia as a migrant when he first arrived in 1968 to fight with the Australian Defence Force in Vietnam. It appears that this status was subsequently forgotten by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, who treated Mr Riddle like any other person attempting to enter this country, requiring that he go through the full official visa procedure, including the payment of quite extensive processing fees. At this point I feel it appropriate to mention that undoubtedly this visa application was rejected on several grounds, including health requirements. Mr Riddle is over 65 years of age and requires a disability pension.

This matter was first referred to my office in October 2005 by Steve Dickman, the then President of the Mittagong Sub-Branch of the RSL. The issue had been raised at a sub-branch meeting where the members expressed concern at the apparent inconsiderate treatment of Mr Riddle by the Australian government. During October and November 2005, the sub-branch committee came in contact with Mr Riddle and obtained the full details of his case. The following was discovered.

In August 1968, Sergeant Riddle sought his discharge from the Royal Marines, having served 10 years and 79 days, thereby forfeiting his pension entitlement. On 12 September 1968, Private JB Riddle joined the Australian Military Forces and flew to Australia that day. At this time, Mr Riddle believed he would be eligible for Australian citizenship because he had been accepted into the Australian Military Forces as a full-time regular soldier. He was also assured by the resident sergeant major, who was part of the military attaché staff at the Australian embassy in London at the time, that he would be fully accepted into Australia after completing whatever war service was required. Mr Riddle was also under the impression that by serving in the AMF for a minimum of three years and by participating in war service he would be automatically
naturalised into this country. A letter was also sent to Mr Riddle in 1968 by the Chief Migration Office from the Office of the High Commissioner for Australia in London at the time. This letter informed Mr Riddle that his application for migration to Australia was complete.

In 1968, Mr Riddle was issued with an Australian passport in which, under ‘National status’, is stamped: ‘Australian citizen and British subject.’ However, under ‘Remarks’ on page 5 of the passport, a statement reads:

This restricted passport has been issued gratis to a serving member of the Australian forces in Vietnam to enable him to proceed on leave and/or return to Australia. Proof of citizenship verified from army records only. Subsequent renewal is subject to all normal requirements for issue of a new passport.

This passport appears to be of a sort issued only to personnel serving in Vietnam. The passport clearly refers to Mr Riddle’s Australian citizenship. However, the somewhat ambiguous statements that it is a ‘restricted’ passport with ‘citizenship verified from army records only’ and that its renewal was ‘subject to all normal requirements for issue of a new passport’ served merely to confuse someone in Mr Riddle’s position. Understandably, Mr Riddle believed that, when his passport stated he was an Australian citizen, this information was correct. Mr Riddle has since remarked that he never received any sort of reminder stating that the passport he had been issued with was actually wrong and that he was not really an actual citizen of Australia. He also stated that he would have expected some sort of warning letter to that effect.

After suffering injuries in Vietnam, Mr Riddle returned to Townsville in March 1972 and was discharged by request in June that year. He stayed in Australia, where he completed several civil training courses. Over the next four years, he worked for several construction plants near Townsville and Cairns. It was his intention to study further and become a civil engineer.

In 1976, Mr Riddle sent his passport to the Australian authorities for renewal. Mr Riddle wished to visit his father in the United Kingdom for the anniversary of the death of his mother, who had died in 1972 while he was serving in Vietnam. Mr Riddle was quite confused when his application for passport renewal was returned to him with a new United Kingdom passport showing him as a British subject, citizen of the United Kingdom, and a permanent resident of Australia.

The department’s actions are puzzling for a number of reasons. Firstly, Mr Riddle did not want a UK passport and had not applied for one. Secondly, he had not applied to a UK passport office and had no interest whatsoever in holding UK citizenship. Thirdly, once he had visited his relatives in the UK he planned on returning to Australia, where he lived and worked as a permanent resident. Mr Riddle’s Australian passport was returned to him with the UK passport; however, no explanation letter was included explaining why his replacement Australian passport had been denied.

When Mr Riddle telephoned the Australian Passport Office in Canberra in February, he was told that, as he was flying on 1 March 1976, he should use the UK passport and, when he arrived in London, he should contact Australia House where the whole problem would be cleared up. On his arrival in the UK he contacted Australia House and was told that the Australian passport he had been issued had only been temporary and that he should start the process for emigration to Australia. Over the next six weeks, Mr Riddle returned repeatedly to Australia House in London attempting to clear up the matter. Unfortunately he was not working at
the time and was forced to take a civil engineering job in Saudi Arabia, which lasted three years. Subsequently, he was involved for many years on civil engineering projects in the Middle East, but he always intended to return to Australia.

Mr Riddle rightly observed that, had he not gone to the UK on holiday and been issued with a UK passport, he could have remained in Australia as a permanent resident and would have been granted Australian nationality had he asked for it. This would also have qualified him for the old age pension and made him eligible to receive a war service loan and access benefits from the Department of Veterans’ Affairs.

In 1968 the Australian Defence Force did not require people to be Australian citizens, and a number of people served during the Vietnam War without being Australian citizens. Although this policy was changed in 1981, Mr Riddle was eligible to apply for a former resident visa, having met the necessary requirements, including having completed at least three months continuous service in the Australian Defence Force at any time prior to 19 January 1981. Unfortunately, Mr Riddle never understood that, despite the reference in his passport to his possessing Australian nationality. This was only mentioned in a restricted passport, issued as per Army records, and did not represent a definitive statement on his status from DIMIA. The Commonwealth must bear some responsibility for this because of the representations made to him by the sergeant major at Australia House, which induced him to leave the Royal Marines, and because he was never properly advised as to why his Australian passport had not been renewed and a UK passport had been issued instead. Also, Mr Riddle has been advised to apply for a certificate of Australian nationality, to which he appears to have been entitled, as a permanent resident.

While the decision not to renew Mr Riddle’s passport was understandable, I feel that his service on behalf of Australia in Vietnam entitled him to much better treatment than he received from DIMIA, and for this he deserves some sort of redress from the government. I find it reprehensible that we grant citizenship to illegal immigrants and yet Mr James Riddle, a person who has fought for this country, has not been treated appropriately. If this country is to pay due recognition to the significant contribution people such as Mr Riddle have made to this nation, it should exempt such people from paying excessive application fees and meeting the usual residency requirements upon their return to Australia as permanent residents. It is essential that the mechanisms of this policy, the ultimate aim of which is to highlight the appreciation we as a nation owe all those who have served to protect this country, are functioning adequately. (Time expired)

Workplace Harassment

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (4.39 pm)—Today I want to raise an issue which should concern all members of this House—the issue of harassment of staff. We may not see it as something we as individual members practise; however, I am sure that most members could recount at least one incident involving a member and staff of the parliament or the personal staff of a member or minister which should cause us to reflect on our conduct. We may find some of the stories about members throwing fruit or ashtrays amusing in hindsight but they should be considered as causing alarm and offence, if not injury. And verbal harassment can be just as wounding. On the government’s website www.business.gov.au, harassment is defined as ‘unwelcome conduct that humiliates, offends or intimidates people’. The site also points out that:

CHAMBER
Under federal anti-discrimination law an employer, regardless of size, may be legally responsible for discrimination and harassment which occurs in the workplace. Employers must actively implement precautionary measures to minimise the risk of discrimination and harassment occurring.

The website goes on to say:

Bullying is another form of workplace harassment that many employers face. Examples of bullying behaviour include unfair and excessive criticism, publicly insulting victims, ignoring their point of view, constantly changing or setting unrealistic work targets and undervaluing their efforts at work.

The website stresses that:

As an employer, you should be aware of the legal risks associated with harassment and bullying and the steps that can be taken to minimise their potential liability.

That is a message that all members of this House should be well aware of. We all realise that politics is war without bloodshed and, in the atmosphere of this parliament, no prisoners are taken. But those rules should not apply to the noncombatants—the staff of the parliament and our personal staff.

To a great extent, the standing orders of the parliament protect individual members from unreasonable attack and, Mr Deputy Speaker, that is a challenge all those who occupy the Speaker’s chair uphold with great zeal. The parliament itself has adopted practices to deal with harassment involving staff. Training has been carried out, harassment officers have been appointed and review mechanisms have been put in place, but there remains a grey area which occurs when staff who are employed by the parliament or as ministerial or personal staff of members engage with or otherwise deal with members or senators.

In the eight years that I have been a member of this parliament I cannot recall being asked to participate in activities designed to increase awareness of harassment or to stress my responsibilities with regard to harassment in my immediate workplace; yet clearly I and, for that matter, all members have a responsibility to avoid and prevent harassment in our workplaces. I can also add my own experience as a parliamentary staffer for nine years before I entered this parliament, so I have seen life on both sides of the big desk. I hasten to point out that I had no complaints against my former employers, the former members for Lindsay and Fowler, although I was reminded more than once whose name was on the office door!

Having experienced life from both sides I can appreciate the sometimes stressful situations that arise, and I am probably more sensitive to the differences in status between members and staff than some other members of this House. Some of us are happy to be called ‘mate’, but others insist on formality. While some members expect, or even demand, special recognition, others are happy to be part of the crowd. One of the great things about this parliament is mixing at the staff cafeteria or at Aussies. I have no doubt that there are few parliaments in the world where members and staff mix so freely. That freedom may, to some extent, lead us to assume that we are all mates so that in a more formal setting there is room for a misunderstanding of roles. At the end of the day, however, the formal roles and relationships are set out in the standing orders and the practice of this House. While we should all appreciate the effect of harassment and bullying on the individual, intimidation or abuse of power can also lead to a breakdown in established procedures. The institution as a whole may suffer as a consequence of harassment and bullying.

Members may recall that in December last year I, along with the members for Throsby, Adelaide and Franklin, raised a number of questions concerning the proceedings of the
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services. As deputy chair of the committee I also wrote to the Speaker, airing a number of complaints concerning issues relating to the conduct of the committee proceedings. The issues raised included the denial of access to opposition members of minutes of meetings, draft copies of report chapters and detail from consultants’ reports paid for by the committee.

I was pleased to note that the Speaker acted promptly to refer the matters to the Deputy Speaker, Hon. Ian Causley, in his capacity as Chair of the Liaison Committee of Chairs and Deputy Chairs, to consider the issues of procedure and practice raised and to provide him with advice as to whether action is required to clarify any aspects of committee practice and procedure. On 8 February this year, the Speaker tabled and distributed copies of a discussion paper based on the inquiry. I express my thanks to the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker for their swift action on this matter.

I have since forwarded my written comments on the discussion paper, as invited by the Deputy Speaker. I will not canvass my response at this time except to say that I am satisfied that it addresses the procedural aspects of the matters raised. However, I believe that it would be outside the scope of the discussion paper to consider the issues of harassment and, in particular, the abuse of power. For that reason, I am raising these issues in a general sense in this speech today.

As you would be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker Causley, the standing orders of this parliament apply to standing, select and joint committees. Indeed, standing orders 214 to 248 refer specifically to committees and committee procedures. As a holder of the chair, you would also be aware of the role of the clerks and other officers in assisting the operation of the parliament. As members we often observe the holder of the chair seeking advice from the clerk at the table. Any Speaker or Deputy Speaker would ignore that advice at his or her own peril, and the same should apply in a committee.

The general principles for the administration of parliamentary committees include, in the role of the secretary, that they should: ‘Under the guidance of the committee or the chair provide impartial, non-partisan advice and support services to the committee,’ and ‘provide equal access to evidence, correspondence and information provided to the committee to all committee members’. In the matters raised with the Speaker, both of these principles were clearly breached, and it was left to opposition members to refer the matters to the Speaker. I note that the outcome of the inquiry and discussion paper may help to resolve these issues in the future. I am left to wonder what recourse committee staff have when placed in this position or how they may respond when unreasonable requests are made by committee members.

As I have mentioned, the parliament has harassment policy measures in place which address instances of harassment by other staff. But I believe that there is also a need for members of this parliament to be informed of their obligations regarding harassment, particularly their own actions. Officers of the parliament and ministers’ and members’ personal staff are in a difficult position when faced with harassment. They may believe that making any complaint could damage their career. That creates a climate of fear in which harassment thrives. As many harassment programs stress, it is essential for those in positions of power to respect the role and integrity of those staff providing the services we all depend on. I shall be writing to the Speaker, expressing my views on harassment and outlining the case for the parliament to consider ways of ensuring that members are aware of their
responsibilities to eliminate harassment and bullying from our parliamentary workplace.

Howard Government

Ryan Electorate: Roads

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (4.48 pm)—As the federal member for the division of Ryan in Queensland, I have been proud to be a part of the Howard government since I had the great privilege of coming into this parliament in November 2001. I again thank the people of Ryan for their confidence in me and say to them that I will continue to work as hard and as enthusiastically as I did on that very first day when I was given the great honour of becoming a member of the Australian parliament.

Today I want to speak in the Australian parliament on a matter of great importance to my electorate of Ryan. It is very much tied to the great feature of the Howard government. The Howard government focuses very much on the national interest. This is a government that governs very much for the nation as a whole. It is very much focused on achieving real outcomes and long-term results. To be able to govern in such a fashion requires immense courage. It requires individuals at the very top of the government to put aside lobby groups and pressure groups and to withstand the immense political intimidation and pressure that come from very significant groups in the nation.

In a different context but on the same principle, I say to the people of Ryan that, whilst I very much listen to all the constituents who come to me and whilst I take into great consideration their views, at the end of the day I seek to represent the entire electorate to the best of my abilities and I do that in the context of being the federal Liberal member for the western suburbs and a member of the Howard government.

The Howard government has made very tough policy calls that have not always been popular. I suspect that the government’s decision in relation to road infrastructure and the construction of significant road projects in Brisbane will affect some of the constituents in my electorate of Ryan. The matter of roads and infrastructure in Queensland is of tremendous importance. Today, I want to speak on the federal government’s preference for a northern option for the Ipswich Motorway, also known as the Goodna bypass option. I want to preface my remarks by pointing out that as of today the government has not yet committed to the northern option in any precise detail. From reading today’s Courier-Mail, if that paper is to be believed, I am informed that cabinet is considering that decision today.

While the government has indicated its support for a northern bypass option overall, as I understand it the precise nature and structure of the bypass has not been finalised. Final approval is contingent on the information contained in the technical report, which I understand Maunsells has completed and has already presented to the government or is about to present to the government for consideration.

Potentially the proposed bypass will cross the river at either Priors Pocket or The Landing or, if another option is taken, which is the least satisfactory to me, it will cross the river in a four-bridge proposal at both Priors Pocket and The Landing, within my electorate. If that proposal is accepted or put forward, it is something that I am going to have a very deep interest in.

The residents who live in the vicinity of the proposed bypass route are understandably deeply apprehensive about the effect the northern bypass will have on their lives and the rural nature of their immediate area. Of course, no-one would be happy if a major piece of infrastructure were to be built in an area where they did not
anticipate it or call for it. I fully understand that: no-one wants an airport in their neighbourhood or backyard, for the obvious reasons. I am very sensitive towards the constituents who live in Priors Pocket, The Landing and Moggill. I am aware of their sensitivities, concerns and anxieties, and that is why from the very start I have been very engaged on this issue. I went to the last election with public sentiment in that area—also against my position—but I was transparent. I was very much on the public record. Everybody knew my position in support of the Goodna bypass option that my good friend and colleague the member for Blair has been advocating. Being deeply engaged in this very important issue means I have been very keen to talk to anyone in the Ryan electorate and specifically those who would be directly affected by this proposal if it were to become a reality.

I say to those who live in The Landing and Priors Pocket: the bypass option is a wider project; it is also about saving lives on the Ipswich Motorway. As a local member and citizen, I am determined to be proactive when it comes to any policies, ideas or projects that might go a long way to saving the lives of Australians on our motorways. We all know in Queensland that the Ipswich Motorway is a terrible road, a road that takes too many lives.

My support for the Goodna bypass option has only been for a two-bridge proposal. I believe that is the best option. I have advocated that I do not support any proposal that would include exit ramps off the bypass. I would not support any on- or off-ramps that would allow motor vehicles to come onto the Ryan side of the river. From day one, my support has been for that. I have been very clear and very much on the public record. For some of my constituents who say I have not made that clear, I direct them to my public statements. This is the best option to address the congestion on the Ipswich Motorway while also minimising the impact it will have on the local Ryan community.

The upgrade of the motorway is the preferred option of the Queensland state government, and I acknowledge that it is also the stated preferred option of the Liberal Lord Mayor of Brisbane, and the Leader of the Liberal Party in the Queensland parliament, Dr Bruce Flegg. But, as far as I am concerned, I think that they have got the call wrong: I do not believe Queenslanders want another short-term option, patch-up job or stop-gap measure when it comes to the Ipswich Motorway.

A widening of the Ipswich Motorway or the bypass will be managed by the Queensland government. The length of time involved relates to the nature of the construction. As far as I am concerned, the preferred policy of the federal government and of all the Liberal federal members in the Brisbane area is the best option for travellers on the motorway. The bypass rates highly over the widening of the current motorway for another very important reason: traffic projections suggest that an upgraded Ipswich Motorway would exceed capacity almost simultaneously to the upgrade being completed, such is the growth of traffic using the road. The independent engineers, Maunsells Australia, say the Goodna bypass will meet the traffic needs of the Ipswich Motorway corridor beyond 2032. Alternatively, the northern bypass would cut the amount of traffic on the Ipswich Motorway by over a half—indeed, two-thirds is the estimated deviation of traffic. Today on the Ipswich Motorway heavy vehicles and regular cars total in excess of 100,000 vehicles. If the bypass is constructed, some two-thirds, or 66,000 vehicles, are going to be taken off the motorway and diverted onto the bypass. I think the overall benefits will be in the interests of
Queenslanders and regular users of the motorway.

In conclusion, I call upon the Howard government to as quickly as possible decide upon the support of funding for the Goodna bypass. I make it very clear to the people of Ryan: I understand the sensitivities of those who are directly affected, but the government has got to make a decision in the interests of the wider community and for the long-term benefits. We cannot simply make a decision that will benefit a small number of people, and I know that some of these residents will not be pleased with my position—(Time expired)

Iraq

Mr BOWEN (Prospect) (4.59 pm)—I want to commence my remarks in this grievance debate with a quote. It is from one of Australia’s most respected diplomats, the former ambassador to the United Nations, a former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and a former special envoy for this Prime Minister, Richard Woolcott. He said:

The United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, having made such a catastrophic foreign and security policy blunder, are now trapped in a dilemma of their own making.

The starting point now must be to acknowledge the original and present errors and to decide on the most appropriate exit strategy from the appalling situation in which we chose to involve ourselves.

My grievance tonight is this government’s foreign policy failings, particularly in relation to Iraq. I raise this issue as a member of parliament who represents more present and former Iraqi citizens than any other member—a member of parliament who, on a daily basis, in his electorate office hears stories of murder, rape and the loss of human rights of citizens in Iraq.

We justified the invasion of Iraq on the basis of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction—weapons which failed to materialise. Then the government justified it by bringing democracy and freedom and prosperity to Iraq. And, as I said, every day in my electorate office I hear tales of people fleeing Iraq—fleeing persecution, fleeing a murderous regime and fleeing intolerance. The reality is, as hard as it is to believe, that these people tell me that the situation was better for them under Hussein’s brutal regime.

This was also the conclusion of the National Intelligence Estimate on the United States, which represents the conclusions of the United States’ 16 different intelligence bodies. They found that the war was clearly creating more terrorists than it was destroying. And it is the view of the United Kingdom’s Chief of the General Staff, Sir Richard Dannatt, who recently said, ‘We should get ourselves out sometime soon because our presence exacerbates the security problems.’ Hugh White, the respected strategic analyst, said:

… don’t pay attention to what the Government says about what is happening in Iraq. When John Howard talks about how vital Iraq is in the war on terrorism, he is simply saying what needs to be said to support … Bush, and to justify the choices he has made to back … Bush’s policies over the past five years.

The reality is that the coalition forces were welcomed when they arrived, but they have worn out their welcome. Despite the arrogant and condescending lectures we get in this House every day from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the lectures that the Australian people receive, this is as big a foreign policy blunder as Australia has ever been involved in. Having made this blunder, the government ask us to take them on trust that they are the only ones who can fix it. The Australian people have woken up to this deception by the government.
This was a policy which was based on fallacies. There was never any evidence that Hussein’s regime was linked to the September 11 atrocities, and we now know that the evidence of weapons of mass destruction was indeed scant. It is a policy whose implementation has been botched. Greg Sheridan has written tellingly about this: ‘Too many civil servants were sacked. The Iraqi army should never have been disbanded and the provisional administration should have been established much quicker. And, most fundamentally, there was little contribution to the rebuilding of infrastructure in Iraq.’ As former US Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld has been quoted, or paraphrased, as saying, ‘We do demolition; we don’t do reconstruction.’ The former citizens of Iraq whom I see in my electorate office on a daily basis and the authors of the letters and the heartfelt emails I receive would find that comment disgusting. The Canadian Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence recently recommended a 42 per cent increase in Canada’s military budget but a 100 per cent increase in their aid budget.

The coalition of the willing now faces a choice. We can continue on the path we are on, which will require a massive escalation of troops which, frankly, is beyond the capacity of the United States and certainly beyond the capacity of Australia and is reminiscent of the views of the Vietnam War that all that is needed is one more heave, one more push and victory will be ours. Or we can help Iraq on its way—we can help it establish an administration which protects the rights of minorities: the Assyrians, Mandaeans and Chaldeans. But the government is unlikely to go down this road because it has invested too much political capital, and a military withdrawal now would be seen as a political retreat by this Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister talks about cutting and running. Last week the Prime Minister of Britain announced that 1,500 troops would be withdrawn in a matter of weeks and a further 1,500 by the end of the year. Prime Minister Howard says this is just a drawdown. Currently, Australia has 1,450 personnel deployed in support of Operation Catalyst, and some of these are used in support of Operation Slipper in Afghanistan. The best estimate is that there are 900 personnel inside Iraq. So at least double and possibly three times the number of Australian personnel in Iraq will be withdrawn by the British government by the end of the year. The Prime Minister says that this is okay but, if Australia were to withdraw our troops, it would be a disaster.

The government’s policy is fundamentally flawed. The government have created the situation where the Christian citizens of Iraq are blamed by some fundamentalist groups for the invasion. As the United States intelligence estimate stated, ‘This war has created more terrorists than it is destroying.’ It would not be so bad if the invasion had not made us less safe, if it had made the world a safer place, but it has not. A fundamentally flawed invasion has been botched, and the government have refused to use their influence to ensure that the situation is improved.

An article by Nicholas Stuart appeared in the Canberra Times last year on 17 October, which I endorse. It said, ‘If Australia is really interested in helping the Iraqi people rather than just providing the terrorists with targets, it is time our Prime Minister started articulating a strategy for leaving Iraq.’

Last week we saw the amazing spectacle of the Minister for Defence comparing the Iraqi invasion with the Kokoda battle. Frankly, the less said about that the better. I think it was an insult to not only the veterans of Kokoda but also the fine Australian service men and women fighting in Iraq.
Each month thousands of Iraqi citizens die in bloody fighting. There are half a million internal refugees. Many more have fled to Syria and Jordan. Basic infrastructure, including schools, has been destroyed. The Johns Hopkins University estimates that 650,000 Iraqis have died since the invasion. Some people question that figure, and I understand there is a debate. But, on any analysis, many more thousands of Iraqis have died than should have and, as I have said, particularly members of minority faiths, such as Christians and Mandaeans, have suffered.

This government has been negligent; however, I acknowledge the support and interest of some of the members opposite. The member for Cook and Senator Payne have been particularly vocal in their support for the cause of the Assyrian community, but the minister has refused to use the government’s influence to do anything about the plight of the Assyrians and others in Iraq.

I was drawn to the findings of a Canadian Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence inquiry which say that the war on terror in Iraq seems to have ‘inspired radicalism within the Muslim community, in places where it was not evident before’. Again, members of my community and their relatives are bearing the brunt of this war. The fact is that there are no signs that this situation is getting better.

There is no monopoly on who is suffering in Iraq. There are Shias suffering, there are Christians suffering, there are Mandaeans suffering and there are people of no faith suffering—there are thousands of people suffering. The war in Iraq is making the world less safe rather than more safe. It is making the people of Iraq less safe rather than more safe. It is time that this government recognised this fact, recognised this reality and articulated an exit strategy for the war in Iraq.

Water

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (5.08 pm)—I want to make a contribution in the grievance debate on the issue of water, the announcement by the Prime Minister on the Murray-Darling Basin and, subsequent to that, the agreement of some state premiers to the proposal last Friday. Mr Deputy Speaker, as you are well aware, we live in a very dry and arid content. Many communities across Australia are suffering from the lack of water—or, as I like to say, the failure of many administrations to plan for the population increases in their communities. Many communities are on very severe water restrictions—including the ACT and right here in Canberra. However, I refer mainly to the south-east corner of Queensland where there has been a massive failure by Labor government after Labor government—since the coalition lost government in 1989, albeit for a very small period of time between 1995 and 1998 when it was returned to government for about 2½ years—to plan for the growth of the south-east corner of Queensland. That is why we are experiencing water shortages and the crisis in water that is gripping the south-east corner of Queensland—particularly Brisbane, where people will move to level 5 water restrictions in early April.

It is an appalling indictment of the Labor government of Queensland. Peter Beattie always finds a reason to divert people’s attention from the crisis that he and his government find themselves in. I can assure you that, as federal members and as Queensland members of the coalition, we will continue to keep the Labor government accountable for its failure to plan for the future needs of Queensland. We have not seen a dam built in Queensland since the coalition government was in power for that 30-odd year period. There has been one extension to the Paradise Dam near Bundaberg. The coalition govern-
ment built Queensland, it built dams and it planned for the future growth that has continued to occur in Queensland.

I turn now to the Murray-Darling Basin. I commend the package that has been put forward by the Prime Minister and the government to address the longstanding problem in the Murray-Darling Basin—that is, the allocation and sharing of water resources in the basin. For many years, Queensland governments were not prepared to join the Murray-Darling Basin Commission. Their view was that Queensland was not the problem in terms of overallocation. I am sure that you, Mr Deputy Speaker Causley, without casting any reflection on the chair, would be aware that New South Wales has been massively overallocated. What is important is not what has happened in the past but how we address this issue now to ensure that the Murray-Darling Basin can be sustained in the future.

The Darling River is fed from many parts of New South Wales and some parts of Queensland. Some of the catchments that the river flows through are in very dry and arid parts of Australia. In fact, the Darling River runs on the edge of Beaudesert. It is no wonder that we see the Darling River in a very sad state at the moment. But that is not the fault of Queensland or necessarily of New South Wales. Any reading of history will tell you that the Darling River has been dry in the past. It is a feature of the Darling River. Paddle-steamers used to be the mode of transport for the wool industry from as far up as Burke in western New South Wales. I am interested to note that the port of Burke is the most inland port in Australia. For many years paddle-steamers used to carry produce up and down the Darling River. But there have been times throughout history when the paddle-steamers could not get up the river or those that did get up the river could not get back for a number of years. That was long before large water allocations were made in New South Wales and before the development of the irrigation industry in Queensland. I believe that it is important that we look back in history because the further you can look back, the further you can look ahead.

Our investment in the Murray-Darling Basin will lead to the sharing of these resources; it will lead to more efficient irrigation schemes; and it will close a lot of the open drains or open channels that distribute water to many of the irrigation areas such as the Murray-Darling MIA in Victoria. The savings from a more efficient mode of transport of water will deliver a huge dividend to the rivers and they will also make more water available for other purposes—perhaps urban or agricultural—in this area. We ought to look at the dividend that will flow from this investment by the government in the Murray-Darling Basin and see it as a great positive.

Our good economic management has put us in a position to invest $10 billion in the Murray-Darling Basin. Ten billion dollars is equivalent to the interest that this government had to pay on the debts which we inherited from the Labor government after their 13 years on the treasury bench. We were paying something like $10½ billion a year to service the interest on the capital borrowed by the former Labor government to pay their bills. We are now in a very strong position to invest the equivalent of the interest paid by the previous Labor government, to bring about coordination and cooperation between the four states which share the Murray-Darling Basin. My own electorate of Maranoa covers almost the entire area of the Murray-Darling Basin in Queensland. I have a very keen interest in the detail of the plan as it will unfold over the next few months in legislation to be brought before this parlia-
ment and complementary legislation in state parliaments.

I want to touch on the proposal by the Queensland Premier to reactivate interest in the Bradfield scheme. Last week before the Premier came to Canberra there was scandal in the state parliament about a former minister, Minister Nuttall, who resigned. It now looks as though he is going to be disgraced by his actions as a minister. Premier Beattie paid for a full-page ad in an open letter to all Australians about directing the Burdekin into the Murray-Darling Basin. In his first statement he said that, if you pump water over the Great Dividing Range and put it into the Thomson River, it will end up in the Murray-Darling Basin. I have news for him. The Thomson River does not run into the Murray-Darling Basin; it is part of the Lake Eyre Basin. If you did lift the water over the Great Dividing Range and let it flow into the Thomson River, you would then have another 1,000 feet of elevation over which to lift that water to get it into the headwaters of the Warrego before it would enter the Murray-Darling Basin.

The Bradfield scheme has been around for a long time and has been considered by many governments on both sides at federal and state levels. Obviously Premier Beattie’s push last week—we have not heard him talk about it this week—was merely a stunt. My concern would be the environmental impact, if it were ever to happen, of bringing that water into the Lake Eyre Basin. We would see the introduction of cane toads into the Lake Eyre Basin. We would see fish species that are not native to the area predating on the yellow bellies and inland fish in the Lake Eyre Basin. Enormous damage could be done by the transfer of weeds from the coastal river streams to the Lake Eyre Basin.

(Time expired)

Child Care

Ms HALL (Shortland) (5.18 pm)—The Howard government has failed and is still failing hardworking families, families with children, families who work long hours to support their children and to pay their mortgages, families who are finding it harder and harder to afford the child care that is vital if they are to maintain their employment. Employment has become even more important with the ever-rising interest rates and increasing repayments that the Howard government has saddled Australian families with. Last Thursday night, I met with a group of parents at one of my local privately owned childcare centres. I would like to raise their concerns and the concerns of the centre owner in the House today. These are parents who want to contribute to Australia. They said to me, ‘The Treasurer wants us to have one child for each of us and one for the country,’ but they are finding it so hard to afford child care for the children they have at the moment that they do not see how they will be able to afford one child to replace each of them let alone one child for the country.

I would like to raise the issues that the parents raised with me and then some of the concerns raised by the owner. All the parents said that the system is not user-friendly. The childcare centre owner also pointed out that it was not user-friendly for her. So we have a system which does not work for the parents and does not work for the owner-operator of the childcare centre. Many families opt to take their 30 per cent rebate at the end of the year because they are frightened of incurring a debt. I will touch on some of the stories of the families as I make my contribution to the grievance debate. They need that rebate on a weekly basis but they are so terrified of the process that they leave it to the end of the year. Childcare fees for two days a week are $220 for one child and $600 for five days a
week. One of the parents said to me, ‘It’s like
paying a second mortgage.’ Here we have
parents working to pay their mortgage but in
doing so they are incurring a second mort-
gage along the way. Some of the parents
modify their working hours so that they can
work one day less per week and will do an
overlap so they can reduce their childcare
fees by a day, paying for four days instead of
five, making it more affordable.

The owner-operator of a childcare centre
raised with me the point that the subsidy for
the under twos should be much higher be-
cause of the costs associated with the provi-
sion of care. There must be one staff member
for every five children under two, whereas
for the over twos it is one staff member for
every 10 children. There is a much higher
cost for the under twos yet the subsidy does
not reflect this.

The owner also raised with me the empha-
sis on getting single parents back into the
workforce through the government’s Welfare
to Work program—but the system in place
works against parents who are trying to do
so. The training institutes operate over a cal-
endar year, but Centrelink projects over a
financial year. The owner raised with me the
case of a parent whose children attend the
centre and who incurred a debt. She was a
single parent who was receiving welfare. She
got to TAFE to study and get some qualifi-
cations, and after six months she managed to
ger a job and was earning $55,000 a year.
Because of the break-up and how the calcu-
lations were done, she was awarded an an-
nual wage of $45,000 when in fact for the
first half of that year she had been receiving
considerably less. What was the end result?
It was a $560 debt. This caused her a lot of
angst and hardship. It was very difficult for
her and she had to repay that money to Cen-
trelink.

The retrospective nature of the calcula-
tions was also raised; families need to be
fortune tellers to be able to say what will
happen over a 12-month period. Many cen-
tres, along with parents, do not understand
the existing system. It is complex, confusing
and ripe for people to make a mistake; it is
ripe for the incurring of debts. The appeals
process is intimidating and the burden of
proof is entirely on families, even if Centre-
link gets it wrong. Centrelink is very quick to
issue debt collection letters, and this really
causes problems for families.

I would like to raise three case studies.
The first is a family with a mother who
works two days a week and a father who
works full time. They do not claim childcare
benefit, not because they are ineligible for it
but simply because they do not want to incur
a debt. The second case study relates to a
family in which the father worked and re-
ceived a wage, but he then used his initiative
and started a business. The business he
owned performed better than expected and
he earned more income than he had pre-
dicted. What was the result? He received a
Centrelink debt notice. He agreed on a re-
payment plan, but throughout the whole
process he felt as though he had done some-
thing illegal. He was made to feel that he
was defrauding the government. I do not
think that is the way we should reward a per-
son who uses their initiative to start up their
own small business, who employs other peo-
ple and who creates opportunities in the
community.

The third case is a family in which the
mother returned to work after maternity
leave. They received a Centrelink notice ad-
vising of a $90 debt. She paid the debt but
was then advised by Centrelink that she had
not incurred a debt and they refunded her the
$90. A week or so later she received a notice
from Centrelink advising her that she had a
$400 debt, so she contacted Centrelink. At
the same time Centrelink had withheld $400 from the childcare centre owner. They had recovered the $400 debt but they were still pursuing the mother. The childcare centre owner is a very proactive woman who cares about the parents of the children who attend her centre. She got in there and negotiated with Centrelink, and before Christmas she thought she had straightened it all out. But in January the mother received another debt collection notice from Centrelink. The matter was finally resolved after much angst suffered by all parties. And guess what? The mother owed the $90 that she had paid in the first instance. This is a system that is supposed to be working, but I do not believe that anyone in this parliament would believe that it is a system working to benefit anyone.

I would like to share with members the situation of another family. The family was earning $48,000 a year, with a 98.97 per cent childcare benefit for two days. The mum had a job that paid $34,000 and dad had a $2,000 pay increase in December, and the family ended up with a debt of $630. This system does not work.

The government is bringing in a new childcare management system, but this system will make it harder for childcare centre owners such as the person I have been talking about, who cares about her families enough to actually get in there and advocate on their behalf. This new system is supposed to reduce red tape but in fact it will be more bureaucratic. There has been little or no community consultation. What this new system will do is remove transparency from the system. It has been put to me, and I am convinced, that this is a system that will not work. (Time expired)

Bruce Highway

Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (5.28 pm)—Most of us in this place are familiar with the opportunism of the Labor Party and their willingness to do and say anything if they think there is a vote in it, particularly in an election year. These antics were on display again last week in my electorate of Leichhardt when the member for Lilley was in town making all sorts of promises about flood-proofing the Bruce Highway. I suggest that the closest the member for Lilley has come to the Bruce Highway is on the approach into Cairns, when he is looking out of the window of the aircraft as he flies into our city for the day. In any case, the member for Lilley promised to jointly fund, with the state government, a multimillion dollar upgrade of the flood-prone Bruce Highway between Cairns and Townsville.

So the member for Lilley is going to pick up the phone and contact the minister for main roads, Mr Lucas, in a new-found spirit of goodwill and cooperation between the states and the Commonwealth, and he is going to agree to jointly fund the multimillion dollar project to upgrade our national highway. It really sounds too good to be true. And, of course, it is too good to be true. Perhaps the member for Lilley knows something that we do not, because it was only a couple of days before his visit that the Queensland transport minister, Paul Lucas, stated quite clearly in my local paper, the Cairns Post:

The Queensland government doesn’t pay the bills on the Bruce Highway, it is the Federal Government who decides what to build, when to build it and to what standard—that is, the federal government is responsible for federal highways. From what I can understand, that is fact. I am surprised that the member for Lilley, given his new-found interest in these sorts of issues, is not aware of the fundamentals.

However, it is not only the member for Lilley who is becoming confused. We know that the Queensland transport minister also has a tendency toward political opportunism
and sending mixed messages when it comes to the Bruce Highway. Only a fortnight ago he was boldly proclaiming on the front page of our local paper, the Cairns Post, that the bridges across the Mulgrave River near Gordonvale and the Seymour River north of Ingham would be fast-tracked, and work could start as early as December. That is great news. But the contradiction did not end there. Later, in the same article, on 14 February, a state government spokesman was quoted as saying that, if the federal money is received for the Mulgrave River bridge, construction could start before the end of the year. A financial request to the federal government would be prepared, according to the spokesman.

When? It was not last week. It has not been this month. It will not be next month. It will not be before the federal budget. Apparently, a financial request will be presented to the federal government in June. The transport minister released the plans in the local paper in February—he got a front-page story on it—but he is not going to bother letting the federal government know what he has in mind and what the costs associated with this project are going to be before June. It begs the question: is this the behaviour of a government that is genuinely committed to getting a good result for the people of Far North Queensland? The reality is that the Queensland transport minister is having difficulty spending the money he already has to upgrade the Bruce Highway.

The problem for the member for Lilley is that he is three years too late in his commitment. This government made a commitment in 2004 to move towards upgrading the flood-prone section of the Bruce Highway. Initially, we had to quarantine some $80 million from the AusLink funding to kick-start the most problematic section, which was the crossing of the Tully River flood plain. On quarantining that money, we were informed that this particular section was considered a low priority by the state Labor government and, consequently, not even a basic level of planning had been done. We then had to commit another $1.5 million to fast-track the planning and the design of this project.

Then, in a genuine endeavour to get the job done, an additional $60 million was committed to the Tully flood eradication project in the 2006 budget, even though the state government to this day has not finalised planning works and costings—and I suspect that the cost will continue to grow. Also, because of the flood impact of Cyclone Larry, an extra injection of $220 million was committed in the 2006 budget to address other flooding flashpoints between Townsville and Cairns. Again, this was done without any plans or costings by the state government. So, to date, the Australian government has deposited a total of $348 million into the Queensland government’s bank account, where I understand it is still sitting earning interest because the money, or the majority of it, is yet to be spent.

Little did the Treasurer know when he signed off on this commitment in the federal budget last May that, almost one year later, all we would have to show for our investment would be a new set of traffic lights in Innisfail and some relatively minor remedial work at Mirriwinni and at Goondi Bend near Innisfail. With all due respect, I am not sure what a set of traffic lights is going to do to alleviate flooding on the Bruce Highway.

Advice from the Queensland Department of Main Roads is that construction of the flooding improvements across the Tully and the Murray River flood plain is due to start in about April and, it is hoped, will be finished by the end of 2009.

The ability to speed up these works rests solely with the Queensland government. The Queensland government manages this pro-
ject on behalf of the Australian government. So this is not a case of buck-passing, but is the reality of roads administration in Australia. If the Queensland government feels it is not up to the job, it should refund the money and let us find somebody else who is. The new Liberal candidate for Leichhardt, Charlie McKillop, came up with a great idea recently, I thought. She noted that there are five local authorities affected by this section of the highway and, between them, she is confident that they would have the wherewithal to manage this project and to put it out via a competitive tender process.

If the Queensland government wanted the job, RoadTek, which is their road building operation, could bid for the contract and demonstrate how it would meet certain performance criteria, including clear time frames and budgets. I think that idea has a lot of merit in it and is something that we really need to investigate in the future, given the outstanding success that we see in our Roads to Recovery program, in which councils have certainly demonstrated their ability to not only build roads but build them in a timely manner, of a very high quality and, of course, well and truly to budget. We have seen that more recently in Investing in Our Schools, so I think this is something that needs to be considered.

The Bruce Highway is the last section of our national highway to be cut annually by flooding, and Cairns is the only regional city of more than 130,000 residents to be isolated by floodwaters on an average of eight days a year. For example, we had rain earlier this month and within 24 hours the highway was again cut near Townsville. The money is sitting in the bank and the money needs to be spent. If there are plans for future works, they should be handed over to the Commonwealth immediately for consideration, not bandied around in the local papers in an effort to generate some front-page news for the state Minister for Transport and Main Roads and then handed over some months later to the federal government for costing.

It is time to end these games. The people of Far North Queensland deserve better than the deception and cheap political point-scoring of the Labor state government—on this occasion, aided and abetted by the member for Lilley, who sees himself as the next Treasurer in a federal Labor government but in actual fact highlights his total lack of understanding and interest in serious regional issues and demonstrates why he should never be allowed to get his hands on Australia’s one trillion dollar economy. We also need additional funding for the Peninsula Development Road, which runs from Cairns through Cape York, and I hope the state government will provide the information to allow us to access that as soon as possible.

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

   That grievances be noted.

Question agreed to.

AUSTRALIAN SECURITIES AND INVESTMENTS COMMISSION AMENDMENT (AUDIT INSPECTION) BILL 2007

CUSTOMS TARIFF AMENDMENT (INCORPORATION OF PROPOSALS) BILL 2007

LAW AND JUSTICE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (MARKING OF PLASTIC EXPLOSIVES) BILL 2007

TAX LAWS AMENDMENT (2006 MEASURES No. 6) BILL 2007

CUSTOMS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (BORDER COMPLIANCE AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2007
EXPORT FINANCE AND INSURANCE CORPORATION AMENDMENT BILL 2007

MIGRATION AMENDMENT (EMPLOYER SANCTIONS) BILL 2007

Assent

Messages from the Governor-General reported informing the House of assent to the bills.

COMMITTEES

Procedure Committee

Report: Presiding Officer’s Response

Mr ROBB (Goldstein—Minister for Vocational and Further Education) (5.39 pm)—by leave—I move:

That the House take note of the following document: Procedure—Standing Committee—Report—Media coverage of House proceedings, including the Chamber, Main Committee and committees [Final report], October 2005—Speaker’s response.

Debate (on motion by Mr Garrett) adjourned.

MAIN COMMITTEE

Procedure Committee

Reference

Mr ROBB (Goldstein—Minister for Vocational and Further Education) (5.40 pm)—by leave—I move:

That the order of the day be referred to the Main Committee for debate.

Question agreed to.

EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (WELFARE TO WORK AND VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES) BILL 2006

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 15 February, on motion by Dr Stone:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Gorton) (5.41 pm)—I would like to continue where I left off on 15 February in commenting upon the Employment and Workplace Relations Legislation Amendment (Welfare to Work and Vocational Rehabilitation Services) Bill 2006. As I indicated at the time, the opposition will not support the bill as it stands and will move amendments to improve the bill. Labor is strongly committed to welfare reform. I have said that in this debate already, and indeed other contributors to the debate have reinforced that particular view. But we are concerned that the government is adopting a punitive approach, and that is exemplified by its Welfare to Work changes. It is true to say that most of this bill represents a continuation of those changes, it is short on detail and will have many unfortunate consequences for welfare recipients. I am afraid to say that that has been a feature of the government’s Welfare to Work legislation as a whole.

I did manage to introduce in my earlier contribution references to the pensioner education supplement. I indicated to the House that pensioners who study or train in an approved course can access the pensioner education supplement; however, recipients of allowances such as Newstart or youth allowance cannot. Under these changes, people who move from disability support pension or parenting payment to Newstart or youth allowance were supposed to be able to retain the PES until they completed their current course of study. However, this bill clarifies that people who claimed DSP between 11 May 2005 and 30 June 2006 who qualified for the PES and who moved to an allowance will only be able to continue to access the PES if they no longer qualify for DSP as a result of their first DSP review after 1 July last year.

The removal of PES for specified recipients reduces support for education for these
groups. This is contrary to the government’s indication in 2005 that PES recipients would retain this entitlement for the remainder of their course notwithstanding the welfare changes. Labor has always argued that restricting the PES so that Welfare to Work candidates cannot access it is short-sighted and will do nothing to alleviate skills shortages. The sector agrees that this is a retrograde step and argues that this is inconsistent with the government’s previous commitments. Labor proposes to extend the pensioner education supplementary to all Welfare to Work candidates.

The Welfare to Work changes include changes to compliance such that certain breaches incur a penalty of eight weeks non-payment of income support. Some people who face this penalty may be able to access financial case management in certain restrictive circumstances. These arrangements are entirely discretionary and are not guaranteed in legislation. While the breaches may be contested through the appeals process, decisions regarding financial case management cannot. The bill, however, provides that overpayments can be recovered by deductions from future income support payments. We have a situation where there is legislation for the recovery of overpayments but no legislation for the payments themselves. The lack of an appeals process is indeed also unsatisfactory.

There are obviously some cases where it is entirely justified to recover payments; Labor is not opposed to debt recovery in principle. Centrelink needs appropriate recovery powers, but such powers should be subject to transparent guidelines and review mechanisms. The bill fails to provide these.

In conclusion, Labor is not opposed in principle to the idea that the provision of this service could be contestable; however, this should be guided by considerations of the public interest and on the condition that appropriate safeguards and quality control mechanisms are in place. The framework being applied by the government does not meet these requirements—in particular, the loss of parliamentary oversight of these safeguards is unacceptable.

Dr STONE (Murray—Minister for Workforce Participation) (5.45 pm)—in reply—In summing up this debate on the Employment and Workplace Relations Legislation Amendment (Welfare to Work and Vocational Rehabilitation Services) Bill 2006 I would like to thank all members for their contributions. In 2002 this government brought forward the Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Disability Reform) Bill 2002, the Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Disability Reform) Bill (No. 2) 2002 and the Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Disability Reform) Bill (No. 2) 2002 [No. 2]. These bills aimed to reform the legacy of Labor’s outdated welfare arrangements. These arrangements consigned disadvantaged Australians to a life on welfare rather than assisting them back into work. Labor opposed the reforms then and voted them down. We wanted to assist disabled Australians to rehabilitate and, if necessary, to upskill them so they could return to work if they had at least a part-time capacity, but the opposition said no. Labor wanted to keep the disabled on pensions until they reached old age. They no doubt thought that their time-honoured practice would reduce their unemployment statistics.

The then shadow minister for family and community services and now shadow Treasurer, the member for Lilley, said at the time that our disability pension reforms were ‘an unprecedented attack on the 3.1 million Australians who have a disability’, but he then went on to say in the same speech:
This country and this society desperately need real welfare reform. We need a community, a whole of government and a political commitment to welfare reform.

Labor has opposed every major employment and welfare reform undertaken by this government, including the introduction of the highly successful Job Network and Work for the Dole, the tackling of Indigenous welfare dependency, the introduction of mutual obligation, helping parents on pensions back to work, and disability support pension reforms. These later changes have been rolled into our highly successful and acclaimed Welfare to Work reforms, which we were able to pass into legislation some 18 months ago.

These amendments to the Disability Services Act 1986 are about increasing choice and diversity for people who need rehabilitation to help them get back into a job. Under Labor, workers left behind by structural change and damaged by years of hard work were simply consigned to an alienated life on the disability support pension. Labor made no genuine effort to vocationally rehabilitate or re-skill these individuals to help them to remain in the workplace, or to return according to their capacity. The John Howard-led government recognises the fundamental importance of vocational rehabilitation for an injured or otherwise disabled worker. We aim to assist the job seeker to understand, compensate for or manage their injury, disability or health condition so they can rebuild their capacity to work. We aim to help them to avoid re-injury and, most importantly of all, to find and retain meaningful employment.

From listening to the contributions from a number of speakers from the opposition, it is clear that the Labor Party, despite its rhetoric, still does not support real, results based reforms to help people to move from welfare to work. Labor would have you believe that this bill is about penalising people who do not have a capacity to work, such as people with permanent and severe disabilities and parents with very young children. Of course, that is not the case. The member for Lalor said in her contribution:

... welfare changes have reduced the financial rewards from work and make it harder for people to get the education or training that they need to get a job.

In fact, the government’s Welfare to Work policy delivers a substantial investment in training and employment services and supports people who can work at least part-time through providing the right incentives to move from welfare to work.

There will always be a safety net for those who cannot work due to a disability or because they have responsibility for children under school age or have some other condition which simply makes it impossible for them to sustain themselves in our economy. Every caring government has aimed to keep a safety net well and truly in place.

With an unemployment rate of some 4.5 per cent, a booming economy and an ageing population, there has never been a better time to assist people on welfare to get real jobs. Under our reforms, people are not on their own in their search for work. We have a comprehensive suite of services, including vocational rehabilitation services that offer people opportunities to improve their skills, to participate in work experience and to undertake training. In the last year we have seen a rise in the number of people getting jobs. The Job Network made a difference to almost 650,000 people by placing them in work—50,000 of this group were parents on pensions, 47,000 were Indigenous Australians and 81,700 were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Speakers on the other side talk of obligation and opportunity but give the Australian people little insight into how their alternative policies would deliver this. This govern-
ment’s comprehensive suite of services and supports has proven that it delivers jobs; in fact, in the last six months, more jobs have been delivered to the unemployed—those previously on welfare—than was managed in the last six years under Labor’s employment services strategies. When the opposition was in government, unemployment rates were in double digits.

This bill will provide choice for people who want and need help to return to work. The Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service currently assists this group. This bill will open up the vocational rehabilitation market to a range of organisations that specialise in supporting people to get back into work and will develop relationships with employers who are prepared to give these people a go.

I would like to highlight the fact that all of the vocational rehabilitation providers appointed through the new tender will have to be suitably qualified and experienced in delivering tailored and appropriate services to clients, based on their individual needs. The quality of all services delivered by providers of Australian government employment services are closely monitored by the department, and any complaints are taken very seriously.

The proposed amendment has limited application as the vocational rehabilitation contracts will not come into operation until 1 July 2007. During the period covered by item 17 of the bill, both houses will continue to have the ability to disallow any vocational rehabilitation services guidelines, consistent with the Legislative Instruments Act 2003. People who have an ongoing eligibility for the disability support pension or parenting payment will continue to receive the pensioner education supplement. Those who most need it will have that access.

There are also a range of quality assurance and compliance measures. For example, new providers of vocational rehabilitation services will be subject to a range of quality assurance measures. The current tender requires tenderers to lift the qualifications of their organisation and staff. This will be taken into account in assessing successful tenderers, and all vocational rehabilitation services will be subject to regular compliance checks and measures. There are comprehensive contractual requirements that specify the standards of the services to be observed. These include a service guarantee, code of practice and performance reviews. Providers must also comply with the legislative disability service standards, which set out a range of standards that must be met in the provision of a rehabilitation program. Compliance with these standards is independently assessed. Breaches of these contractual or legislative standards can result in a range of penalties being applied. An independent complaints mechanism is in place and is available to participants who may be dissatisfied with any aspect of the service that they are receiving.

I commend this bill to the House. It is an important part of our welfare reforms for some of the most disadvantaged people in this country.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Message from the Governor-General recommending appropriation announced.

Consideration in Detail

Bill—by leave—taken as a whole.

Ms GILLARD (Lalor) (5.54 pm)—by leave—I move opposition amendments (1) to (14) together:

(1) Schedule 1, item 19, page 7 (lines 22–23), omit the item

(2) Schedule 1, item 20, page 7 (lines 24–25), omit the item
(3) Schedule 1, item 21, page 7 (lines 26-30), omit the item
(4) Schedule 1, item 22, page 8 (lines 1–3), omit the item
(5) Schedule 1, item 23, page 8 (lines 4-5), omit the item
(6) Schedule 1, item 24, page 8 (lines 6-8), omit the item
(7) Schedule 1, item 25, page 8 (lines 9-11), omit the item
(8) Schedule 1, item 26, page 8 (lines 12-13), omit the item
(9) Schedule 1, item 27, page 8 (lines 14-15), omit the item
(10) Schedule 1, item 28, page 8 (lines 16-21), omit the item
(11) Schedule 1, item 29, page 8 (lines 22-24), omit the item
(12) Schedule 1, item 30, page 8 (lines 25-26), omit the item
(13) Schedule 1, item 31, page 8 (lines 27-29), omit the item
(14) Schedule 1, item 32, page 9 (lines 1-3), omit the item

When I spoke in the second reading debate on this bill on 14 February, I raised a number of concerns about whether this bill prevents parliament from having proper access to disallowance guidelines relating to vocational rehabilitation services. I indicated that my counterpart in the Senate, Senator Wong, had written to the Minister for Workforce Participation requesting clarification on the question. I am pleased to indicate that, on the day of my speech on the second reading, Senator Wong did receive a reply from the minister indicating that both houses will continue to have the ability to disallow any guidelines relating to vocational rehabilitation services, consistent with the Legislative Instruments Act 2003. We accept the minister’s assurances in response to our concerns.

Unfortunately, other concerns remain. This bill restricts access to the pensioner education supplement by removing the ability of some people moving from the disability support pension to Newstart or youth allowance to retain their pensioner education supplement until they complete their current course of study. This measure is at odds with the principle of increasing access to education and training to improve employability, but it is entirely consistent with the Howard government’s approach of moving people from welfare to work by placing them on lower payments and reducing access to training.

Labor’s amendments would remedy this defect in the bill. Labor urges the government to seriously consider these amendments rather than, as we would expect with a government that so often plays politics, simply rejecting these amendments out of hand because they have been moved by the opposition. The proposition is simple: pensioners who study or train in an approved course can access the pensioner education supplement, while recipients of allowances, such as Newstart or youth allowance, cannot. Under the Welfare to Work changes, people who move from the disability support pension or parenting payment to Newstart or youth allowance were supposed to be able to retain their pensioner education supplement until they completed their current course of study. Then this bill comes along and breaks that promise.

This bill changes the arrangements for the so-called ‘transitional group’ of disability support pension recipients—that is, those who were granted the DSP after the May 2005 Welfare to Work announcement and before the July 2006 implementation date. If these people are transferred from the disability support pension to Newstart or youth allowance after a second or subsequent post 1 July 2006 review, they will lose their eligibility for the pensioner education supplement and will effectively not be considered part of the transitional group. This means that they
will be able to continue to access the pensioner education supplement only if they no longer qualify for DSP as a result of their first DSP review after 1 July 2006. The very fact that explaining that is an enormously complicated proposition indicates that there are a group that are going to be disadvantaged and for no good reason. Indeed, we would say that it defies explanation.

The Howard government, when we have asked them to justify the very perverse effect of this legislation, have simply claimed that it is a clarification of existing rules. The ordinary meaning of the word ‘clarification’ is to make things clearer, and that is the last thing that is achieved by this set of arrangements in relation to the pensioner education supplement. Labor has consistently argued that restricting the pensioner education supplement to stop Welfare to Work candidates from getting it is short-sighted and against the national interest of meeting skills shortages. We urge the government to support Labor’s detailed amendments that have been moved at this stage of the debate to remedy this defect in this bill, particularly when the only argument in favour is a clarification. (Time expired)

Dr STONE (Murray—Minister for Workforce Participation) (6.00 pm)—In responding to the amendments moved by the member for Lalor, let me say that eligibility for the pensioner education supplement, or PES as it is commonly called, was extended through special provisions to the disability support pension transition group—people who claimed and were granted DSP between 11 May 2005 and 30 June 2006 and who transferred to Newstart or youth allowance as part of the Welfare to Work reforms.

The Employment and Workplace Relations Legislation Amendment (Welfare to Work and Vocational Rehabilitation Services) Bill 2006 clarifies who is in the disability support pension transition group for the purpose of receiving the pensioner education supplement. Under Welfare to Work, people in the DSP transition group who are receiving the pensioner education supplement are able to retain their entitlement to PES for the duration of their course even if they do move on to Newstart or youth allowance. PES is not generally available to people on Newstart or youth allowance. There are lots of other supports for training, as you would be aware, for those categories. This special provision for the DSP transition group enables completion of a course already commenced.

The Australian government did not intend that people would retain DSP transition group status indefinitely. It was intended that people would no longer be in the transition group once they had had their first review after 1 July 2006 under the new DSP rules. People in the transition group who were receiving the pensioner education supplement are able to continue receiving PES for the duration of their approved course even if they lose eligibility for the disability support pension after their first review after 1 July 2006. This might happen, for example, if they have their full work capacity back.

Allowing people to retain DSP transition group status indefinitely would, we believe, discriminate against other DSP recipients receiving the pensioner education supplement who do not receive the benefit of retaining their entitlement to the pensioner education supplement if they lose their entitlement to DSP. On that basis, we do not believe the amendments are necessary, and I commend the original bill to the House.

Ms GILLARD (Lalor) (6.02 pm)—If that is the minister when she is clarifying, I would hate to see her when she is obfuscating. I ask the Minister for Workforce Participation to answer the following questions
about this measure which are dealt with in Labor’s amendments. Firstly, can the minister explain the government’s rationale for removing access to the pensioner education supplement for the group that I have identified? Secondly, why has the government abandoned its commitment to provide the pensioner education supplement to all Welfare to Work candidates for the duration of their course if they began receiving the pensioner education supplement before they moved from a pension to an allowance? When did the government decide that this particular group, who have been moved off the disability support pension after a second or subsequent review, should be singled out?

We believe that we are entitled to know—and indeed the Australian people are entitled to know—how this measure is consistent with the skilling of our workforce to meet current and future labour requirements and with the stated objective of the pensioner education supplement which, according to Centrelink, is supposed ‘to assist people with study to increase their chances of finding work’. That is the stated objective of the pensioner education supplement. How is the measure in this bill, which is removing access to it for a defined group, consistent with that aim? What evidence does the Howard government have that restricting access to the pensioner education supplement for these people will improve their chance of getting a job?

Why are people with a disability being penalised by the Howard government? What other measures will be available to these people to help them meet the ongoing costs of their education? How much is the government going to save through this measure?

Dr Emerson—Good question.

Ms GILLARD—I am being assured by the member for Rankin that that is a good question—a question about the money. How much is being saved through this measure? Has any analysis been undertaken to establish the costs to current pensioner education support recipients and the likelihood of those in this cohort dropping out of their courses due to losing the pensioner education supplement? Wouldn’t that be a track record to be proud of as a government—causing people to drop out of their courses due to costs? Where this payment would assist disabled recipients with the costs of attending real training or education courses, what other measures or programs will be available to them to assist with these costs? It is not my intention to delay the House on this matter, but it is my intention to say that the opposition is seriously seeking answers to these questions, which ought to be available to the House before the House votes on the amendments standing in my name.

Dr STONE (Murray—Minister for Workforce Participation) (6.05 pm)—I need to, I suppose, repeat to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition that, under Welfare to Work, people in the DSP transition group who are receiving the pensioner education supplement, or PES, are able to retain their entitlement to PES for the duration of their course even if they move onto Newstart or youth allowance. If they were receiving PES, they are able to continue with that course even if they lose eligibility for DSP after their first review.

We in the John Howard-led government have the view that the most significant thing you can do for someone is get them back into the workforce. Under Labor we saw, for decade after decade, a focus on putting people into mickey mouse courses—certificates II, III and IV; an endless churning of people into training after training experience—which never gave them work experience and which often left them deeply distressed by knock-back after knock-back in the workplace. We have an enormous amount of domestic and
international research that shows that the most critical thing for someone who has been out of the workforce for quite a period of time—whether for mental health conditions or something like a musculoskeletal condition—is returning to the workplace. And, if they do need further training, perhaps to make up for lost time, the most effective training is, in fact, on the job, surrounded by their colleagues and supported by the team.

Dr Emerson interjecting—

Dr STONE—The member for Rankin suggests that we are talking about abolishing PES. That is the sort of reaction we would expect from the opposition. We are, of course, retaining PES. We see it as vitally important. But we see it as even more important that, after you have completed your course, you are helped to be placed into a position of work—indeed, you may be able to be placed immediately back into the workplace. In terms of your own morale, your sense of wellbeing, your ability to be rapidly vocationally rehabilitated, the most significant thing is to return to the place of work. It may be part time initially, if that is what your capacity only allows you in the first instance. We know that it keeps your employment statistics down if you skim people off and put them into endless back-to-back courses, particularly if you can call them full-time study, but we are not into simply churning people endlessly through TAFE courses; what we are about is giving Australians a real chance to be independent of welfare if they are of working age.

We know that work, first and foremost, has proven again and again to be the best way to assist individuals and their families back into a life where they are no longer stigmatised, alienated or indeed depressed because they cannot earn the sort of income that they wish to earn to fully participate in Australian society. We know that intergenerational welfare dependency is not a benign experience: children in a household where there is no breadwinner are four times more likely to become welfare dependent themselves and never know work. We are determined to break the cycle of intergenerational welfare dependency. Unfortunately in Australia there are over 700,000 people on disability support pensions who may never know the world of work. A lot of them have been grandfathered. We are determined that those who can return to the workplace will be assisted to do so, with vocational rehabilitation that focuses on their capacity to fully participate in the Australian economy. That is why your focus on and obsession with training, we think, is not in the best interests of all Australians.

Dr Emerson—We just heard in question time how important training is.

Dr STONE—Training is of critical importance, and so is upskilling, but it is not an alternative to finding a job and re-entering the workforce. What we have in Australia right now is an economy that is looking for people to rejoin the workforce—and to be upskilled once they are in the workplace if that is what they need. We do not believe it is a kindness to keep people endlessly in back-to-back courses if when they go to be recruited into a workplace they get told, ‘Sorry, you have no recent work experience. You’ve been out of the workforce for a very long time.’ So I am very confident that the bill we have before the House is in the very best interests of Australians with a disability. We aim to make sure that all Australians have a fair go. They will continue, as I said before, to have access to the pensioner education supplement and we will make sure that they have a decent go in this country. (Time expired)

Question put:
That the amendments (Ms Gillard’s) be agreed to.

The House divided.  [6.14 pm]
(The Deputy Speaker—Mr Barresi)

Ayes……………  57  
Noes……………  77  
Majority…………  20

AYES
Adams, D.G.H. Albanese, A.N.  
Andren, P.J. Beazley, K.C.  
Bevis, A.R. Bird, S.  
Bowen, C. Burke, A.E.  
Burke, A.S. Byrne, A.M.  
Crean, S.F. Danby, M. *  
Edwards, G.J. Elliot, J.  
Ellis, A.L. Ellis, K.  
Emerson, C.A. Ferguson, L.D.T.  
Ferguson, M.J. Garrett, P.  
Georganas, S. George, J.  
Gibbons, S.W. Gillard, J.E.  
Grierson, S.J. Griffin, A.P.  
Hall, J.G. * Garrett, P.  
Hoare, K.J. George, J.  
Katter, R.C. Kerr, D.J.C.  
King, C.F. Lawrence, C.M.  
Livermore, K.F. Macklin, J.L.  
McClelland, R.B. McMillan, R.F.  
Melham, D. Murphy, J.P.  
O’Connor, B.P. O’Connor, G.M.  
Owens, J. Piibe, T.  
Price, L.R.S. Quick, H.V.  
Ripoll, B.F. Rix, J.  
Sawford, R.W. Sercombe, R.C.G.  
Smith, S.F. Snowdon, W.E.  
Swan, W.M. Tanner, L.  
Thomson, K.J. Vanvakinou, M.  
Wilkie, K.

NOES
Abbott, A.J. Anderson, J.D.  
Andrews, K.J. Bailey, F.E.  
Baird, B.G. Baker, M.  
Baldwin, R.C. Bartlett, K.J.  
Bishop, B.K. Bishop, J.I.  
Broadbent, R. Brough, M.T.  
Cadman, A.G. Causley, I.R.  
Ciobo, S.M. Costello, P.H.  
Draper, P. Dutton, P.C.  
Entsch, W.G. Farmer, P.F.  
Fawcett, D. Ferguson, M.D.  
Forrest, J.A. Gambaro, T.  
Gash, J. Georgiou, P.  
Haase, B.W. Hardgrave, G.D.  
Hartsonyer, L. Henry, S.  
Hockey, J.B. Hull, K.E. *  
Hunt, G.A. Jensen, D.  
Johnson, M.A. Jull, D.F.  
Keenan, M. Kelly, D.M.  
Laming, A. Lindsay, P.J.  
Lloyd, J.E. Macfarlane, I.E.  
Markus, L. May, M.A.  
McArthur, S. * McGauran, P.J.  
Mirabella, S. Moflan, J.E.  
Nairn, G.R. Nelson, B.J.  
Neville, P.C. Pearce, C.J.  
Prosser, G.D. Pyne, C.  
Randall, D.J. Richardson, K.  
Robb, A. Ruddock, P.M.  
Schultz, A. Scott, B.C.  
Secker, P.D. Slipper, P.N.  
Smith, A.D.H. Somllyay, A.M.  
Southcott, A.J. Stone, S.N.  
Thompson, C.P. Ticehurst, K.V.  
Tollner, D.W. Turnbull, M.  
Vaile, M.A.J. Vale, D.S.  
Vasta, R. Wakelin, B.H.  
Washer, M.J. Windsor, A.H.C.  
Wood, J.

* denotes teller

Question negatived.

Bill agreed to.

Third Reading

Dr STONE (Murray—Minister for Workforce Participation) (6.20 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.

HUMAN SERVICES (ENHANCED SERVICE DELIVERY) BILL 2007

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 7 February, on motion by Mr Brough:

That this bill be now read a second time.
Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney) (6.21 pm)—
The Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007 relates to the government’s plan to spend almost $1.2 billion over four years on an access card which will replace the Medicare card, the pharmaceutical benefits concession cards and all Centrelink cards. The government claims that the card will: firstly, make it easier for people to deal with government agencies; secondly, speed up payments and rebates; thirdly, reduce fraud; and, fourthly, replace up to 17 other cards.

Of course, these are all good aims. If this legislation delivered on these aims, we would not have difficulty supporting it. But without significant change, this legislation does not deliver on those goals. In addition, it will have a number of other significant negative impacts. Our concerns about this legislation are not, for the most part, with the technology proposed but rather with the systems designed to collect, store, maintain and transfer information on the card and on the database which backs it up.

Labor supports the use of smartcard technology in service delivery. We support the aim of improving service delivery in Medicare and social security and the aim of reducing fraud, but we do not support this proposal because it is full of problems. We will not support a half-baked proposal that simply reproduces identity fraud, that allows a whole lot of personal information on every Australian to be collected and stored without adequate protection and that potentially costs the taxpayer more than it saves.

The first claim made by the government is that the access card will make it easier for people to deal with government agencies. I think it is worth saying that the card will make it a little easier for some people to deal with government agencies but only in that users will not need to notify several government departments if, for example, they change their address. The central register will have the address details changed and that will notify other government departments. But this is a very small change compared with the other improvements that it is possible for the government to make when it comes to service delivery for citizens.

For example, anyone who has seen the body of Centrelink paperwork will know that Centrelink claim forms are far too long and repetitive. Information is required to be provided over and over again—even information that does not change, like the dates of birth, names and ages of children, and so on. Australians should not have to give their income estimates separately every time they apply for a different benefit. Parents will know that they continually get a barrage of letters in the mail querying details of child-care use, of income and of their children’s immunisation status. These come regularly even when there has been absolutely no change in a parent’s circumstances or there is not likely to have been a change in the parent’s circumstances. Anyone who has dealt with Centrelink would know that the paperwork and the correspondence that has to be entered into is long and unnecessarily complicated, and questions are often included that have little or no relevance to the issue at hand.

If the government were interested in improving service to citizens, we would see a greater commitment from the government to the proper resourcing and training of Centrelink staff. An internal Centrelink random sample survey conducted by the Australian National Audit Office in June last year showed that around 30 per cent of Centrelink records contained an error which resulted in the wrong payment. These errors will not be fixed by the access card, and it is one of the greatest difficulties for people who are interacting with Centrelink. The access card will
certainly not make fixing these errors any easier. All it will do is have some marginal effects around people establishing their credentials with Centrelink. The access card also does nothing about issues such as the time that Australians are spending in Centrelink and Medicare queues. That is probably one of the things that is raised most often with members of parliament when it comes to dissatisfaction with social security and Medicare services. Again, this card does nothing to improve that issue.

The government’s second claim is that the access card will speed up payments and rebates. There is simply no evidence in the legislation or any of the explanatory material of how an access card would do that. It is certainly a short cut to proving identity to government agencies, but it does not change the way that claims are processed or payments are made. The access card is not related to the separate initiative for Australians to receive their Medicare rebate electronically, which is planned for sometime this year in any case. So while electronic payment of rebates will reduce the time that Australians spend in the Medicare queue that I was just talking about, the access card is a separate initiative to this e-payment of Medicare rebates.

The third claim made by the government—that the access card will reduce fraud—is perhaps the most difficult to understand. The government says that the access card will reduce fraud, in particular through the registration process which will seek to verify the identity of everyone who currently possesses a Medicare card, health care card, veterans card or any of the other cards I mentioned. This would be a much more convincing argument if the registration process was rigorous and watertight. Unfortunately, the fraud-reducing potential of the access card has been completely undermined by the fact that the registration for cards is supposed to begin early next year, long before the planned national document verification service comes online.

As the proposal stands at the moment, it is actually possible that the access card will make things worse when it comes to perpetuating existing fraud. On top of that, it obviously puts at risk the security and privacy of the vast majority of honest Australians. But focusing specifically on the issue of proof of identity, there is currently no efficient way of checking the proof of identity documents of the 35,000 Australians that are supposed to be issued with cards each day until this national document verification service comes online.

From April next year, the government plans to start registering 35,000 people every day. The national document verification service that is being developed by the Attorney-General’s Department to check the authenticity of birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates and so on—along with drivers licences, visas and other forms of identification that applicants for the access card will be presenting—is simply not ready. This system, a massive online data-sharing network, is just not built yet. And it will not be built by next year. In fact, the Attorney-General’s Department last week said in the estimates hearings that that system will not be completed until 2010.

The document verification system is critical to the registration process and, as it will not be ready until 2010, it makes little sense for this legislation to bring the registration period forward to as soon as April next year. Anyone who was really clever about wanting to set up a false identity would make sure that they did it in the first months of the operation of this system, when the government’s ability to check identification documents will be much weaker.
The government’s fourth claim, that the access card will replace up to 17 cards, sounds all very well on the front page of the newspaper, but most people have only one card—they have a Medicare card—a small number of people have two cards and fewer still have three cards. At the same time that the government is claiming people will be liberated by the access card—they will be able to throw out their bulky old wallets—they are introducing another card. The childcare smartcard is an ill-conceived idea that childcare operators have unanimously said is stupid. And parents have just shaken their heads about the idea that they will have to pull out a card every time they drop the kids off or pick them up at child care. They will have to work out which parent is going to have the card at which time of the day when they drop off and pick up the kids.

It seems to be nonsensical to try to spruik a benefit of this access card as reducing the need for all these government cards and at the same time talk about introducing extra cards like the childcare smartcard. I think the fact that people have two or even three cards is generally of less concern to them than knowing that their identity is secure from hackers and that any information that they have provided to the government is safe and will not be stolen and used inappropriately. The notion is that there is a clamour out there for people to have the number of cards reduced. It is not a bad aim; it is a good aim, but it has to be done with all of the proper safeguards to ensure that this card, with all of the important information stored on it, will not become a honey pot for criminals interested in stealing people’s identities.

Our main concerns with the proposal are, firstly, the accuracy, security and privacy of the data to be stored on the card and the database which supports it. Many individuals and groups have expressed their concerns about the card, including the Australian Medical Association and some government members of parliament. The member for Moncrieff said that the access card could become a Trojan Horse for a national ID card. The member for Mackellar said that it does not pass the Nazi test. And even the Attorney-General has admitted that the access card could be exploited by future governments. I am surprised that he thinks that only future governments might do the wrong thing. I would be a little more concerned about the current government.

There is too much information stored on the face of the card. All of the public critics of the card say that it is unnecessary to have a number of the key identifiers on the face of the card. The government says that it is not an ID card by stealth but critics—including Professor Allan Fels, who the government had work on the privacy issues surrounding the card—rightly point out that if this is true then it is unnecessary to have so much information printed on the card. The bill provides that a name, a unique personal identification number, a digital signature, a photograph and an expiry date must all be displayed on the face of the card. In addition, people can choose to have their date of birth, veteran status and—if they are blind and on a disability support pension—their blindness listed on the face of the card.

With so much on the face of the card it is difficult to see how it is not an identification card. As I said, Allan Fels was commissioned by the government to report on the privacy aspects of the card. That means that the government probably knows that there are some very significant privacy issues here and that the decisions should not be made on the run when we have to decide on such important and technical matters relating to privacy.

Allan Fels recommended to the government that the unique identifying number and
the electronic signature not be displayed on the card because they are unnecessary and pose a risk to people’s security. The government has ignored this recommendation but did not give any reasons for ignoring it. The digital signature is an obvious risk. A teller at a video store could take a photocopy of your card and use your signature for all sorts of inappropriate reasons. In relation to the unique number which Professor Fels is concerned about, if people want the convenience of having their number on their card, why not make it voluntary like some of the other information that is included in the card? Indeed, many people have said that you could contain the photograph within the chip in the card rather than having it on the face of the card.

There is a great deal of concern about the amount of information on the face of the card and how this makes this card a de facto ID card. The information stored on the chip repeats the information on the face of the card, and there are some additional pieces of information that are contained in a microchip embedded in the card. The information will be divided into what can be read by any card reader that you can get for a few dollars at your local Dick Smith shop or any other electronics store and information which requires a personal identification number as well.

Last week Professor Fels brought down a report on the voluntary medical information to be stored on the chip. He said in that report:

The decision about what specific health and emergency data might be listed in the card is a considerably more complex matter than might have been anticipated ... This is because the data entered into the chip is data which is intended to be acted upon by other people—in life-threatening situations. The example that the AMA and others have given is that, if there is incorrect information about medication or the information has not been updated recently, you can be given other medication that interacts, potentially fatally, with the medication that is noted on your card. So the information has to be dead right, and the fact that the information can be loaded on and changed by anyone at any time who has access to the card reader is obviously of concern. There is no real detail in this legislation about who can load on the information and under what circumstances. I think Professor Fels’s comment about the potential uses of the card initially sounding appealing but turning out to be a lot more complicated and problematic than they seemed is a pretty sound comment on a great deal of the suggested uses of this card.

Turning now to the information stored on the database, the registry, as it is called, will include: a date of birth; citizen or permanent residency status; sex; residential and postal address; date of registration and status of registration—full or interim, for example—the personal identification number; veteran status; and electronic copies of documents used to prove your identity when initially registering. Information that people can opt to have on the register includes Indigenous status, email and phone contact.

The government proposes that scanned copies of original documents presented when Australians are interviewed before being given their card be kept on an electronic file. That makes this register an enormously valuable resource for criminals, who can hack into it or bribe public servants to get access to it. A criminal could steal a person’s whole identity by getting access to the information contained in this register.

For the most part, I believe government information is closely held and well managed, but there are examples of identity theft that has depended on false documents and on unauthorised accessing of databases by pub-
lic servants that should give us pause for thought when we consider just how valuable this honey pot of information is. Just recently, at the end of last year in December 2006, an Australian man was arrested in New Zealand for using the birth certificate of a baby born in 1965 who had lived only 13 days. He used that birth certificate to apply for a New Zealand passport. There were 600 privacy breaches within Centrelink reported in August 2006 where staff had accessed customer records without proper cause or authorisation. There was a report by the Child Support Agency obtained under freedom of information in June last year that found that 405 privacy breaches had occurred in the previous nine months. In at least two of these cases mothers and their children had to be physically relocated at taxpayers’ expense because the Child Support Agency’s release of information had put them at risk. You can see the very high stakes of people getting access to documents not their own and information that they should not have access to. Bringing all of this information together in this way and including electronic scanned copies of original birth certificates and so on seems to me to be asking for trouble.

The additional problem that has been raised by a number of critics is something that we call function creep. The concern is that every minister and every department will want to use the card for some other new whiz-bang purpose and that over time the amount of information stored on the card and the purposes of the card will expand. That makes the card more valuable, not only to the owner but to anyone seeking to steal the card and use it for improper purposes. The more functions the card has, the more valuable it is to a criminal and of course the more vulnerable it is to theft or misuse. The issue of function creep is particularly concerning because of the vast amount of discretion left to the minister about the information which can be collected in this legislation. There really is nothing to stop the minister changing what information is collected over time or the uses to which the information is put.

The AMA has suggested that this problem could be minimised by the government specifically legislating what the unique identification number on the card could be used for. But, like a number of other sensible suggestions made by the AMA and by people who have commented on the draft legislation and made other comments about this bill, this suggestion has been ignored.

When it comes to the forgery of cards, it was interesting to hear the chief of the Australian Federal Police, Mick Keelty, say that he is very enthusiastic about the card because it will help reduce identity fraud. He has happily acknowledged that the devil is in the detail, because this card will not reduce identity fraud unless we can be confident of the security of the information on the chip and on the register. There will be many people who tell you that smartcards are easily forged, as all mass-produced cards are. Even if the chip on the card is inactive, the face value of such a card will be high because of the hoops you have to jump through to get it in the first place. Dame Stella Rimington, former chief of MI5 in the UK, said in relation to the UK ID card:

ID cards have possibly some purpose. But I don’t think that anybody in the intelligence services, particularly in my former service, would be pressing for ID cards. My angle on ID cards is that they may be of some use but only if they can be made unforgeable - and all our other documentation is quite easy to forge. If we have ID cards at vast expense and people can go into a back room and forge them, they are going to be absolutely useless.

She said that in a speech in 2005. The government says that this is not an ID card. It keeps denying that this is an ID card, but
obviously Mick Keelty is excited by the possibility of using it as a source of identification, and I think it is pretty plain to anyone who has followed this debate that there is nothing to distinguish this card from an identification card.

There is a danger, obviously, with lost and stolen cards. The government currently runs the ASIC—the aviation security identification card—system, which is used by officials who need access to sterile areas of airports. Three hundred and eighty-four of these cards were reported as stolen or missing in 2005 alone. The government says that access cards which are lost or stolen will be deactivated the next time they are swiped, but of course the face value of the card is still very useful.

The strongest opponents of this in the community are the people who believe that this is to all intents and purposes an ID card. It is just amazing to have members opposite who were such strong opponents of the Australia Card proposal, including the Prime Minister himself, now seeing no problem with introducing something that is essentially the Australia Card on steroids. This card and the register contain a great deal more information than the proposed Australia Card, and the use of biometric technology means that it is much more useful for surveillance measures than the Australia Card ever would have been. The biometric photo on the card can obviously be matched with surveillance video taken in public places to track people.

The government says that people will not be able to ask to see your card as a form of ID and that there is a two-year jail term and a 120-penalty-unit fine for people who do, but this relates to people who require you to show your card, not to people who request, not to people who ask nicely, not to people who might offer the option that you might want to show your card. On top of that, there is what is called a Crown exemption, which means that, even if someone improperly asks to see your card, the fact that they work for a state or federal government department means that they cannot be prosecuted for it. We also think it is incredibly unlikely that the poorly-resourced Privacy Commissioner will have the resources to follow up on the misuse of this card or that the police would ever have the resources and energy to investigate and prosecute in this area.

There is no guarantee that the collection, storage and maintenance of the information on the database will not be outsourced. It could be outsourced overseas; we do not know. We do not know what that means about the protection from onselling of very sensitive information.

The government says that the card is voluntary, that nobody is forced to get one. You are only forced to get one if you ever want to use a Medicare service; if you ever want to have access to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme; if you are a veteran and you want to access your veterans entitlements; or if you ever want childcare benefit or family tax benefit. That is not voluntary at all!

The biometric technology that is used has a very high failure rate. It can be affected by weight gain or weight loss. It has about a 10 per cent failure rate, we are told. That means that people may actually be stopped from accessing services that they are entitled to because of faulty technology.

The registration process is going to be an absolute nightmare, with people needing to present all sorts of documents. For people living in the outback, the government say that they are going to send out vans, but I do not believe that they are going to send out a van to every community and every farm in Australia.

On the cost, the government say that they will save $3 billion over 10 years. They keep claiming this figure, although the KPMG
report that they have released in a highly censored version says that they could save between $1.6 billion and $3 billion over 10 years. If the figure is actually $1.6 billion, they would save more money by putting the $1.1 billion or $1.2 billion that they are going to spend in the bank and collecting the interest.

This also restricts the Medicare access of 16- and 17-year-olds in a way that is of extreme concern. For this reason and a number of others, a second reading amendment is proposed by Labor. I move:

That all words after “That” be omitted with a view to substituting the following words: “while supporting the use of smart card technology to improve service delivery in Medicare and social security; to reduce the number of cards necessary for people using these services; and to reduce social security and health fraud; the House is of the opinion that the bill should not proceed in its current form because:

(1) there are inadequate safeguards to protect the accuracy and privacy of information on the card and in the register;

(2) the Government continues to keep secret key information about the costs of the card; and

(3) there is no guarantee that the Document Verification Service will be fully operational with appropriate safeguards by the commencement date proposed”.

Labor will be moving further detailed amendments both in the House and in the Senate, particularly after the Senate inquiry into this bill. The inquiry is rushed and inadequate but nevertheless may cause us to come up with further amendments to be moved in the Senate.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Wilkie)—Is the amendment seconded?

Dr Emerson—I second the amendment and reserve my right to speak.

Mr HARDGRAVE (Moreton) (6.51 pm)—The Australian Labor Party have yet again put a proposition to Australia that if they were elected they would have a ministry for victims. The heart of the member for Sydney really was not in her contribution to this debate tonight, but she went through the philosophical nightmare that she has to face because of the extreme left of politics that is her favourite ground. She put the case: ‘No matter what benefits you think are possible, don’t worry, you will be a victim—you will be made to feel a victim. Everything will fail; everything you have will be lost.’ We are going to see and hear a lot more of this from the Labor Party between now and the federal election day—an alternate government that believes in growing the numbers of victims in Australian society. A constituency of victims suits the Labor Party. To create an environment whereby people are downtrodden and feeling as though they are somehow or other consigned to some sort of threatening environment suits the Australian Labor Party. It is not the way Australia operates in 2007, and they need to get over this philosophical hurdle that continues to encumber them and continues to cause them to fail to do the hard work to understand what is before the House right now.

What is before the House tonight is a bill that starts the incremental steps towards the creation of this access card regime. This is not about a national identity card. That was 20 years ago—and 20 years ago the member for Sydney probably led student protests in favour of the Australia Card. She can exercise as many ironies as she likes, and she can besmirch the professional standards of public servants in this country under parliamentary privilege for as many days as she likes, but the simple reality is that what this government is doing is putting in place a system that will suit the law abiders, the people of Australia who do the right thing by the system. As the ad says, it supports the system which supports them. In my electorate of Moreton, if we want to talk about Medicare
and Medicare services and benefits, there were 1.6 million services in the 2004-05 financial year, according to the complete set of ratified figures that I have, some $67.3 million worth of services; in the electorate of Sydney there were 1.9 million services, some $86 million worth of services. So I do not know whether the member for Sydney is somehow putting a case in favour of this higher use of Medicare. If the AFP’s figures are right, 50 per cent of fraud against the Commonwealth is committed in Medicare transactions, so maybe she is putting a case to make sure we do not put pressure on those in her constituency who are a party to that. Either way I think her contribution tonight has missed the point completely.

Nor is this about following the British model. I have to say that a few of my colleagues have had a few comments to make about what has happened through the Home Office. When I went to the Home Office four years ago as a minister in this government and spoke to them about a variety of things, one of the things I clearly understood was that the UK circumstance is very different from Australia. For a start, they have far more porous borders. There are a lot more illegal entrants in the UK than in Australia—in fact, I think the estimate at that time was about one million people in that country. They did not know who they were. So the British government—and particularly in this post-September 11 environment it is not an excuse for draconian measures but an excuse to look at and refine further good conduct to society—brought in, basically, a system which said, ‘No card, no access,’ to flush out all those who were unlawfully in society. That is not an issue in Australia today, because we have a very different and in fact much-envied system of organised migration to this country.

The Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007 is the first of a series of bills, a point the member for Sydney did not highlight to the House. This is about establishing the framework of what is to come next, and it could not be done in a more open and accountable way than with this series of staged legislative responses to the variety of issues which the member for Sydney has raised. Frankly, in the absence of an understanding that this is the first of a series of bills, it might have been a legitimate series of things she raised, but she forgot that key point: this is not the endgame; this is the beginning of it. This is about establishing a framework for the card. This is about addressing matters of community interest, including establishing the objects and the purposes within this legislation to prevent things such as function creep—and I will deal with some function creep ideas that have come out of my constituency by way of example; there are a variety of them and I will come back to them in a moment. But this is also about establishing the register and the card to provide certainty so that information will be on the register and the chip within the access card. It is about prohibiting unauthorised demand for and use of the access card for identity purposes, and it is about vesting the ownership of the access card with the cardholder.

The Minister for Human Services, Senator Ian Campbell, and his predecessor Minister Hockey made it absolutely plain that a variety of subsequent legislation will be brought into this place. Before the people of Australia, we will see a full and open debate—before the first registration of the access card, which is due by April 2008. A variety of matters are expected to be dealt with, including the protection of the information on the register and the card. Legislation will be put before this place that will set out completely the limited circumstances of access, use and disclosure of information, including its relationship with the Criminal Code cov-
erating such things as hacking offences. It will deal with matters such as the effective oversight and governance of the access card system; issues regarding use of the access card—in other words dependants, carers and other linked persons and their access to the information on the card—circumstances giving rise to the suspension and cancellation of registration of the card; and the replacement of lost and stolen cards. It will also deal with some of the issues relating to the individual’s area on the chip, where they can store some voluntary information that may be of use to them in their interaction with government. It will be about presenting the card to obtain Commonwealth benefits from 2010 and other transitional issues.

Listening to the member for Sydney tonight, the people of Australia would be confused and think they are about to have what the Hawke government tried to introduce in 1987—that is, a one-size-fits-all compulsory stamp across their forehead in the form of a plastic card. That is not what this government is proposing. We want to deal with the convenience of access to government services, and we want to deal with the opportunity for people to put additional information on the card to make that journey with government a lot easier. We want to make it possible for those who are dealing fraudulently with the Commonwealth to be put under pressure. The minority of people in this country who do the wrong thing should be penalised and should be reasonably under threat of restriction. We are not trying to control the population or to restrict legitimate access to the support afforded to those in need.

In my electorate there are 4,519 people who are non-income support healthcare cardholders; 8,520 people who are healthcare cardholders; 15,071 pension concession cardholders; and 2,248 Commonwealth seniors healthcare cardholders. That is 30,358 people who are no doubt very interested in whether or not the variety of combined access to Commonwealth services could in fact be better facilitated by the use of this one card which would provide them with easy access to those services. I do not know the exact figures on veterans, but I have a very strong local veterans community in my electorate. There are about 200,000 veterans in Australia: 135,850 of them have gold cards, 47,000 have white cards and 15½ thousand have orange cards. There are 109,487 dependants who also have gold cards. So there are a lot of Australians who can get what the member for Sydney either was too lazy to raise or quite deliberately forgot to raise in her presentation to the Australian people tonight.

What the government is out to do with this legislation is to put in place an improved access regime that ramps up the protection for the taxpayer and ramps up the integrity measures associated with interaction with government. A lot of government departments like to have their own systems—that is, what suits them and the way they operate. It is a bit like the oft talked about Yes, Minister series in that nothing is going to happen until the system is in place. So, in a lot of ways, this is a bold set of steps for the bureaucracy to get their heads around as well. They have to work very hard in a cooperative way to make sure that they are seeing things from a whole-of-government point of view, not simply from the view of what suits their own department’s logic. It is not fair or right to suggest, as the member for Sydney did tonight, that public servants are somehow or other in the trade of information game. That was the impression she tried to give.

Our constituents are very interested in this—there is no doubt about it—and perhaps for the sorts of hysterical reasons outlined by the shadow minister for victims, the member for Sydney. People can see that
there are some possibilities associated with this card. Mr John McGregor, from my electorate, wrote me a letter saying that he sees all sorts of possibilities. I do not think it hurts, as a contrast point in this discussion, to put some of these things down. For instance, he says that in the debate we are going to have in Australia he would like to see a high-memory capacity discussed. He would like to see his access card able to store a wide variety of digital media, from standard text files and doc files to audio MP3 files. I see the member for Macarthur is at the table. He would possibly like a few MP3 files on his card too, but I do not want to put words in his mouth.

Mr McGregor is making the point that it is not so much about listening to your favourite song as being able to format image files such as X-rays, which could be of some use in the sorts of emergencies that people have talked about. The government is not planning these things, but the point is that these technical possibilities are there. As we move forward, we have to be careful that we get the balance right, as the government is trying to do in this incremental advance towards the access card.

Mr McGregor also said it would be nice to hold secure and non-secure information on the card. That could be quite handy in your contact with state and local governments. His point is that perhaps his library card could be displaced by this smartcard. He would have a ready reckoner on file of the sorts of books he liked, not just simply a secure Medicare file. All of these things would be opened by a personal identification number and perhaps some other biometrics, such as digital fingerprints, iris scans and so forth. Either way, he would like to have control of his card. That is not an unreasonable expectation.

Whether or not the government want to move down that path will be discussed in the weeks and months ahead, as we work our way through incrementally. It is not the intention of the government to go down that path, but the possibilities, technically, are there. Offering secure ID functions on the card could, my constituent says, allow people to opt to use this as a way of dealing with authority in helping to check people’s identity. There are all of the Big Brother overtones associated with that. Perhaps 20 years ago, in the ID card debate associated with the Australia Card, we were right to say no. But the possibilities are still there in a technical sense and we may see an incremental move towards that.

Perhaps police officers will be furnished with a portable smartcard reader. The member for Sydney says you can get them from Dick Smith pretty cheaply. They would have to be cheap for the Queensland police to buy them. Nevertheless, there are real possibilities to access particular data that is authorised to be accessed. There could be some sort of open folder format, just like opening a passport. That is Mr McGregor’s viewpoint. His idea is to be able to use the technology associated with this card not just for the official, secure transactions with government but perhaps as a passive means to carry out transactions for things within the community.

We will have an interesting debate as we work our way through this issue. It is a debate that the government are rightly sponsoring through the responsible way that we are working our way through this legislation. There is the opportunity to bring in further legislation to harness the protocols that Mr McGregor and others aspire to. At the same time we will make sure that we are not ignoring those sorts of possibilities out of some great hysteria because we are worried that data will not be protected and we will all be stamped with ‘the mark of the beast’, as Revelation puts it.
I remember 20 years ago working in the media—I think this time 20 years ago I was working for *The 7.30 Report* on the ABC—and there were plenty of people in the community who were fostering all of the conspiracy theories that the member for Sydney tried to put in her contribution tonight. Those sorts of approaches are quite real in the minds of the sheltered few, but the simple reality is that in Australia and the world in 2007 there is a demand for us to be more accessible to a range of services using digital formats. Equally, our digital identifiers are well established and well known: if you are on the internet, you have an internet provider associated with your particular website; and as you access the internet your information is gathered and stored. There are reasons to be fearful about how secure some of those sites are—and lots of money is spent by governments in particular to secure certain sites, as indeed they should. I think the lessons of the last 20 years are based on the practical reality of the way a lot of information has been accessed by those who we do not want to access it, and it means that we are a lot better at protecting information than we have ever been in the past. People like Mr McGregor are saying that we should look at opt-in and opt-out options within this access card regime. On the identity theft front, we should demand of government that it has the protocols in place to make sure that any transactions are easy and properly coordinated processes. It is about ensuring that those people are also well protected against those who misuse those processes and cause, by government estimates, billions of dollars of funds to be siphoned away to where they should not go.

Where the technology and the possibilities of this take us is in the hands of this parliament, and that is why the government is embarking on a set of very careful steps down this path for a 2010 start and for the registration process to start in April 2008. We are starting the process in this debate, and I commend this bill to the House.

Mr CREAN (Hotham) (7.11 pm)—I rise in this debate to raise a number of concerns with the Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007 and to support the second reading amendment that the member for Sydney has moved. Essentially this is a bill to introduce a compulsory access card, a card linked to new electronic databases containing essential and personal details about individuals. Labor are not opposed to an access card but are opposed to the way in which police protocols and information-gathering protocols are supported in this nation—that there is a lot of information out there about each and every one of us. The question then is: do you want to combine all that in a convenient way? If you are an honest law-abiding citizen there is nothing to fear in the slightest.

At the end of it, this legislation is about supporting the law-abiding decent Australian citizen—and there are millions of them—who transacts almost on a daily basis with government departments and ensuring that those transactions are easy and properly coordinated processes. It is about ensuring that those people are also well protected against those who misuse those processes and cause, by government estimates, billions of dollars of funds to be siphoned away to where they should not go.
On the other front, the government are not picking up key recommendations of Professor Fels into privacy issues—again, information advice commissioned by the government but which they are ignoring.

The second reading amendment moved by the member for Sydney spells out those concerns and in essence we believe that there are inadequate safeguards in the bill as it stands going to protect the accuracy and privacy of information. We believe that the government continuing to keep secret information about the costs of the card and what it is designed to do is not appropriate. We also are concerned that there is no guarantee that the document verification service will be fully operational and contain appropriate safeguards. Having said that, if the government supports those issues and amends the legislation accordingly, we will support the bill; if not, we will oppose the bill.

It is important in our view to have a robust and secure system to prevent welfare fraud but it is equally important to protect personal privacy and to prevent identity theft. Labor have consistently opposed welfare fraud and theft and we have supported measures to prevent it. Centrelink, Medicare and veterans payments should only go to those who need them, and we must be vigilant against the rorts that undeniably exist. The question is: will this access card prevent or significantly reduce fraud? That is the assertion that the government makes. On the information available to us, it is not possible to answer that question. The government has not released the work commissioned through KPMG which it says supports its case. It argues the need to access information to prevent fraud but it will not give us the justification of the solution.

KPMG was asked to identify the costs and benefits of introducing the access card, but the government will not release that information. We again call on the government to release in full the detail that they are withholding. KPMG points out that its proposal represents a significant change from present practices to combat fraud through detection and investigation. The new approach that they propose, and to which this legislation is intended, is aimed more at prevention and deterrence. But how effective will the new methods be? What are the costs in inconvenience to users of essential health and welfare services? What about the possible erosion of individual rights and privacy? KPMG’s analysis has been reported to the government, but it has not been released. We call on the government to release that information. In the absence of the information, it is very hard to accept the government’s bald assertions.

KPMG asserts that a robust and uniform registration process, underpinned by strengthened proof of identity requirements and the provision of a card which will properly authenticate the user, will make fraud much more difficult. KPMG says that it will not only help prevent fraud at the outset but also give Medicare and Centrelink better information with which to detect fraud. All of that may be true, but we have no way of judging the merits of those claims—it is just the government’s assertion. It is not backed by information that the government has released but by information it says it has seen—and which it will not share with the rest of the community. Significant sections of KPMG’s report have been deleted for ‘cabinet-in-confidence’ reasons.

And then we have to deal with the financial costs of implementation. Detailed costings have been removed for commercial reasons. The government has released KPMG’s broad indication of possible fraud savings, ranging from $1.6 billion to $3 billion over a 10-year period. The minister has quoted the higher figure—$3 billion—but omitted the
time scale, giving the impression of large and immediate savings. Whatever the savings, they could be completely swamped by the costs of implementation of the scheme—costs that could well blow out to more than $1 billion. No-one really knows how much welfare fraud there is—and, if the government knows it, it certainly is not telling us.

It is a fact that people claiming welfare benefits under false identities are only one aspect of waste and fraud. Centrelink does make mistakes, and applicants make honest and inadvertent errors in applications. No identity card will stop applicants claiming in their own name payments to which they are not entitled.

The integrity of registration and information gathering for the access card will clearly be an important factor in achieving its goal of fraud prevention. The government envisages personal interviews for registration. There will need to be, therefore, more than 16 million interviews and photographs, with verification of identification documents. The government has based its costings on the assumptions that each interview will take no longer than five minutes. In our view, this is likely to be a gross underestimate, particularly where there are language difficulties or where documents are not verifiable, have been forgotten or cannot be produced.

There will also be significant costs to families in obtaining birth and marriage certificates, up to $45 each. Certificates from foreign countries may not be acceptable because their authenticity cannot be verified. People from war zones and areas of civil disturbance may not be able to obtain the necessary certificates; indeed, they may not even exist. Proof of residence over the past 10 years may be required. That will be very difficult for itinerant people and anyone who moves frequently. The government still has not explained how people such as the mentally ill, the homeless or otherwise severely disadvantaged people will be able to qualify for their cards. What is the status of their carers? The aforementioned people’s very survival will depend on the card, because they will have to produce it to access the benefits upon which they so desperately rely.

We also raised concern about people living in regional and remote areas. This is a field of one of my portfolio responsibilities. They may have to travel long distances to present for an interview, with the possibility of a return trip if there is a problem with their documentation. The government has said that mobile teams will register people in regional areas. This is to be commended, but obviously problems will arise if people are away from their homes when the mobile teams visit.

Much greater thought and public consultation needs to be put into the development of this proposal. It is not something that can be rushed through the parliament when significant aspects remain unresolved. We are being asked in essence to buy a pig in a poke, and I must say that this pig needs much closer examination. I have said before that the opposition want this information from KPMG released. We believe it is in the public interest in order to test whether the government’s claims stack up.

The new card will have a name, a personal identification number, a signature and a biometric photograph. It will also have a digital chip that can carry medical information, an address, emergency contacts, concession status and stored value—or money. The biometric photo is an interesting concept in itself. A biometric photo is a digitised image of a mathematical formula of the measurements of facial features, making it easy to compare the image on the card and the database with images from video footage, newspapers or other sources. Clearly, this has im-

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plications for surveillance beyond access to welfare services. It is expected that state and federal police will have access to the database, which will hold photographs of the entire Australian adult population. There are concerns about the accuracy of matches between images. There is a failure rate, and there are obvious problems with significant changes in appearance, such as weight changes or other physical changes. This may cause people to be misidentified and possibly denied benefits to which they would otherwise be entitled.

The minister says that the new card will protect privacy in that it will show less information than current drivers licences; for example, it will not show date of birth and home address. It is true that much information will not be visible on the card itself, but it will be able to be read by authorised electronic readers. Professor Allan Fels, as head of the Consumer and Privacy Taskforce which was established as part of the consideration of this legislation to advise the government, proposed two significant amendments to the government’s plan, which the government has not accepted: that the personal identification number and the digitised signature not be displayed on the card. Professor Fels says that a digitised signature is not necessary, in that signatures on similar cards are very rarely checked, and the inclusion of the signature provides an opportunity for identity theft.

Professor Fels has similar concerns about the unique number being visible on the card. He accepts that it will have to be on the chip, but a visible number can be easily copied and used to assist in identity fraud. Professor Fels has further concerns that the card may become a national identity card which has to be produced on demand. The government says that the card is voluntary. This is an entirely disingenuous statement, I would suggest, because anyone who requires access to any government benefits or services—which is just about everyone at some time—will need to have the card. Given that that is the obvious consequence of entitlement to benefit, it would be very easy for a future government to change the law to require everyone to carry the card at all times and to produce it on demand.

Professor Fels has also said that there must be strict security surrounding the databases on which the card is based. I am concerned that collection, storage and maintenance of information on the databases may be outsourced—perhaps even offshore, beyond the reach of Australian security and privacy mechanisms and legislation. Further, Professor Fels said that the public must have confidence in the card, and this can only be ensured by strong legislation. He has called for the government to put its commitments regarding privacy and data security in the legislation, but this bill does not do that. We all know about the record of this government in terms of broken promises and the redefinition of promises, with ‘core promises’ being the only ones that have to be honoured.

In summary, we are being asked to agree to a card before the full facts are known, before all the rules have been made public, before the full need for it has been disclosed to the public, before projected costs and benefits have been thoroughly examined and disclosed, and before full consultation and discussion have taken place. This is another example of this arrogant and out-of-touch government not trusting the people and not seeing the need to take the people into its confidence. It applies double standards. It wants the card to build trust in the system, but it will not trust the people who make up the system.

I want to briefly allude to the fact that the Hawke government proposed the Australia Card back in 1986-87. It was proposed to
carry a unique number, the cardholder’s name, address and signature, and it was to be used only for taxation, social welfare and Medicare purposes. It was not to carry a photograph, and the technology at the time precluded any thought of including a chip with digitised information. As president of the ACTU back then, I supported the proposal. I believed then, as I believe now, that abuse of the welfare system cannot be condoned. It constitutes theft from the public. Abuse of the system and misdirection of limited resources mean that deserving recipients are the ones who miss out. Then, I was satisfied that the privacy issues had been sufficiently addressed and protected in the proposed legislation and in the limited scope of the proposed card. There had also been extensive community consultation. As is well known, the Australia Card was abandoned following legal advice that, although the legislation could have been passed by a joint sitting of parliament, the Senate could have disallowed regulations crucial to the implementation and operation of the card. Of course, at the time, public opposition to the scheme was also undoubtedly a factor in the government’s decision to abandon the bill in 1987.

It is our view that, since then, this government has learnt very little from the circumstances at that time. There are many unanswered questions—and I detailed those earlier—but the real concerns about the proposed access card go to the fact that, despite the government’s denials, the access card will inevitably become an identity card, even if the legislation seeks to prohibit its use as such. The very strength of the card will lead to it being requested and used as proof of identity. We are also concerned that there may well be function creep—further functions added—and that, whilst the parliament may legislate for data protection, it cannot ensure compliance. There is a real possibility of data misuse and consequent loss of privacy.

It is against that background that we moved a second reading amendment, and the member for Sydney will also be moving amendments in the consideration in detail stage. We believe that the Senate inquiry should be given more time to consult and report on the issues that we have raised and will continue to raise. I support the second reading amendment and I indicate on behalf of the opposition that, if the amendments that we have proposed are not adopted by the government, we will oppose this bill.

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (7.31 pm)—I congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker Secker, on your appointment to the Speaker’s panel. I rise in support of the Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007. My support for this legislation is premised on a very clear need to update Australia’s delivery of health services. The current Medicare arrangements which govern delivery of over $16 billion in health benefits have been in place and unchanged since 1984—the same year the dollar coin was introduced and the same year Advance Australia Fair was proclaimed as our national anthem. Many things have changed since that time—but not the Medicare card.

The Medicare card uses outdated magnetic strip technology. The Australian Federal Police estimate that more than half of identity fraud cases in Australia each year involve a Medicare card. It is because it is cheap and easy to copy, and there is no photo on it. The Federal Police also tell us that a high-quality fake Medicare card can be purchased on the black market for $150. The Australian people should be able to expect their government to provide a robust form of protection for their personal information. The current Medicare card and the other 16 cards and vouchers that the smartcard will replace
do not provide this protection. This, of course, leads us to the issue of welfare fraud.

It is estimated that the smartcard will save some $3 billion in health and welfare fraud over the next 10 years. My understanding is that this is a conservative estimate. When one considers that the Department of Human Services distributed $100 billion in health and welfare benefits last year, I think it would be fair to say that we could realistically expect even greater savings than effectively three per cent of our total health and welfare expenditure, especially when we consider the degree to which those who have been fraudulently using the card have been able to use it under the current system. As examples of this, there is the case of a Victorian man who allowed his father, a non-resident, to claim the Medicare rebate to the value of $3,300 for laser eye treatment and related consultations. A Sydney woman’s stolen Medicare card was used in 2005 to claim the benefits associated with a kidney operation. The thief had a cyst removed during a procedure at the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney. A deregistered doctor in Queensland used 21 false identities involving Medicare cards to obtain almost 20,000 morphine tablets, with a street value of $2 million, to sell to drug addicts and abusers. The fraud cost the taxpayer over $50,000 and put countless Australian lives at risk. Then there was the lady who made up false birth certificates to claim benefits for nine sets of twins—which is quite some achievement—worth over $600,000. She was getting benefits from the government for 18 fake children. So, not surprisingly, we have to change this situation. The level of fraud is totally unacceptable.

It is plainly evident that the government has to improve and update the delivery of health services to Australians in a manner that is more appropriate in today’s technologically advanced world—it is not 1984 anymore—and a solution is necessary to deliver the $11 billion in Medicare benefits every year. The smartcard would improve the delivery of Medicare benefits in a number of ways. But the smartcard is not just replacing the Medicare card; it in fact replaces 17 different Australian government health and welfare benefit cards, in particular the veterans card, the healthcare concession card and the pensioner concession cards.

In terms of fraud, these other cards are, in technological terms, even less sophisticated than the Medicare card. Most of them are made of cardboard, which is quite surprising. Concession cardholders claim 80 per cent of the $6 billion the government spends on the PBS annually. That is $5 billion of Commonwealth money that is claimed every year by showing a piece of cardboard—one with no photo of its owner and which can be readily forged by the most amateurish of counterfeiters. The Australian National Audit Office estimates that one-quarter of all concession cards are cancelled before the actual expiry date that is printed on the card. This means that at any given time there are 1.5 million Australians claiming heavily subsidised prescriptions they are not entitled to and effectively stealing hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayers’ money every year.

This goes to the heart of how the smartcard improves this system. When it is introduced, those entitled to a concession will have to swipe their smartcard at the chemist and the chemist’s machine will instantly communicate with Centrelink and tell the chemist: ‘Yes, this person is entitled to a concession rate,’ or ‘No, this person is not entitled to a concession rate.’ It is quite simple. It is just like a normal bank ATM system. Banks have been using this with EFTPOS for some years—yes, there is money in the account or no, there is not. It is quite simple.
There have been four concerns, in particular, that have been put forward. Some of my colleagues have brought these issues forward. I respect their views and opinions on this issue, but I take a different approach. The first major concern is that the smartcard is an ID card. The second concern is what has been termed ‘function creep’, whereby the smartcard’s function becomes, over time, more far-reaching than it was planned to be. The third concern is in regard to the eligibility of minors to be cardholders. The fourth concern, as I see it, is over privacy.

Let me firstly address the charge that the smartcard is an ID card or a rehashed version of Labor’s Australia Card. This is simply not the case. The smartcard is a health and social services card, nothing more. Individuals will not be required to carry it on their person like the UK ID card. No person or organisation can require you to present the card for any reason, except when claiming Commonwealth benefits. The premise is simple: bring the card when you need it; show it when you want to. In fact the legislation specifically prohibits anybody from requiring you to present your smartcard.

For example, security staff at a hotel would be specifically prevented from requesting to see your smartcard for proof of age. You can offer it as ID if you wish, but you cannot be required to produce it. In fact under this legislation there are penalties if people demand to see your smartcard. So there is no credibility in the claim that the smartcard is some kind of national identity card. The United Kingdom’s ID card, for example, which is used for national security, immigration control and all public services, includes up to 13 biometrics—that is, fingerprints, iris scans and so on. The smartcard only has a biometric photo and will display less information on it than a drivers licence. You can choose to have your date of birth on the card, but this is entirely optional. That will not be a major problem.

No extra functions can be added without changing the law. Some have raised concerns about ‘function creep’—that we will find that additional functions will be added and before we know it we will have a brave new world where all aspects of our lives will be on the card. In fact the Commonwealth agencies that can use the card are explicitly listed in the bill. No other agency can use it. If another agency does want to use it—and I am sure that some will think, ‘Yes, I’d like to have access to this card’—it would require new legislation. There is no capacity for function creep without further change to the law.

The arrangements for minors will not change. I know that there has been some concern that the card will somehow prevent teenagers from accessing health care. This is a particularly sensitive area in terms of reproductive health for teenage girls and becomes problematic for legislators trying to protect children while at the same time upholding the rights of parents to be involved in any medical treatment their children might be seeking or receiving. The current arrangements in terms of minors will not change. I believe that currently 16- and 17-year-olds can get their own Medicare card without parental consent, and there are strict guidelines for certain categories of children under 15 years of age getting a Medicare card without parental consent, such as homeless children and children who are estranged from their families for a variety of reasons. The majority of children under 15 years old do not have their own cards and are listed on their parents’ cards. There is zero change in this area: the guidelines that govern the Medicare card arrangements of minors will transfer directly to the new smartcard.
The fourth area of concern as I see it is privacy. Many people legitimately fear that, with the progress of technology, the government’s capacity to act in a way that infringes on the personal privacy of its citizens is enhanced. What I am sure of is this: the smartcard does not equip the government or any other organisation or individual with any greater power than they already possess. The fact of the matter is that there is no data stored by the smartcard database, called the customer registration system, that is not already held by Commonwealth agencies. The government already holds an enormous amount of information on each citizen at various different levels. The smartcard does not change information-sharing arrangements between government departments and agencies. It does not combine data that was not previously combined.

The smartcard database will sit separately from the Medicare database and the Centrelink database. None of these databases will communicate with each other any differently or share information any more than they already do at present time. The only real difference will be that the government will now store a photograph of each cardholder. Currently the Commonwealth holds photographs for various uses, like passports. The only change is that the photo will be stored on the smartcard database, but, again, the legislation explicitly nominates the agencies that can access this information and by law no other agencies will have access to that data.

The real myth buster in terms of privacy concerns is the nature of the information stored. The smartcard database only stores basic details: name, address, date of birth et cetera. It is hardly groundbreaking information. People are free to store extra personal information if they wish to—such as blood type or allergies—but this is entirely optional.

There are already multiple layers of privacy protection in federal law, including the Privacy Act and a raft of other statutes. The introduction of this bill does not remove any pre-existing safeguards that exist in current law; it simply establishes another level of protection with specific reference to the card. The privacy of information collected by Human Services for the purpose of the smartcard is protected by this legislation. The higher grade of security will actually increase privacy protection, not threaten it. Smartcard chips are the way of the future. The banks are embracing this technology, and it is time the government did too. So there is no ID card by stealth being introduced, there will be no capacity for function creep, there will be no changes to arrangements involving children and there is no mega database being created to invade the privacy of unsuspecting Australians.

It is plain to see that Labor are flip-flopping on this issue. Labor’s position on this policy is quite confounding. The member for Sydney has outlined Labor’s opposition to the bill. Yet her colleague the member for Lilley said only last year that ‘a smartcard for social security purposes is a very good thing. It would help us detect fraud’. Also last year the member for Sydney’s predecessor in the Human Services portfolio, the member for Wills, said that Labor’s position was to acknowledge ‘that smartcard technology has the potential to streamline services and reduce costs’. There has been quite an incredible about-turn by those on the other side of the chamber in regard to this policy. My view is that they have transplanted the public interest at stake here for perceived political gain.

The Australian government is making more than $100 billion worth of payments every year. It is absolutely self-evident that there should be a decent system in place that reduces fraud and is convenient for custom-
ers; a decent system that brings our health and welfare service delivery into the 21st century. It is the least we can do to ensure that the right payment is going to the right person at the right time. This card will help deliver on that promise and stop most of the fraud that has gone on in the past.

I am sure that there will always be those with entrepreneurial flair who will move to fraud, but this will make it so much more difficult and the types of flagrant abuse of cards that we have seen right around Australia will cease. I support this legislation. I want to see an end to the fraud. I want to see the money placed in the hands of those people who deserve it: pensioners, concession card holders and those who are due for PBS rebates for their medical bills and a whole range of services that are provided by the government. It is a huge amount of money. New technology has evolved. There are always challenges; there are always issues. I am sure that most of us are concerned about issues of privacy. Will this be the brave new world where we have the intrusion of government into aspects of our personal lives? I believe that the safeguards and the protections are there. This new smartcard will bring us up to 2007 technology. We will avoid much of the fraud that we see today and there will be a significant reduction in government expenditure, which will allow greater expenditure on those in genuine need. It will stop those who are simply out to defraud the system by duplicating bogus cards rorting the system across the board. I commend this legislation to the House.

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (7.45 pm)—Thank you, Deputy Speaker Secker. It is good to see you sitting there, Patrick. The Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007 proposes to streamline access to government services and combat fraud by issuing all Australians with a new access card. However, Australians have always been wary of any card that contains a cardholder’s name, date of birth, signature, unique identification number, gender, residential address, Medicare number, concession status, details of children and other dependents, allergies and emergency contact numbers. A card with this unprecedented amount of detail is only one step removed from a national ID card which any government could use to monitor its citizens even more. Many Australians are justifiably concerned that this bill is really a euphemism for a national ID card.

In his second reading speech, the minister alluded to the access card’s dominant purpose as being a reduction in welfare fraud. The minister is quite right to suggest that ‘Australian taxpayers have a right to expect that only those individuals who are entitled to benefits receive them.’ However, I do not share the minister’s arrogant attitude to those who have shown genuine concern at the scope of such a card. Given the scale of the project and the amount of information the government will be collecting, the response is naturally one of concern and hesitation.

I do not share the minister’s view that those expressing a concern about the scope of this card are scaremongers, nor do I share the minister’s view that members on this side are ‘friends of fraud’, as he outrageously suggested in his second reading speech, simply because we are relaying the concerns of our constituents to this parliament. Perhaps the minister could repeat those claims to the numerous constituents in my electorate of Lowe who have raised their concerns about this card directly with me. One of those constituents, Miss Evelyn Smith, sums up the mood well when she says, ‘It will contain much information which will become available to many establishments and persons who have the equipment and means to decipher it.’ Indeed, as Miss Smith also mentions, ‘It may be considered that the use of
this card will be limited but I can foresee reasons where it will be more widely needed.’

Mr Crean—Absolutely: function creep.

Mr MURPHY—Indeed. The previous minister has already mentioned that the card would only be used to 40 per cent of its capacity and that it can store a wide range of additional information. We have heard the current minister suggest that his department is already in talks to explore opportunities for state involvement in the card’s roll out. Where will the use of the card stop? Rather than arrogantly taking a stick to the concerns of Australians, the Howard government must explain the reasons for and the limits of this Department of Human Services card.

The minister and his department have repeated that this card will combat fraud and that it is not a national ID card—indeed, this appears to be enshrined in the legislation. However, when Australians run the risk of having the finger of God follow them everywhere, they naturally speculate as to whether the scheme will remain limited for long. We all should be wary that this card does not become a wolf in sheep’s clothing. If the bill remains in its current form without Labor’s amendments, the scheme may be relatively easy to expand. I have grave concerns, which I will mention in further detail later, about the unique identifier proposed by the government and rejected by the task force into the access card headed by Professor Fels.

The minister’s claims that the card will be used to fight fraud and that it will not be an ID card may be a tactical move designed to lessen opposition to the scheme’s introduction, with the intent that it will be expanded later. There seems to be a sense of getting the infrastructure in place by selling a popular message now and worrying about the card’s unpopular uses later. The question my constituents are asking is whether the so-called benefits of this card to taxpayers outweigh the risk that the boundaries of the card will be expanded to their detriment at some point in the future. It is a question that the Howard government has done an appalling job of answering and it is question that no amount of Work Choices style advertising can conquer. Why has the government only released a heavily censored version of the KPMG business case study on the access card?

Mr Crean—What have they got to hide?

Mr MURPHY—If there truly is a $3 billion return on a $1.1 billion investment, why can’t we see the full report for ourselves? The member for Hotham interjects very appropriately; he has a paralysing insight in relation to that. I will take the opportunity to wish him a happy birthday, because it is his birthday today. I hope that you are having a great birthday, Simon, here in the national capital.

Mr Crean—I am. It is just the place I want to be.

Mr MURPHY—I am sure that you want to be here celebrating your birthday by listening to my speech when you could be doing something else. Thank you for your contribution to this country. It has been immeasurable.

Mr Billson—Happy birthday.

Mr MURPHY—I thank the minister for endorsing that.

Mr Billson—The birthday wishes, at least.

Mr MURPHY—He is a great Australian, Simon Crean—no doubt about it. I have been privileged to be his parliamentary secretary. He is a good friend of mine and he is having a great birthday here in the national capital.

Returning to the bill, the same can be said about privacy protection. Australians need detail. While the Howard government has had the law firm Clayton Utz prepare a pri-
privacy impact statement, the government refuses to release it. The privacy impact statement is itself being made private by the government. The government is not making a strong case for the Australian people to trust it when it refuses to trust them with this information. It is still not entirely clear what the government is trying to achieve by introducing the access card. As my colleagues have suggested, the lack of information available suggests that the access card is a solution in search of a problem and not the other way around.

Given the enormity of the scope of this scheme, the government must start from the assumption that individual rights are superior to the rights of the state. If the government seeks to erode individual rights, it must surely be forced to discharge an onus of proof that there is an overwhelming public benefit in private rights being eroded. It has failed to discharge that onus of proof. It has failed to give a full explanation as to why the relationship between the state and the citizen should be dramatically changed in this fashion. The compelling reason that the government says necessitates this access card is protection against fraud—in particular, welfare fraud. There is a healthy scepticism in asking whether welfare and Medicare fraud is as rife as the government suggests. In an article titled ‘Knowing me, knowing you’, published—

Mr Billson interjecting—

Mr MURPHY—Right on cue, Minister. Your singing brings back memories. In the article, published in the Age on 1 June 2006, the vice-chairman of the Australian Privacy Foundation, Mr David Vaile, said:

It’s very easy to make outrageous claims about security and fraud crackdown, but (we have) only 1 to 2 per cent welfare fraud—lower than credit-card fraud. It’s beyond (the Government’s) return on investment ...

I am sure the member for Hotham would have said it is a disgrace.

Mr Crean—Hear, hear!

Mr MURPHY—It is a disgrace. He has endorsed that. The full public disclosure of the KPMG report would certainly help us to get to the bottom of this matter, but the government has chosen to keep it locked behind closed doors. Nonetheless, the government insists that there are current fraud risks that are unacceptable. The minister in his second reading speech also accepts that there is currently a ‘cumbersome and time consuming system for delivering health and social services benefits’. What neither the government nor the minister has addressed is why the current bureaucratic processes are not working.

Why has the government allowed fraud to become the problem it says it is? Why has the government allowed the system of delivering health and social security benefits to become as cumbersome as it is? The Howard government is trying to snatch a victory from the jaws of defeat. It is attempting to divert attention away from its own failure to clamp down better on rampant fraud, assuming this fraud even exists. It is attempting to divert attention away from its own failure to deliver essential services efficiently. That is what I call projection. What better way to divert attention away from its own failures than by a promise of a panacea in the form of an access card?

Rather than debating the government’s failures, we are now debating the pros and cons of an all-new access card that will apparently make those failures a thing of the past. However, those past failures will still be relevant. No government can rid itself of system failures by turning everybody into a number and issuing them a card. No government can rid itself of problems within a bureaucracy by blindly putting in a new layer
of bureaucracy. To date, the government has done nowhere near enough to address the issues of security of data, privacy of data and quality of data. Changes in this bill and the implementation of an access card will do nothing to rectify these problems. Will a huge national database of identity details make Australian details less or more secure? Will such a database make Australians less or more vulnerable to counterfeiting, hacking or illicit sales of their details?

When commenting on Britain’s proposed smartcard, Frank Abagnale, the real con man on whom the film *Catch Me If You Can* is based, said:

I give it six months before someone replicates it perfectly ... Everything you need to clone an identity is in one place.

In an article entitled ‘Smartcard not so clever: fraudster’, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 16 May 2006, a British ex-government expert suggested that there are inherent risks with the access card being proposed in this bill. Mr Heath said:

It is an extremely courageous step to put all your identification, all the different departments, on to one identifier.

The Howard government cannot shake off its past. The access card is not a panacea for fraud. The issue of identity fraud does not simply disappear with the introduction of a new card, no matter how sophisticated it may be.

The compilation of a national database of the whole population has serious implications in relation to potential fraud and misuse. The government’s past failures in fraud prevention are made more relevant—not irrelevant—by this bill before the House tonight. It is more important than ever before for the government to show extreme diligence in data security—diligence it has not always shown in the past. Despite an overwhelming majority of public servants performing their duties ethically and responsibly, we have heard numerous cases of staff mishandling information at Centrelink, the Australian Taxation Office, the Child Support Agency and Medicare.

I am not entirely convinced that the government has discharged its obligation to demonstrate the broader public interest in eroding individuals’ rights and privacy. Citizens should not have to prove a right to privacy or a right to be left alone; rather, the government must fulfil its obligations to prove it has a legitimate reason to put everyone’s personal details on one database. Proposing a so-called panacea for problems of fraud and service delivery to mask the government’s highly relevant past failures does not amount to a discharge of this obligation. For this reason I firmly believe that the Senate inquiry into this bill should be given much more time to take submissions and more time to report.

Nonetheless, I will support the bill with the amendments proposed by those of us sitting on this side of the chamber. I make particular reference to those amendments that would give effect to all recommendations made by Professor Allan Fels’s consumer and privacy task force.

The access card will facilitate the collection, retention and handling of personal information on a scale never seen before in Australia. The slightest breach of data security will have amplified effects on the privacy of individuals. An effective way to minimise interference with privacy is to adopt the underlying principles of privacy law and practice: only collecting information if there is a specific, necessary and lawful reason for doing so. No robust reasons have been advanced for including a cardholder’s signature on each register, card chip and card surface. Rather than providing any forensic value in detecting fraudulent uses of a card,
the presence of a signature will only increase the potential risks of identity fraud should systems be inappropriately accessed or cards stolen.

The government has ignored the advice of experts in the Office of the Privacy Commissioner and its own task force on the access card. Indeed, in its response to the Access Card Consumer and Privacy Taskforce the government has advanced the nebulous argument that a signature will ‘provide greater utility and security for the cardholder,’ without advancing a skerrick of evidence in its favour. As I have mentioned before, the risk of identity theft and fraud features prominently in the government’s case for the access card, yet a specific task force that was given carriage over these matters unequivocally states that the presence of a digitised signature on the card increases the risk of identity theft and fraud. What does the government do with the advice it has commissioned?

Mr Crean—Hides it!

Mr MURPHY—The member for Hotham is right again. I support him, because the government has ignored the advice. Under the proposed access card scheme, each individual will also be assigned a unique personal identifier number, or UPI, which will be stored on the chip and on the surface of the card. The government has advanced the argument that the UPI is vital for service delivery and the convenience of cardholders. The benefits of such a number have been doubted by the task force.

Nonetheless, a universal identification number, no matter how attractive its purported benefits are, poses too great a threat to the privacy of individuals—as the member for Hotham so clearly understands. Indeed, the task force has said:

... if the card number is displayed it increases the risk of fraud. This risk outweighs some advantages for government administration and user convenience.

The government should not arrogantly depart from the recommendations of its own task force on issues of privacy protection and fraud prevention. It is worth noting that the unique universal identification number is also a crucial element of any national ID card. Despite proposing to put the necessary infrastructure in place, it is not inevitable that this health and social services access card will become a national ID card in the future. That said, it is not impossible either.

The government has provided assurances in this legislation that the card is not, nor is it intended to become, a national identity card. However, the bill still facilitates such an expansion by putting the necessary infrastructure in place. The potential for this access card to become an ID card remains, even if the likelihood of that risk eventuating remains low. If the government has the courage of its convictions it ought to remove the means by which this access card could become an ID card in the future. It could do so by scrapping the universal identification number from its proposal. In concluding, I hope you have a happy birthday, Simon.

Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (8.04 pm)—I am pleased to rise tonight to speak in the second reading debate on the Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007. In some respects I find it a strange debate. It is a debate about tomorrow that is being held today. I have been listening to this debate with a great deal of interest in the contributions that have been made by the various speakers.

It is popular custom to label each age that we live in. If we go right back, there was the Bronze Age; more recently we have had the industrial age, and today we say we live in the digital age. The digital age is the popular
name for a time when the developed world continues to embrace digital technology. Ones and zeroes—binary language—is, I suggest, the most common language used throughout the world today. As each of us goes about our business every day we leave a digital trail of who we are, where we have been and what we have been up to. In this time, collecting, collating and analysing this data is far easier and more comprehensive than at any point in our history. What is more, if the current trend continues, we can expect these tasks to become even easier.

Therefore, a bill like the one being debated here this evening provides reasons for all of us, as representatives in this chamber, to pause and consider. I can certainly say that I have done that very thing in approaching the debate tonight. The goal of the Howard government, of implementing this access card, warrants support. There can be no doubt that within government departments there is much duplication, inefficiency and scope for improvement. There is much in the government’s dealings with Australians that essentially operates on the basis that it is the customer’s problem and it is up to them to fix it. There can be no doubt that in many respects the closest a department or agency gets to customer services is a sign on a wall, a numbered ticket or a recording saying, ‘Please hold; your call is important to us.’ The fact that this government is willing to embrace new technology and to take solid steps that overturn decades of often poor service, inefficient processes and a perverse attitude which places the onus on the customer rather than on the service provider is a very positive move in the right direction.

That said, the devil is in detail. In supporting this government’s initiative to introduce the access card, I have outlined my ongoing and strong view that there must be adequate protections built into the legislative and technological framework surrounding this card to prevent this technology being misused or leveraged in the future. I have made it clear over the past year or more that I am opposed to a national ID card. The national ID card, I believe, would turn on its head the relationship between the individual and the state. The card we are talking about tonight, in the legislation and its intent, is not a national ID card.

There is, however, a risk that the technology being rolled out in implementing this access card could be used by a future government—and, let me make it clear, not this government—to form the platform for a national ID card. My very small role in this place on this matter is to seek to minimise the opportunity for a future government to undertake this task. That is why at the outset I say that this is a strange debate for me, because it really is a debate about tomorrow that is being held today.

The access card this legislation governs, the information contained on the face and the back of the card, the information contained in the chip and the information held on government databases are directed toward the enhancement of government service delivery and the opportunity to minimise welfare fraud.

I have been particularly heartened by Minister Campbell’s approach to the roll out of the access card. Within government I have greatly valued the opportunity to raise issues and ideas and to have these considered as part of the package of bills that will govern the roll out of the access card. From my perspective, we must have clarity of purpose with respect to the access card. Information on the card must be confined to strictly comply with the purposes of the card. Information on the database should be confined to strictly comply with the purposes of the card across the respective agencies. And information on the chip of the card must be confined
to strictly comply with the purposes of the card. For example, we know that this legislation and the access card concern themselves with government services, their enhanced delivery and opportunities to combat welfare fraud. No more and no less should be sought with respect to the information contained on or in, or networked to, the card.

Fundamentally, though, it would be dishonest to say it can be distilled into this most basic statement, because there remains a fundamental conflict in assessing the merit or otherwise of this debate—the conflict between the utility of the card and opportunities for future governments to obtain function creep by using the technology and the card in the future. In this respect I have welcomed the fact that the minister has been so pleased to take on board comments and to consider various criticisms, positive and negative, that I and others have put forward. Also I welcome future legislation which, as was outlined in the first and second reading speeches, will deal with further elements of information protection and legislative issues relating to the use of the card.

I do not seek to take any politically opportunistic stance with regard to the legislation that is introduced into the House. I certainly intend to work as part of government to ensure that the card and its surrounding legislation as passed by both houses will be the very best, will guard against future function creep and will remain true to the purpose that this government has in mind in introducing them.

I will touch on a number of measures that I have sought and discussed with the minister that I am confident in the future will be part of the package of measures to be introduced. They include, for example, audit trails. In addition to that, they include safeguards against additional database compilation as well as strong measures for enforcement of any breaches of this and other related legislation. Additionally, I would like to seek replacement time frames in the legislation, such that if a person’s card was stolen or lost there would be binding time lines on the Public Service to replace the card to ensure the continued delivery of government services although a card may not be able to be presented.

In this respect, especially with regard to audit trails, I believe there is much that can be achieved, and I was heartened in looking at a number of the comments that the minister and others have made on the access card to see that there are a number of measures that will be taken. For example, the fact that Australians will be able to have confidence that the access card will not change the current data-sharing rules between government agencies is one that I certainly put great stock in. The fact that in addition to that there will not be a change of arrangements between human services agencies with respect to delivery of government services, that Centrelink staff will be the only ones able to access the Centrelink data they currently have access to and that Medicare staff will only be able to access the same data that they currently have access to, is very comforting and certainly underscores and highlights that this card is a far, far cry from a national ID card. But, as I said, we should ensure that the total package of legislation, and not merely this one bill in isolation, is recognised as putting in place the appropriate safeguards that are required.

I mentioned the need to ensure that there are safeguards against database compilation. I have certainly welcomed this government’s commitment to ensure that those databases remain separate. I believe the fact that the minister has stated that we do not believe in a single database holding every Australian’s health and social service details and that agency specific information will continue to
remain and reside solely with that agency does provide some reassurance that future database compilation will not take place. Of course, I recognise that the Attorney-General in speaking on this very issue said that it is impossible for a government to bind a future government. But in that respect there is a reason and a rationale for why I have sought more than merely a legislative prohibition on such database compilation.

It is very clear that, as much as possible, there will also need to be technological safeguards. In this respect, I have merely called for the architecture pertaining to the technology that is used to roll out this card to be designed from the outset to prevent future database compilation as much as is feasible and economically sustainable. I suggest to the House that as Australians we can take comfort in the fact that, if this kind of architecture and these technological safeguards were incorporated from the outset with respect to the roll out of this legislation, a future government seeking to compile it into one large database—as is occurring in the United Kingdom—would not be able to achieve that outcome. The reason that would not be able to be achieved is that it would require the system and particularly the technology and its architecture to be rewritten or to be rolled out again. And that, of course, would come at significant cost and give pause to any future government that sought to compile into one database—as is occurring in the United Kingdom—would not be able to achieve that outcome. The reason that would not be able to be achieved is that it would require the system and particularly the technology and its architecture to be rewritten or to be rolled out again. And that, of course, would come at significant cost and give pause to any future government that sought to compile into one database—

In this respect, I also welcome Professor Allan Fels’s chairmanship of the Access Card Consumer and Privacy Taskforce. The comments that I believe Professor Fels has put forward are very sound. In a number of respects, I certainly look forward to seeing the way in which this legislation interacts with following pieces of legislation to ensure that the various issues that have been raised by Allan Fels are incorporated—to the extent that, as I said, a decision also needs to be made about that fundamental conflict between card utility and function creep opportunity. In this respect, I am a realist. I recognise that it would be simply impossible to develop a piece of legislation that would prevent any future government from taking it one step beyond where it is. But, that said, it also would be remiss of any of us in this chamber to not recognise the opportunity for this kind of information collation and this kind of technological platform to be used for further data compilation in the future.

I must say that, in listening to the debate this evening, I have been a little alarmed at some of the poor policy positions that have been espoused by some in this debate—but also publicly. I was a little concerned that the member for Lowe kept referring to the fact that this legislation would see the creation of a single database. That is very wrong. I certainly would place myself at some distance from those who have in some way indicated that this legislation is seeing the creation of a single database. That is not the case. In addition to that, I have been concerned at some of the comments that have been made by others in the political arena. Senator Kerry Nettle, the Greens senator, for example, indicated their opposition to the access card, saying: ‘It simply is incredible for the government to pretend this is not an ID card. Each access card will have a biometric photograph and record all of the holder’s essential identity details.’

The issue is—I believe I have made it very clear that I am opposed to a national ID card—that this is far from a national ID card. As was outlined by the minister, there are
very great differences between this card and a national ID card. Under this bill, this card will not be compulsory for every Australian, although it cannot be disputed that a large number will be using it every time they want to access government services. It will not be an electronic health record. It will not record financial details. It will not be required to be carried at all times. It will not be required to transact normal, everyday business. It will not be required to be shown other than for the provision of health and social services benefits provided by the Australian government and to confirm concession status. In this respect, the extension that this in some way is a national ID card is wrong.

But I also have said in the past that I want to ensure that this card cannot become a national ID card. And there is a great, gaping gulf between those two statements. So, in this respect, I would say to the Greens Senator Kerry Nettle, as well as to Senator Natasha Stott Despoja from the Democrats, who says that she is concerned that this is a national ID card—

Ms Plibersek—What about me? I said that too.

Mr CIOBO—and to the shadow Labor minister—that they need to understand what is before them. Certainly approaching this debate and this legislation in a dishonest way for political advantage is, I believe, to do the wrong thing by the Australian people.

Ms Macklin interjecting—

Mr CIOBO—I will take the interjection, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I take it as an opportunity to make it very clear. I say again what I have said on numerous occasions—that is, this access card is not a national ID card, but there could be opportunity in the future for a future government to make it a national ID card. And that is the very reason why—I repeat again—I have been very pleased to work closely with the minister to ensure that there are in place safeguards to prevent such an event from occurring. In this respect, I am certainly pleased to recognise the reality that we should embrace new technology but also play our role to ensure that that new technology is not abused.

I will raise a number of additional points as well. There can be no doubt that the access card will be used fairly commonly. To suggest otherwise, I believe, would be naive. In the same way that originally a drivers licence was simply a permit that indicated someone was able to and licensed to drive a vehicle, yet now it is used for all intents and purposes on everything from renting a video to getting into a club or pub, I suspect that in the future we will see the access card used for the same reasons. It is with this knowledge that I say that the message should be made very clear that the access card is not a proof of identity document. If this government or any future government sought to hold out the access card as indicating that it is proof of identity, it would be completely wrong, because I have no doubt that the access card will and can be fraudulently produced in the future. Those who would seek to do the wrong thing by society, those who would seek to do the wrong thing in society, would certainly be able to produce a forged access card. The notion that in some way this card is unable to be forged is wrong. It of course can be and will be forged. In that respect, production of the access card as a form of identity verification is of no consequence whatsoever. If, for example, a Qantas attendant or someone at a bank counter asked for ID and what was proffered was the access card, I would suggest to that bank or to the private sector generally that that should not be accepted as a form of proving identity, because that could be a forged card. It could be a card that was forged that very day.

It is this kind of scenario that raises for me some concerns about function creep on the
slippery slope. In this respect, I suggest that it is only a matter of time—and, indeed, we have seen some evidence of it thus far—before the private sector will say, ‘We seek access back to the national registration database to ensure that the card presented is a valid card.’ The private sector will seek to have access to the government’s records to ensure that a card as presented can be verified as being valid. In this respect, I would suggest that it would not be very long and certainly not much of a stretch to suggest that continued production of the card to verify identity would see widespread calls from the private sector for this purpose.

So, in supporting the legislation tonight and in supporting the future legislation by this government, I also take this opportunity to underscore and make clear the fact that this card in no way, I believe, provides any verification as to identity. It certainly does within government. It certainly does within Centrelink or Medicare or for any of those purposes where the government is able to pull up the central files, including a photograph, to determine whether the person presenting the card is presenting a valid card. But, without access to the central database, the card itself does not verify identity and, in this respect, I would make that a very clear point. That is not concerning to me and I do not believe it should be concerning to government, because in that respect this card is for the purposes of providing government services and nothing further. So people seeking to extend the coverage of the card do so in the full knowledge that the card could simply be a forged card and therefore of not much weight to the private sector.

In summary, I look forward to welcoming the comments that will be made by the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration, which, I understand, are undertaking an inquiry into this matter. Their report on 15 March, when tabled, will be interesting reading. I certainly am supportive of this government’s intentions and of this first piece of legislation, and I look forward to seeing additional safeguards put in place that touch upon a number of the issues I have raised this evening. I also condemn some of the misleading statements that have been made by members opposite who seek to use this for political advantage. (Time expired)

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (8.24 pm)—What an extraordinary speech from the member for Moncrieff. On the one hand, he says that he supports the legislation we are currently debating and, then, as he is summing up his remarks, he says that this card ‘can be and will be forged’. In another extraordinary statement, given that the whole purpose of this card is for it to be used to deal with the identification of people so they can get access to Medicare and social security payments, he goes on to say that it ‘in no way ... provides any verification as to identity’. Out of his own mouth he says that it can and will be forged. That is extraordinary criticism from the member for Moncrieff who, I understand, also said in the lead-up to this debate that this card is a Trojan Horse for a national identity card. The legislation has not changed since he made those remarks and, as he walks out of the chamber, it just demonstrates that his arm has been so extraordinarily twisted up his back that it hurt so much he had to come in here and say he supported the legislation, even though, in his own remarks, he has damned the legislation by saying that this card can and will be forged. That is out of the mouth of the Liberal member for Moncrieff. That sums up one of the major criticisms we have on this side of the House—that is, the very practical realities facing this legislation.

We know what the Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007 is supposed to be doing. It is supposed to be a new way of delivering $100 billion in health and
social security payments, and we know that those payments touch the lives of almost every single Australian. Our social security system is there to help millions of Australians—families raising children, the aged, the unemployed and those who cannot work—and to help those who are looking for work get back into employment. Our health system has been built on the back of Medicare, designed and supported right from the beginning by Labor—in contrast, I must say, to the chequered support it has received from those opposite, but that is a debate for another day. Medicare has right at its heart a very simple Australian concept, one that we are so proud of on the Labor side: that if you get sick you will be able to see a doctor. But, if this legislation goes through, you will need this new access card to see a doctor—and most of us at some time in our lives will need to do that. This proposed new access card will become a requirement—and the member for Moncrieff understands this—for all Australians wanting to use these services. By 2010 a person will need an access card to obtain any Commonwealth benefit—that is, Medicare, pharmaceutical benefits that are subsidised through the PBS, and social security and veterans' entitlements, and the list goes on. We on this side of the House support the use of smartcard technology in service delivery; we know it can be helpful. We also support the goal of improved service delivery for both social security and Medicare. We want to get rid of fraud because, most of all, we want to make sure that social security support and Medicare go to those who need it.

But we do not support this proposal, because it is full of holes and full of problems. Once again, it was best summed up by the Liberal member for Moncrieff, who said that it can and will be forged. We on this side of the House support a social security system that reflects our vision for our nation: the concepts of egalitarianism, community and compassion. All of these we want to see at the heart of our national consciousness. Unfortunately, under this government, these concepts have been diminished in favour of individualism, competition and a distrust of institutions.

The concept underlying this bill that we are debating tonight is that our social security system should be strengthened by ensuring access for those who need it most—a concept that, at its heart, is supported by this side of the parliament. Of course we want to get rid of fraud and abuse so that government help goes to those who need it most. But, unfortunately, the way that the government has gone about it in this legislation will not in fact achieve this end. As I said, reducing welfare fraud is a good thing. People should not make unjustified claims. But spending more than $1 billion to issue cards to all those who access social security and health services is going to be a very expensive and complex way to reduce fraud. You might say that it is worth it, but the question is: will it actually work? We know the member for Moncrieff does not think it will work. He has made that clear tonight. He does not think it will work because people are going to be able to fraudulently reproduce these cards.

The second thing is: do we know anything about the nature of social security fraud? We do know that people claiming welfare benefits on false identities are only a small proportion of those getting wrong payments. For years we have had Auditor-General’s reports showing that Centrelink itself makes administrative mistakes. We know that the card that we are debating tonight is not going to fix the administrative mistakes made by Centrelink. This is the most important point on the issue of fraud: this card will not stop people claiming in their own names for payments they are not entitled to. That is what we suspect is the prime source of fraud in the social security system, although we cannot get the
data. We suspect that is where the fraud is taking place. We would like to see that fraud reduced as much as possible, but this card will not do it because these are people who are claiming wrongfully in their own names. They will be able to use this card to do so.

The minister, in his second reading speech, was at pains to suggest that this is no more than an upgraded Medicare card to try to put to rest the concerns in the Australian community. Obviously, he has not put to bed the concerns of the member for Moncrieff. There are a number of other government backbenchers who also have made some pretty extraordinary criticisms of this legislation. They say—and the member for Moncrieff made it clear—that the government is introducing an identity card by another name. Again, in an attempt to stress that the government is not introducing an identity card, the minister went through in great detail the measures the government is introducing and the legislative statements it is making to try to get around the reality. I have to say that it does seem like a case of the minister protesting too much.

The minister’s argument, at its core, is that with an identity card you could not conduct your normal affairs without having to produce your card; whereas, he claims, this access card is nothing of the sort. Life will carry on as normal without the card, it is claimed, if an individual so choses. But normal life actually does include going to the doctor, claiming family payments and, if you are an elderly person, claiming the aged pension. Graham Greenleaf, Co-director of the Cyberspace Law and Policy Centre at the University of New South Wales, makes the point that the access card is:

... effectively compulsory and near-universal for adults, in exactly the same way as was the Australia Card. It is not as a rational and practical matter possible to do without a Medicare Card in Australia in 2006 ...

So if it is not rational and not practical to do without a Medicare card then the new access card will become a requirement for virtually all Australians—certainly all Australians who want to see a doctor. It will be a national card for all Australians to access near-universal services.

The reach of the card is set to expand before it even begins. This is another matter that members opposite should contemplate. The Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs has already floated the idea of the new access card being used to swipe children in and out of childcare services. Indeed the new childcare management system currently being developed by the government and due for implementation next year will require all parents to sign their children in and out of their childcare services, and that information must be transmitted automatically, electronically, to Canberra. It is no big leap of logic to see how the government could say, ‘We might as well use the access card system to gather this information. Parents could just swipe in and out with that.’ It is very possible that the government could require the parents of the almost 600,000 children in formal care who receive the childcare benefit each year to use an access card every day. So much for it not being a normal part of life for those parents. If they do not use it, they will not get any government support for their children’s care.

We have significant concerns also about the privacy of the personal information being stored on the card, as have many Australians. We know that the cardholder’s name is going to be on it, as are a digital signature, a new identifying number, a photograph containing biometric data, the expiry date and other information. All of that will be on the face of the card. Other information will be contained on a chip in the card, some in a ‘public’ area of the chip, which can be viewed by a simple card reader, and some in a PIN-protected
apparently ‘private’ area. All the information on the surface and chip of the card will be held in a new government database called the access card register. Officers at Centrelink, Medicare and other Australian government agencies will be able to access the register.

The scope of the information on the card register database has given rise to concerns amongst many in the community about unauthorised access. I certainly share those concerns. Commonwealth officers are there to serve the public and we all know that in the main they do an outstanding job, yet always where there is a human element it is inevitable that privacy breaches will occur even inadvertently. We know this because breaches have occurred in the past. There are also examples of identity theft and unauthorised accessing of databases by public servants. They include reports in August 2006 that 600 privacy breaches had occurred within Centrelink where staff accessed customer records without proper cause or authorisation. Most concerning, a report by the Child Support Agency found that 405 privacy breaches occurred in the previous nine months. In at least two of these cases, mothers and their children had to be physically relocated at taxpayers’ expense because the Child Support Agency’s release of information had put them at risk.

Another key concern has been the use of biometric data in the photograph on the public face of the card—remember: the member for Moncrieff said that this could be forged. This biometric data is included to enable your image to be compared with other photographs and video footage very easily, therefore making surveillance easy. It is expected that police—both state and federal—will have access to the register, which will contain for the first time photographs of almost the entire adult Australian population. Currently there is no requirement for police to get a court order in order to access this database. These and many other concerns about the information to be stored and the security of the storage have been well voiced by many in the community on both sides of politics, and I urge the government to listen to these concerns and take them seriously.

The underpinning network of social security benefits, payments, pensions and entitlements will remain a feature of the Australian community. It must; it is a fundamental aspect of a compassionate society. But compassion is not an end in itself; it is part of the overall approach of the welfare system that is about enabling participation in our community. The welfare system should be encouraging active participation in the economy and in society. It should be actively seeking to provide people with assistance to overcome barriers before they slip through the cracks—in other words, on this side of the parliament we want a welfare system that responds to the needs of our modern community and does more than provide a safety net to catch people when they fall. Our welfare system should lift people out of poverty by giving them the capacity to fully participate in society.

Unfortunately, poverty and disadvantage still remain deeply embedded in many Australian communities. Life is not a bed of roses for many Australian families, despite the economic boom. Just today we saw new research by Professor Tony Vinson for Jesuit Social Services entitled *Dropping off the edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*, showing that:

Extreme social disadvantage in Australia is real and it’s measurable. It’s endemic to a small number of locations in this country, and it can be fixed... Professor Vinson has found that just 1.7 per cent of postcodes around Australia account for more than seven times their share of the factors that cause intergenerational poverty.
This poverty has been entrenched for years. The more reports we hear of families struggling, unfortunately the less the government seems to care. It seems to be the case that this Prime Minister has stopped listening.

Even with 15 years of economic growth, children in places like West Heidelberg in my own electorate, Kempsey in New South Wales and Hervey Bay in Queensland still miss out on basic education, health care and the other important underpinnings of life. A child missing out in a wealthy country like Australia in this day and age is nothing short of heartbreaking. This comes on top of a report from ACOSS from the community sector, also released today, which shows that 1.5 million Australians sought help from welfare agencies last year—that is up four per cent on 2005.

One of the big messages of today’s reports is that we need to get in early to give children a good start to life. These are the critical messages coming from the people doing research into struggling families who are suffering from intergenerational poverty. They are not out there saying, ‘Spend a billion dollars on a new ID card’; they are calling in fact for the recognition of the particularly strong link between intergenerational poverty and low educational attainment. That is what they want to see from this government; that is what is needed to turn this dreadful poverty around.

Labor understands this link, and with our $450 million a year plan to give every four-year-old access to 15 hours of early learning a week we intend to do something practical to help. Labor is about addressing the causes of intergenerational poverty rather than what this government is doing, which is the introduction of a billion dollar-plus access card. When it comes to addressing the very deep and ingrained causes of intergenerational poverty in this country, you would have to say this government has got its priorities wrong.

I support the second reading amendment moved by the member for Sydney and stress the problems we see with the access card proposal in its current form, particularly the inadequate safeguards to protect the accuracy and privacy of information on the card and in the register, and that the government continues to keep secret key information on the true costs of implementing the card. Labor wants to see our social security and health systems protected from fraud and abuse so that they can continue to provide future generations of Australians the support they need. (Time expired)

Mrs Hull (Riverina) (8.45 pm)—The measures in the Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007 will strike the right balance between providing convenience to people in how they use their access card while protecting their privacy and minimising the opportunity for fraud to take place. It is estimated by the AFP that 50 per cent of fraud cases involve Medicare cards. The measures in this bill will substantially reduce fraudulent claims for benefits, will reduce claims based on inaccurate concession information and will prevent a person from using someone else’s card to claim an entitlement.

It is conservatively estimated that the new access card will save around $3 billion over 10 years in fraudulent payments made using the existing outdated Medicare card. I recall doing a report when I was on the economics committee titled Numbers on the run. We found that we had significantly more tax file numbers than we had people so, if we think there is not some sort of fraud taking place in many areas simply because there is not an ability to recognise or to store information about people, we are greatly mistaken.
Earlier this month in my electorate of Riverina, the Minister for Human Services, Senator Ian Campbell, announced that 19 Centrelink customers in the Riverina had payments cancelled or suspended following a crackdown on the cash economy activity. This detection of fraudulent activity in the Riverina alone is expected to save Australian taxpayers around $133,000. This operation was a two-day field operation initiated by Centrelink and conducted with the assistance of business owners in the Riverina harvesting industry. This access card will help prevent this type of fraud, which is happening not just in the Riverina but across all electorates.

Unlike the current arrangements, the new system will detect people trying to register under two identities. Fraudsters will be caught before they cost Australian taxpayers large and often unrecoverable amounts of money. The system will also respond to the concerns of hardworking Australians who are sick of people who are cheating the system and getting away with it. Apart from the clear benefits the card will provide in combating fraud, it will also play a significant role in streamlining the current cumbersome and time-consuming system for delivering health and social services benefits.

Around 580,000 people each year make a trip into a Centrelink office and join a queue only to find that they have to go home to find other documents, and they have to start again every time they want to apply for a new type of benefit. There are multiple registration points, with some people having to provide the same proof of identity information to the same agency if they want a different service. Each year, some 50,000 letters are sent to individuals who have incorrectly filled out their name and/or their address on their Medicare claim form. This new access card will mean that consumers will only need to register once for a service and, unlike the current system, will only need to notify participating agencies once of their change in circumstances, such as a change in address.

The services include those now provided by or through the Department of Veterans' Affairs; Department of Human Services, including the Child Support Agency; CRS Australia; Medicare Australia; Centrelink, Australian Hearing Services; and Health Services Australia. This card will represent the most significant reduction in red tape, and that is something that the consumer is constantly asking for—no more cluttering up the wallets; you will have one card replacing up to 17 health and social services cards.

It is interesting to hear some of the debate that has taken place in the House. It honestly bewilders me at times. Many people entrust their life savings to internet banking. They have no problem in providing all of the information in their accounts, transferring money all over the world—transferring their money online through the internet—yet there seems to be some concern that somebody will have a photograph identity on a card, or information that is stored on the card that may not be protected, when we clearly know that many of the transactions that we do in our everyday lives are not protected. We flash our licence to every airport, staff member and airline operator when we get an e-ticket. We do not have any problems with handing over our licence, having our photograph viewed and date of birth and licence numbers noted, yet we are concerned about this card.

We provide a licence and licence number if we want a refund at a Myer store or any other store when we return consumer goods. We have no problems with putting forward our licence with a photograph to identify ourselves. We have a passport system that we have no problem with. I look at all of the subsequent legislation that will include the
protection of information on this card and issues relating to an individual’s area of the chip, on which they can store voluntary information and transitional issues. All of this legislation will be put there to protect those people who hold this card.

Some concern has been expressed about the possibility that businesses would be able to demand the production of the card as a form of identity. The bill makes it an offence punishable by up to five years imprisonment, a $55,000 fine or both, for any person, and up to $275,000 for a company, who requires a cardholder to produce their card for any purpose other than for the provision of Commonwealth health or social service benefits or to verify concessional status. But I will go so far as to say—I will guarantee—that this card will be produced because people will want to produce it. They will find it an easy way to verify their bona fides. Rather than businesses seeking the card, I suspect that we, as consumers, will be willing to offer up this card on numerous occasions, as we do now with our drivers licence.

The bill also makes it an offence punishable by a maximum penalty of two years imprisonment, a $13,200 fine or both, for a person to make a copy of or divulge a card owner’s photograph, signature or card number unless it is for the limited purposes of the legislation or with the owner’s consent. That fine climbs to up to $62,000 for a company that commits this offence. I still wonder and question why there is a big issue about this card when we do not seem to have the same problem with our photo identification on our drivers licence, where the photograph is taken at an RTA outlet and is put on your drivers licence. Nobody seems to be at all concerned that there is access to that photograph.

Smartcard technology offers Australians greater privacy because it allows a user to display less information on the face of their card. The face of the access card will contain less information than a drivers licence. This means that more information can be kept out of the immediate view of any unauthorised person. The card will feature a digital photograph, a preferred name, a card number and a signature. Each user will have the option of including their date of birth on the card if they want that added benefit.

People who currently hold veterans gold cards will be entitled to new gold access cards. They will be the only Australians to be given the option of gold coloured access cards. This option is in recognition of the respect Australia has for its veterans and its war widows and widowers. The new gold access card will replace the current veterans gold card. The government will also legislate to ensure that it will be illegal for a pub, a bank or other body to force someone to produce this card as a form of identity.

The basic information on the card, such as the holder’s name and address, will be secured, but the photograph will use biometric technology that measures and analyses the physical characteristics of each Australian. The technology measures features, such as the distance between your pupils, to prevent anyone else from using your card. It is virtually impossible for two people to share the same biometric facial characteristics. In this way, the government can prevent someone from fraudulently using another person’s card or attempting to register more than once. It is a massive protection factor.

Today I had passport photographs done for the very same reason—but I do not worry about that. We hand our passports over, we allow ourselves to be photographed while we are walking through terminals, and everyone measures the distance between our eyes and the width of our forehead; but we do not seem to have a concern about that. When I
look at this legislation I cannot understand why people are crying wolf.

Recently, in one of my local papers, there was a vox pop. I am interested in these vox pops because they gave an indication of what the general community is feeling. They ask about five different people their views on an issue, and it is very rare for agreement to occur among the five people. The question that was asked in my local paper was: ‘Do you support the idea of an access card?’ Without exception, everyone who was asked supported it. One person said, ‘It’s a good idea because it makes everything easier and safer.’ Another man said, ‘I’m happy with the way the system is at the moment but, if it comes in, I wouldn’t have a problem with it.’ Another consumer said: ‘Yes, I do support it. I went to Tasmania and you need ID to do anything there, and it works well. Anything to make things safer is a good move.’ Another gentleman said, ‘Yes, because there are a lot of con men out there.’ A woman said: ‘Look, I’ve got no problems with it. I think the only ones who would complain about it are the ones with something to hide.’

That is exactly my point. If you have nothing to hide or to fear then you would have no problems with an access card or an identification card for health benefits, pharmaceuticals or any benefit that the government is going to pay. I think that is what we as taxpayers of Australia should be insisting upon. It is hard enough to work on a day-to-day basis and pay your taxes without having to recognise that, at any given time, somebody is defrauding the system. It is incumbent upon us to try to make this system as secure and safe as possible. If that is not the intention of good government then I do not know what good government should be doing.

I really support the minister with respect to this access card. I think it is sensible and it is clearly a reasonable thing to do. I do not see the average consumer being concerned about this at all. There will always be some problems from civil libertarians, with their fear of big brother and somebody staring over their shoulder and knowing their information; but, as I have said, many of these people will unhesitatingly hand over a passport with a photograph, their mother’s maiden name and their place of birth—a host of information. We unquestioningly present our passports to every Customs officer and we present them in order to open bank accounts. We have no concern about handing over that kind of information, even though people could track you down right back through your past, whether or not you want them to. I absolutely support this bill.

Debate interrupted.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 9 pm, I propose the question: That the House do now adjourn.

**Electoral Act**

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (9.00 pm)—I think almost every Australian is aware that a federal election will be held some time this year—although, obviously, there is much speculation about the date. I think that it is for that very reason that, as a member of the House, every time I look around I am receiving a letter from the Special Minister of State increasing my entitlements. As incumbents, we have been advised in recent times of our entitlement to an extra full-time member of our electorate staff, an extra computer, increasing print entitlements and, in recent days, an improvement in our mobile phone entitlement—just to name a few of the handouts of recent months.

What most Australians might not know is that the Howard government is going to make it harder for ordinary Australians to
vote at the forthcoming election. Sweeping changes introduced by the Howard government last year as a result of their control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives will result in new laws that significantly alter the way Australians vote. So it is about making it easier for us incumbents to protect ourselves, whilst making it harder for ordinary Australians to actually cast a vote.

The truth is that while, traditionally, voters have had a full week after the announcement of the election date to enrol or update their details, they will now only have until 8pm that night. This severely restricts Australians who work nightshift or have family responsibilities, as well as people who are not fluent in English or who travel regularly. It will also seriously impede people working in remote areas and in fly-in, fly-out mining communities. It will similarly affect people working in the tourism industry.

During the first week of the 2004 election campaign, the Australian Electoral Commission received approximately 80,000 new enrolments and 350,000 updates. That is a total of over 430,000 voters who potentially may not have been able to vote in the election if the 8pm same-day cut-off had applied—as will apply at the forthcoming election. A large proportion of these voters were people enrolling for the first time—mostly young people who, for the first time since turning 18 years of age, were exercising their democratic right to vote. A large proportion of these voters, about 80,000, were voters who re-enrolled, while others were updating their details after moving or changing their names.

Voters now have only three days rather than a full week to change their enrolment details, while enrolling voters must now prove their identity by providing a drivers licence or a prescribed identity document or providing a form that is signed by two witnesses who are not related to the enroller, who have known him or her for longer than a month and who can confirm their own identity with a drivers licence number. That sounds like a lot of hard work. It is. These laws are clearly not designed to encourage people to vote and become more involved in Australian politics.

These are very serious issues. I do not accept that the Australian taxpayers should be lining our pockets with improved entitlements while it is being made harder for ordinary Australians to vote in the election. It seems to me that the pendulum is swinging too far in the way of incumbents to the disadvantage of ordinary Australians and their ability to cast a vote at this very important forthcoming election. We can all work out the priorities of this government: not to make it easier for people to vote but to make it easier for the incumbents currently represented on both sides of this House to gain re-election at the forthcoming election.

The government is to be condemned for this misuse of entitlements. It is not about assisting ordinary people; it is about looking after a small club of currently elected federal members of the House of Representatives. The Howard government is keenly interested in making sure that this occurs. This is precisely what any government keenly observant of every citizen’s fundamental right should not be doing. Voting is a privilege and something to be valued by all citizens. There is an onus on eligible voters to defeat the Howard government’s endeavours and to take the first available opportunity to enrol correctly so as to guarantee that they have the right to cast their vote at the forthcoming federal election.

But the proposals by the Howard government are about diminishing the rights of ordinary Australians—especially those in remote Aboriginal communities and the outer suburbs and regional communities of Austra-
lia—while at the same time making sure that it is easier for incumbents to get re-elected at, I might say, taxpayers’ expense. Incumbents’ entitlements during an election campaign—(Time expired)

Internet Access for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Mr HENRY (Hasluck) (9.05 pm)—I wish to speak tonight of a remarkable and inspirational young man who is a constituent of the Hasluck electorate, a resident of High Wycombe. Scott Hollier received his doctorate in philosophy at Curtin University last week on 15 February. In so doing, he joined only a handful of severely vision impaired Australians to earn a PhD. Scott has retinitis pigmentosa, which means that, at best, he has very narrow, or tunnel, vision and loses all his sight in poor lighting or at night. His thesis ‘The Disability Divide’ deals with how internet technologies can provide opportunities for people who are blind or vision impaired. Dr Hollier is a Principal Consultant for Corporate Development and Innovation at the Association for the Blind of Western Australia, where he hopes to change society’s perception of people who are blind or vision impaired.

In Australia, one in four people have some form of permanent disability. Of the general population, 66 per cent have access to a computer whilst only 48 per cent of those with a disability have access. Fifty-three per cent of the general population have internet access but only 39 per cent of those with a disability do. This is a statistic that is in our power to change. I am disappointed that those in the community who stand to benefit the most have so little access. The internet has been a welcome resource for many people but, for people who are blind or vision impaired, the internet has opened up so many more opportunities for them. Internet access provides independent access to information—more so in the case of those who would otherwise rely upon the help of others, as blind or visually impaired people have had to.

With vast reading libraries now available through the internet, the independence that gives to people who are blind or vision impaired has helped to remove barriers and give access to literature, information and knowledge that they would otherwise have to wait for or simply miss out on. These days, using new technologies such as zoom text or voice software packages, people are able to access that same information immediately, providing much greater opportunity for education and for employment. New technologies now open a window to the entire world. Instead of relying upon braille or audio copies, any text can be accessed straightaway using simple technologies available on home computers. It has also assisted visually-impaired people to participate in online support groups, in exactly the same way that other groups do.

I turn now to the issue of faster access to news and world events. Blind or visually-impaired people are able to gain information more quickly from the internet than from any other source. As early as 1973 the United States government enacted legislation under section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requiring that any information technology sold to or on behalf of the government must adhere to specific accessibility criteria for people with disabilities. This then led to companies such as Apple computer building into their computers as standard features programs such as voice software packages and an excellent zoom option to enlarge text.

In Australia people with disabilities, and in particular people who are blind or vision impaired, are not benefiting from computing and information technologies as much as other Australians through a lack of access.
As such, Standards Australia have identified a need to provide a standard for Australia and have established a working party—which includes Dr Hollier—to assist in the development of an appropriate standard. Dr Scott Hollier discovered that the digital divide is caused not by a lack of ability, will or interest among people who are blind or vision impaired but rather a lack of opportunity.

There are many assistive technologies available that can help people who are blind or vision impaired to use computers in much the same way as those with full sight. It is unbelievable in this day and age that 68 per cent of people who are blind or vision impaired are unemployed, and of those who do have jobs many are significantly underemployed. I applaud Dr Scott Hollier not only for the inspirational way in which he gets on with life but also for his hard work and focus on ensuring that people who are blind or vision impaired will find life easier in the future by ensuring that appropriate legislation is enacted in Australia to enable those with a disability to access the internet and to utilise computer technology. Therein lies the true meaning of life: helping one another.

**Member for Indi**

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Gorton) (9.09 pm)—I rise tonight to raise a concern I have about the member for Indi’s recent appointment to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. If we need any more evidence of the arrogance of the Howard government, we need only look at the appointment of the member for Indi to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. I would like to reiterate the comments made by the member for Batman about the outrageous behaviour of the government in changing the electoral laws—this could disadvantage not only other parties but also, more importantly, potential voters at the forthcoming election. Most importantly, I rise to address the campaign finance scandal that has enveloped the member for Indi. The government has shown a complete disregard for this matter.

The scandal emerged when British American Tobacco lodged its return to the Australian Electoral Commission disclosing political donations for the financial year 2005-06. Page 2 of the British American Tobacco return identified a $15,000 donation to the Liberal Party’s Federal Electorate Council for Indi on 10 April last year. While the Indi FEC is listed as the recipient, the address identified on the return is: Friends of Indi, 117 Murphy Street, Wangaratta. It just so happens that 117 Murphy Street is the location of the member for Indi’s electorate office. Therefore we know where the money has ended up.

The problem for the member for Indi and the Liberal Party is that neither she nor they disclosed this hefty donation. The front group Friends of Indi did not lodge a return either. It is not often you can say that the honesty of a big tobacco firm saved the day, but if BAT had not fessed up then the donation to the member for Indi would have remained a secret. The release of BAT’s return by the Australian Electoral Commission has shone a public spotlight on the member for Indi’s fundraising practices. Her ducking and weaving on this issue has been reprehensible. At first, the member for Indi admitted she was familiar with the Friends of Indi, but she soon moved to distance herself. The cover-up was revealed when a spokesperson for the group, Tom Robertson, said he was a friend of hers from student politics.

Mr Robertson went on to tell the *Border Mail* newspaper that the group’s fundraising activities included dinners with the member. Let us not forget that the donation was sent directly to the member for Indi’s electorate
office. Sleazy fundraising is one thing, but there is more to this story. The member for Indi did not just pocket the $15,000; she championed BAT’s position in a local industry buyout late last year. When some tobacco growers opposed the BAT buyout, she said they were motivated by corruption or fear of criminal thugs in the industry. It is no wonder, then, that some locals have been outraged by the revelation of her secret relationship with BAT. Let me quote Myrtleford grower, Carlo Mancuso:

“Mrs Mirabella has no trouble in tarnishing the reputation and integrity of former tobacco growers by associating them with the illegal tobacco trade, while taking offence at the suggestion there is an association between her undisclosed funding from BAT and her role in a package that ended the industry,” he said.

As they say in the classics: where there’s smoke, there’s fire. It is clear that the member for Indi has a case to answer, and her silence has been telling. She is not known for her timidity generally, but she has been very timid indeed when it comes to explaining her role in this affair. We know that the member for Indi pocketed BAT’s money and went on to support BAT’s buyout of local growers. We know that the BAT donation was the third-largest political donation made by that company last financial year. We know the donation was not disclosed to the AEC or to the parliament. Local growers knew nothing about it.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry says that he knew nothing about it either, despite the fact that the member for Indi was pressing the government for a taxpayer funded support package. There are things the electors of Indi deserve to know. Why did the Liberal Party’s local finance chairperson, Andrew Randall, say that he has never heard of the Friends of Indi? Either Mr Randall is suffering from memory loss or the member for Indi has a most curious relationship indeed with her local party.

How did the member for Indi spend the $15,000 from BAT? What are the names of many Friends of Indi donors? Have these donors gained appointments or other favours from the member? We do not know, but we can guess why the member for Indi has been so reluctant to come into this chamber and explain herself. This is an outrageous abuse of the laws that are currently in place and it should be investigated by the government. Instead of appointing the member for Indi as chair of a committee that has oversight on electoral matters, they should be investigating the behaviour of the member for Indi.

(Time expired)

New South Wales Police Service

Mrs MARKUS (Greenway) (9.15 pm)—I rise to give my full support to the New South Wales Police Service and their efforts to increase base police numbers. The New South Wales Police Service can only be as good as the resources provided to them. These resources include manpower, equipment, administration material and stationery, to name a few. Who would ever have thought that, while $88 million was spent on the broken millennium trains, a police officer has to buy their own clipboard so that they can have something to lean on in the car to do their paperwork because the stationery budget is nearly exhausted? This is unacceptable.

On the home front, we expect our police to be front-line officers walking the beat and responding to calls. This is not happening, as much as our police would like it to. It is not because the officers do not want to go out; it is because the resources of staff on duty are so stretched that the manpower is not there in the first place. New South Wales is one of the largest police districts in the world and we should have the resources to man it. New South Wales has approximately 14,500 offi-
cers protecting over 6½ million people all within an area of some 800,000 square kilometres. We have the worst overall crime rate in the country. Of the 13 types of crime defined, New South Wales rates the worst in 11 of them. It seems no coincidence that we have the highest overall crime rate and the second lowest number of police per thousand people. We hear New South Wales Labor talking about zero tolerance like New York, but how can New South Wales reach that benchmark when New York has five police officers for every 1,000 people and New South Wales has 2.18 police officers for every 1000 people?

The local area commanders are doing all they can with what limited resources they have and their officers know this. The Labor Premier recently came out boasting about the latest numbers of police graduates to boost our police service, but what he failed to mention is that they are really just filling the gaps of police who are still listed as ‘actual strength’. What is actual strength? Actual strength is the number of officers a station has on its books. Let us say a police station has an actual strength of 182 authorised staff. To the average person, 182 authorised staff at a station sounds impressive. But what the public are not told is that 23 per cent are on sick report, long-term sick report, temporary restricted duties, permanent restricted duties, maternity leave or leave without pay. So the extra eight police who recently graduated and joined this station may now be recorded as part of a 190 authorised staff but what they are really doing is filling the gaps for some of the 23 per cent who are not actually on duty for various reasons. On top of this, we have officers on annual leave, training, with court duties and attending to other stations or duties. Those people who I mentioned above may remain on the roster but they do not fill the front-line shifts.

How are new police officers supposed to get any real mentoring and support? New police officers come in and there are not the resources to mentor them. I have been advised that only 13.5 per cent of the New South Wales Police Service have more than 20 years experience and only 12.5 per cent of our leaders are over 45 years of age. The state Labor government should be ashamed of themselves. We have newly graduated committed police officers who just want to learn and be the best they can. How can they learn when in 2005, for example, approximately 700 officers either resigned or were medically retired?

We have good New South Wales police officers who want to get out into the field and do their job to the best of their ability, but they are not resourced. We have detectives who cannot do their job because at times they are filling the gaps of the front-line officers who still appear as actual staff but are not there to fill the shift. We have officers who have to work in unacceptable conditions, such as eight people sharing desks which only cater for four or working in a station where the number of base staff is twice the size that it was originally intended that the building should hold—or worse: police sitting on chairs that have masking tape in place because they are so old and tattered.

Our police and our community deserve better.

One of the comments that I get back from people in my community is that they want to feel safe in their community. They call the police and the police want to be able to come but they cannot. If I as the federal member am aware of the crime concerns then surely the state members must be aware of them as well. It is absolute negligence that the New South Wales Labor government has not done more than top up the force. What we are talking about is people’s welfare; people’s lives; people’s safety; our community’s safety. A
police presence reduces crime. Statistics from around the world prove that. I urge the people of New South Wales who are sick of being treated like second-class citizens with this unacceptable standard to vote with their feet for a change of government. In the meantime, if the New South Wales Labor government is really serious about the needs of this state, I challenge them to put some of the money they will save on the Murray-Darling into resourcing the police force. This is an issue that is significant for every single individual in the community. (Time expired)

Chisholm Electorate: Child Care

Ms BURKE (Chisholm) (9.20 pm)—I rise to speak on a matter of issue to the federal parliament, not a matter that is bound in the state arena as the member opposite did. Funnily enough, there is a state election happening in New South Wales and I suppose we are going to have lots of trotting out of New South Wales state issues. I wish that the government would concentrate on things that it is responsible for. What I want to bring up tonight is yet again the crisis in child care.

The crisis in child care is growing within my electorate and it is something that the member for Greenway should be talking about, rather than police matters. I want to commend the Whitehorse Council for taking significant action in this area. They have announced $1.6 million in funding for upgrades for their childcare centres, with some of them overlapping with my electorate of Chisholm. Whitehorse Council has seen that there are glaring needs and shortages in child care within the area and they have created an additional 75 places. I am not sure that child care is a prerogative of the local city council, but it is an area that they have been involved with for a long time. They run five centres within Whitehorse, providing terrific care and a good example for all centres around of the best quality care available. The $1.6 million has upgraded existing centres to create modern refurbishments and improve surroundings at these centres and has increased the number of spaces available. This is terrific, because I know that in my electorate there are many families who are in desperate need of childcare places.

The Howard government has not been able to see this. The Howard government says that there is no childcare crisis and that parents are being too choosy. I think that the one basic thing you can do in your life is to be very choosy about the childcare centre that you send your child to. What Prime Minister Howard said was an absolute insult to parents. He blamed them by saying that they were too choosy. He was also shooting home childcare costs to parents.

Childcare centre costs have more than doubled in Victoria under the Howard government. The Australian Bureau of Statistics consumer price index figures show that since 1996, when John Howard came to office, the cost of child care in Melbourne has increased by 126 per cent. It has more than doubled. That is, of course, if you can actually find a place to send your child to. One hundred and twenty-six per cent in 10 years is just ridiculous. It has exceeded the cost rise in every other area, from petrol through to houses—you name it. Childcare costs are skyrocketing. They are making it unaffordable for many families to choose to send their children to child care. The choice then is generally for the mother to leave the workforce. The cost has increased so much that many people are literally being forced out of the workforce.

Childcare costs in Australia have grown the fastest in Melbourne, followed by Perth with a 94 per cent increase and Brisbane
with a 93 per cent increase. This is ridiculous. But people are still trying to find this money because there is still an additional crisis in actually finding places available. In my electorate office we have conducted a yearly survey of all the centres within the electorate to ask them what their waiting list is. Last year, of the 24 centres within the area, 15 had closed their books and were not taking any more names. The rest had places available, but these were for a half-day here and a half-day there. A mother coming back to the workforce wants consistent care at the one place. It is a big enough decision to say, ‘I am sending my child to this centre.’ To then find that you can only have a half-day here with this carer and that your child has to get used to another routine with a half-day here at another centre is unfeasible and unfair.

Labor has a policy on child care that will assist these people. Within my electorate of Chisholm, Whitehorse City Council has filled the breach with 75 places, and I commend them. But there should be other ways of resolving this problem. There should be centres at convenient locations. I do the double drop when I am at home. My husband does it on the other mornings. It drives you ballistic trying to get into the traffic again on Station Street as I do every morning to ensure both my children get to where they need to be on time. We should have centres more conveniently located and we should have greater planning in this area. Some areas have too many places and some do not have enough. We need greater coordination and consistency so that women can return to work with peace of mind that their children are at great centres. (Time expired)

**Port Wakefield Primo Abattoir**

Mr *FAWCETT* (Wakefield) (9.25 pm)—I rise this evening to draw the attention of this parliament to one of the success stories in the electorate of Wakefield, which, whilst successful, is today going through a very difficult time. I am talking about the Port Wakefield Primo abattoir, which is one of the two major pig processing plants in South Australia. Over the last five years, this plant has grown in scale, complexity and quality of its operation. It now employs around 370 full-time employees, who have developed a high-level set of skills to meet the demanding requirements of Coles, one of their major customers for packaged pork products.

Port Wakefield has been identified by the company as a critical site for their operations. What a lot of people in the agricultural industry have found is that outer metropolitan areas very quickly get outgrown and pressures come upon them, so they look for regional sites where they have the ability to make long-term investments which are not going to get crowded out. With the signing of a 10-year contract with Coles, Primo has seen fit to invest in Port Wakefield and, importantly, in the community there. It is not only the people who work in the abattoir but also local growers. In Wakefield we have a number of people who breed pigs, as well as grain growers and others who provide that whole market. A large part of the community contributes to this company and to its success, including in exports. The company exports to Singapore, China, Taiwan, Japan and Korea, and those exports are expected to increase.

I have to report to the parliament that this weekend the slaughterhouse in the abattoir burnt internally and, essentially, to the ground. There was also damage to the boning room, which is the part that really value-adds in terms of processing the pig. The good part of this is that the company, in their very professional manner, had very good safety precautions and procedures in place. Despite the devastating nature of the fire, there were certainly no fatalities and even no injuries or
people hurt, because their evacuation procedures went smoothly.

For Mark Viney, the manager on the site, it has been a very full weekend as he has sought to assess the damage and to work through what their options are. Because of the danger of gases that remained in the site, it was only yesterday afternoon, in fact, as I arrived to meet with him, that he had access to the plant for the first time. They went in to try and assess what the damage was and what the options were for the company. What impressed me was the very high degree of awareness that the management had for their workforce.

One of the things that impresses me about this company is that they recognise that their success as a company has come about because of the commitment and the willingness of their staff to upskill and train to the point where they have a world-leading export processing company. That is due to the workers. The commitment of the management to understand the implications of this disaster not only for their company but also for their workforce is to be commended.

We had a follow-up meeting this morning where the workers came to hear from the owners, Mark and the other managers at the plant as to what the future holds. Because they have only recently been able to get assessors and other people in, there is a lot that is unclear at the moment. But one of the things that struck me today was the applause and support that the owners and Mark got from the workforce as they spoke. It shows that they have managed that company and brought it to a standard of excellence which the workers have a real stake in and a real sense of ownership toward. At the meeting today, we had Centrelink there, as well as representatives from the state and local governments and the regional development board. We have given an undertaking to work together to find the best possible way that we can work with this company to make sure that not only Primo but also the community who has supported and built that company has a future in Wakefield.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 9.30 pm, the debate is interrupted.

House adjourned at 9.30 pm

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Ms Livermore to move—

That the House:
(1) acknowledges that the Federal Government formally recognised Australian South Sea Islanders as a distinct cultural group in 1994 and that this was followed by the Queensland Government in 2000;
(2) recognises that Australian South Sea Islanders, as a group, experience disadvantage compared to the general Australian population;
(3) notes with disappointment that many of the practical measures to overcome this disadvantage recommended by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in its report *The Call for Recognition: A Report on the Situation of Australian South Sea Islanders* have not been implemented despite their endorsement by the Federal Government in 1994; and
(4) calls on the Federal Government to go beyond the symbolism of formal recognition of Australian South Sea Islanders and expand current policies to enact appropriate measures designed to deliver real assistance to this group.

Mr Quick to move:

That the House:
(1) notes that:
(a) microcredit is a proven means of eradicating poverty and that research by the World Bank in 1998 found that 40 per cent of loan borrowers had moved out of poverty after four years;
(b) at the Microcredit Summit in Halifax, Canada in 2006, Australia endorsed the goal of having 175 million families receiving microcredit by 2015;

(c) if the Microcredit Summit goal was achieved, then about half the first goal of the Millennium Development Goals, which is to halve the number of people who live on less than a dollar a day, would be met;

(d) Australia spent $14.5 million on microcredit in its overseas aid program in the 2005-2006 financial year, which was less than one per cent of the overseas aid budget; and

(e) the USA, which has funded microcredit longer than most countries, has established a current benchmark level of 1.25 per cent of the aid budget for microcredit spending; and

(2) urges the Australian Government to follow through with its endorsement of the 2006 Microcredit Summit Goal with an increase in funding of microcredit to $40 million per year, or a level of 1.25 per cent of the aid budget, starting with the forthcoming Budget.

Mr Edwards to move:
That the House calls on the Minister for Defence to recognise the offence and hurt caused by his remarks likening the Iraq War to the Kokoda campaign and urges him to unreservedly apologise to all veterans of the Kokoda Track and their families.

Mrs May to move:
That the House:
(1) recognises that:
   (a) high blood pressure is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease, stroke, heart failure, peripheral vascular disease and renal failure;
   (b) cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death and disability in Australia, claiming the lives of 50,294 people in 2002, or 38 per cent of all deaths;
   (c) around 3.67 million Australians are affected by heart, stroke and vascular diseases;
   (d) 1.10 million Australians are disabled long-term by heart, stroke and vascular diseases;
   (e) the prevalence of heart, stroke and vascular conditions increased by 18.2 per cent over the last decade; and
   (f) the total burden of heart, stroke and vascular diseases is expected to increase over the coming decades;

(2) also recognises that:
   (a) salt appears to be the necessary cause of high blood pressure; and
   (b) controlling one's salt intake plays a big role in controlling one's blood pressure, which in turn reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease;

(3) calls on the Australian Government to:
   (a) educate the Australian people on the dangers of a high salt diet; and
   (b) follow the United Kingdom's example and label food with green lights, which identify at a glance the best foods on the market for salt content; and

(4) on a bipartisan level, encourage Australians to reduce their salt intake and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Mr Hardgrave to move:
That the House:
(1) acknowledges that South East Queensland has the highest growth in traffic congestion of any region in Australia;
(2) also acknowledges that the Australian Government has allocated to Queensland authorities over $3 billion in funding under AusLink Round 1 and $18 billion through other road related programs since 1996;
(3) expresses its concern for the lack of commitment by Queensland authorities in progressing the work financed by the Australian Government and the redirection of funds away from the authorised projects;
(4) further expresses its concern at the unreliable project costing provided by the Queensland Government for infrastructure projects and the failure of the Queensland Government to follow the example of other State governments to value-add to the Commonwealth contribution to national highway projects with state contributions; and

(5) notes the Australian Labor Party plan to only widen the existing Ipswich Motorway to six lanes and keep trucks on the Brisbane Urban Corridor while the Liberals want a solution to interstate transport needs, which will take trucks off the Brisbane Urban Corridor and provide ten lanes of traffic between Brisbane and Ipswich.
Monday, 26 February 2007

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott) took the chair at 4 pm.

COMMITTEES

Education and Vocational Training Committee

Report

Debate resumed.

Mr SAWFORD (Port Adelaide) (4.00 pm)—The implementation of the very achievable 12 recommendations in the report of the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training on teacher education entitled Top of the class will provide a very sound underpinning to future education policy in this country in not only teacher education but education generally. Debates in this country on education are all too often non-productive. Claims and counter-claims are made and repeated ad nauseam. Few of the claims can be substantiated, for they ignore valid evidential research and data. The committee has responded very strongly to this glaring omission. Three of the recommendations, 1, 2 and 9, deal with the need to establish a far better research base.

Firstly, it is recommended that a longitudinal study be established to examine the effectiveness of teacher education in Australia and the first five years of a teacher’s career when it is all so obvious a serious attrition rate occurs. Secondly, it is recommended that the Australian government establish a specific educational research fund to be distributed on a similar model to that of the National Health and Medical Research Council. Thirdly, the committee recommends that the Australian government support Teaching Australia’s proposal to conduct a feasibility study into the establishment of a national clearing house for education research.

One of the great problems in the education debate in this country is that everyone thinks that they know what is going on because they went to school or university or some bit of further education. Nothing could be further from the truth. Very few people indeed know what is going on in education, and very few in this place. That in itself is a tragedy. Education debates in this House are all too often embarrassing and just plain wrong.

Recommendation 1 says: ‘Stop guessing, find out what is going on.’ Recommendation 2 says: ‘Take education seriously.’ Recommendation 9 says: ‘Stop grinding teachers into the ground with the latest fad, whim, fashion or politically correct statement.’ Recommendation 3 says to the Australian government: ‘Continue to support the work of Teaching Australia to develop a national system of accreditation.’ There is no doubt that the establishment of a national system of accreditation will take some time and cooperation of state and territory registration authorities. The government should ensure that sufficient resources are committed to allow time for agreement to be reached.

Education is becoming internationalised. It is imperative that Australia begins to take a national approach to education. A national system of accreditation is a sound way to begin that process. Thirty years ago Australia was regarded as an enlightened educational beacon internationally. That is no longer necessarily the case. From that time, we have dropped the ball on technical and vocational education—we still have not picked it up; undervalued primary education, particularly in numeracy and literacy—we have not picked that up either; diminished physical education, giving rise to obesity in children—we have not picked that up either; al-
lowed mathematics and science to fall under the radar—we have not picked that up either; and, as over 25 reports on teacher education have indicated, sent many mixed messages on that topic as well.

It is time to begin to return Australia to a more prominent position in the world of education. Recommendation 4 concerns entry into teacher education. As prominent researchers Skilbeck and Connell have said, selection for teaching should draw upon the rich cultural diversity of Australian society. They are absolutely correct. The teaching force needs to reflect the diversity of the Australian population. It does not, however, do this. Entry into teacher education is increasingly mature, metropolitan, middle class and female. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of those attributes. However, they are far too narrow.

There are too few students from lower socioeconomic, Indigenous, non-English-speaking, rural and remote backgrounds, as well as a dearth of males in primary education. Indigenous representation of 0.7 per cent is well below the four per cent of Indigenous enrolments in our schools. Non-English-speaking representation is at 13 per cent, well below the 23 per cent of students enrolled in this category. Statistics suggest that representation from low socioeconomic areas is not a problem. That is not true. The way of measuring the representation—the socioeconomic status—is flawed and seriously so. Mature age representation is increasing. Sixty per cent of enrolments in teacher education at Flinders University in my state are mature age. Thirty per cent of the enrolments in the University of Tasmania are aged over 25 years. Percentages in Queensland are 50 per cent and higher.

Students from rural and remote areas are disadvantaged because of living and relocation costs and the need to get a job. This leads to a significant dropout from courses of people who would probably become great teachers. It appears the real issue with rural and remote students is not necessarily attracting them to teacher education but supporting them to ensure the retention and successful completion of their studies. Some states like South Australia and Queensland do provide significant funds for this to occur but it is not extensive and, overall, the national response is uneven.

Selection processes for entry into teacher education is very much a contested debate. Should it be based solely on academic performance or draw upon a wider range of criteria? Academic achievement is not sufficient, but this is how most teacher education entrants are selected. However, aptitude is also crucial. The quality of students when they graduate is more important than their academic achievement when they enter the course. It is at graduation that no compromise should be made.

During courses some students display attitudes that suggest they are totally unsuited to teaching. However, there is some reluctance to transfer them to other courses. The assumption that high academic scores reflect high literacy and numeracy is not always correct. Only four of the 31 universities require year 12 mathematics; eight require year 11. The other 19 universities have no requirements in mathematics. That is not acceptable in a modern world.

Recommendation 5 deals with the supply of teachers and meeting teacher shortages. There is an obvious mismatch between government, employing authorities and universities in meeting the needs of the teacher labour market. The obvious lack of collaboration between these bodies is not acceptable. This is one area where data is available. There is no excuse for not using it, although it should be acknowledged that the process for identifying workforce priorities is not specific enough.
Recommendation 6 refers to practicum and partnerships in teacher education. Beginner teachers rate their practicum as the most useful part of teacher courses. However, there is no single model in Australia. There is no consensus on how much there is and when it commences, nor on structure, assessment or evaluation. There are suggestions that the amount of practicum has reduced in recent years. There is a shortage of placements. There is no obligation on employing authorities or schools to offer places. There is a lack of incentive to be involved: small payment, no time off and no professional development. This is a very serious problem in our secondary schools. Major reforms are needed in practicum. There is insufficient attention given to matching students with appropriate teachers. Too often teachers have little contact with universities and are unclear of expectations. Universities list a lack of funding as the major hindrance to a practicum. There is a lack of shared responsibility between employers, universities and schools.

The Australian government should take the lead in promoting, strengthening and evaluating partnerships. Employing authorities need to assume a greater responsibility for the preparation of future teachers. Practicum supervisors should be eligible as advanced teachers for higher status and remuneration. Universities need to give greater priority to properly supporting students in practicum.

Time is going to limit my recommendations, so I will quickly refer to recommendations 7 and 8. I support the committee’s recommendation on the introduction of the Scottish model of induction as the model that should be followed in Australia. Ongoing professional development for teachers should be a condition for the renewal of registration. As an aside, interestingly, the Scottish model of education is the one that we are most closely aligned with in Australia.

Recommendations 10, 11 and 12 refer to the funding of teacher education. The Commonwealth contribution for teacher education at $7,251, which is lower than that for languages and performing arts at $9,037, is simply not justifiable; in fact the amount ought to be closer to that of nursing, at $9,692.

Funding increases for practicum and the greater transparency of acquitting Commonwealth government funds are also highly recommended. As I have said previously, this is a very sensible and professional report which has made achievable recommendations and demands, and it deserves a positive response from the minister and the government. I thank the chair, the member for Cowper, and members of the committee. I thank the secretariat, who have done a great job—in particular, Janet Holmes, who has put together a very lucid and professional report, needs to be specifically congratulated. I commend the report to the Main Committee, and I commend it to the government and to the opposition.

Mr Henry (Hasluck) (4.10 pm)—In speaking in support of the report Top of the class: report on the inquiry into teacher education I would like to firstly acknowledge the City of Gosnells, in my electorate of Hasluck, which hosted a day’s hearing on 25 October. They provided a great deal of assistance and support to the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training in setting up the hearing room for that day, which was greatly appreciated. I would also like to acknowledge the work of the chair, the member for Cowper, and fellow committee members. This was a very interesting, enlightening and educational opportunity to hear all of the evidence and to discuss the issues with members of the committee during the
course of the hearings. I would also like to commend the work of the secretariat in organising, administering and providing support to the committee and in the detail of the report.

*Top of the class* is a comprehensive review of some of the problems faced by trainee teachers. The report will give us a better understanding of the opportunities currently available and the changes that need to occur to provide even more support and, most importantly, to improve teacher performance in the classroom. As was said at the tabling of the report, there is not a crisis in teacher education, but there is an opportunity to improve performance in teacher education. Importantly, the report seeks to bring about solutions to support teachers, as they are the most important factor influencing student achievement, influencing our children as they go through the school process.

The committee recommends the Australian government’s continued support of Teaching Australia in its development of a national system of accreditation. This is not a new idea. I understand it has been on the agenda of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs for years, but unfortunately it has not happened. A common set of national, professional standards for teaching needs to be developed for use by all jurisdictions—for the registration of teachers and for the accreditation of courses. Key stakeholders need to be involved in the development of these standards. A national system of accreditation will not only strengthen the quality of teacher training but also provide the public with the assurance that graduating teachers are trained to a nationally accepted standard. Doctors, accountants, engineers and even plumbers operate within a national standard. National standards are set not just to ensure entry standards performance expectation but also to ensure accountability and continuing registration to practise.

Another aspect of the report, which is significant and must be addressed, is that of practicum. Practicum is a very important aspect of teacher training. The committee heard evidence of shortages of practicum placements, a weak link between practicum and theoretical components, the differing quality of supervisors, inadequate funding, along with additional problems faced by those undertaking practicum in rural and remote areas, all of which need to be addressed. These problems have been outlined time and time again for many years and they appear to escape an effective solution. Whilst there are a number of initiatives in place that are designed to improve practicum and whilst there are many teachers who are outstanding supervisors, it is still unacceptable that the quality of practicum is so varied across the country.

In Western Australia a teacher is required to have only 45 days of supervised practice teaching. Having the opportunity to experience a classroom, honing the skills required to not only manage the classroom but also plan for each term’s classes whilst at the same time keeping the students not only focused but engaged requires as much practical experience as possible during training. I believe this practical experience must commence early in training, not at the end, because it gives a student teacher the opportunity to discover early if their preferred profession is really what they wish to do. Many young trainee teachers spend three years at uni and find themselves in front of a classroom only to discover that they do not have the skills, the knowledge or the competency to control students in the classroom environment. These people tend to drop out, leading to the attrition rate that we seem to experience amongst qualified teachers.

Having the opportunity early on to discover the class environment can then lead to remedial steps being taken. It is important that these sessions are properly supported and super-
vised. Recent graduates rated practicum highly, but much of the evidence before the committee showed that it is an area of major concern. Practicum sets out to achieve integration of the theory with professional practice across teacher education, content, knowledge and professional knowledge. It is important that it is implemented in such a way that there is a partnership with the teacher educational institutions, the schools and the relevant professional bodies.

I might just underline that partnership aspect and its importance in ensuring a proper, practical process of teaching student teachers in the classroom about classroom management—managing students and the issues that students have. Its aim is to assist progressive development of newly acquired skills for the trainee teacher, providing valuable classroom experience in a variety of circumstances whilst working with the students. This provides a trainee teacher with the opportunity for evaluation and can then assist them in their response to their classroom experience. Practicum is also vital in providing feedback to the training institutions to ensure that their course best serves their trainee teachers.

Evidence before the committee showed that a number of course providers are working hard to improve the professional experience, and the committee commends these efforts. However, where the system was not as good can largely be attributed to a current division of responsibilities for delivering teacher education and the lack of recognition of shared responsibilities between the major parties. Teacher education facilities, the schools involved in the partnerships and the supervisors all play an integral role in providing the best practicum experience for the trainee teacher. It is not a difficult role but it is imperative that it occurs, as everyone, including the students, will benefit from an increase in responsibility.

I strongly support the recommendations of the committee to rectify these problems. Ensuring that high-quality practicum is carried out and assessed by high-quality supervisors will ensure that course providers better meet the expectations of the trainees. In all professions, the governing bodies ensure that apprentices, doctors and lawyers serve an extended period under supervision. This supervised on-the-job training is vital. It should be no less important an opportunity for those who are charged with the education of our children.

With an attrition rate of some 60 per cent of teachers and an ageing population, it is extremely urgent that we address the problems that are leading to this exodus from the profession. The Howard government recognised the trend in the shortage of teachers and capped the HECS fees for tertiary teaching courses in 2005. Unfortunately, the state government in Western Australia took a lot longer to act. In Western Australia at the start of this school year there was a shortage in the public schools of more than 250 teachers. That impacted on a number of classrooms, with children attending school for the first time without teachers.

It is not as though there are not teachers with qualifications. In fact, I had a young constituent approach me last year who spent four years at university gaining a qualification in physical education and the best that the state education department could do was place him as a relief music teacher—not within his area of discipline. We need to make sure that these allocations and the development of skills and disciplines are applied in the best possible interest of the teachers but also the students.

Relief teachers in Western Australia are being allowed into the classroom with just three years training, rather than four, under part of a desperate plan by the government to tackle the shortage. This situation has not occurred overnight. They have been warned for several years that this was the trend. The response of the Labor minister for education, Mark McGowan,
was to send a party of three officers from the Department of Education and Training to attend a range of immigration expos in universities in places such as Birmingham, London, Edinburgh and Belfast on a recruitment drive to overcome this issue.

He also intends to recruit teaching students from England, Scotland and Ireland who are only due to complete their studies in June of 2007. That is on top of 16 UK and overseas teachers employed at the beginning of the school year who now find themselves in classrooms in the far north of Western Australia. Imagine being plucked from those areas in the Northern Hemisphere and being placed in the north of Western Australia. The difference in climate itself would be a significant challenge to teaching. What support will these new teachers have? Apart from the differences in the classroom, how are they to deal with other aspects such as government employee housing conditions and a department that is completely foreign to them, not to mention the cultural differences and homesickness?

As legislators it is imperative that we ensure that teachers enter the classroom with the best possible training and the best approach to the job at the same time as not only keeping intact what was once a desire but also ensuring that their passion for teaching remains strong. As William Butler Yeats once wrote:

Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.

We must ensure that the classroom experience is closely aligned to the perceptions gained during training. I commend the report to the chamber.

Mr STEPHEN SMITH (Perth) (4.20 pm)—I welcome the publication of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training report on the inquiry into teacher education. I note that it is a unanimous report. I note the committee’s chair, the member for Cowper, has referred the recommendations to the government, just as the deputy chair, the member for Port Adelaide, has referred them to me as Labor’s spokesman on education. I will, as the government no doubt will, give the detailed recommendations consideration and respond in due course.

This is a very valuable report because it underlines the importance of teaching as a profession and it underlines the importance of quality teaching. Historically as a nation we have undervalued, underregarded and underremunerated teachers. We have undervalued teaching as a profession and that is now emerging as a historical attitude which is to our cost. If we do not repair that attitude, it will be to our considerable economic and social disadvantage in the future. I do not think we can underline too much the importance of teaching and the importance of quality teaching.

All of the research and evidence I have looked at recently leads me to the conclusion that one of the most important factors, if not the most important factor, in determining a quality educational outcome for a student is the quality of the teacher in the classroom. As a consequence, public policy cannot turn a blind eye to how we assess quality teaching in the classroom. But before you can move to determine how public policy might judge the quality of teaching in the classroom, you actually have to have a supply of teachers—you have to have a supply of quality teachers and retain them in a noble profession.

Let us look at a quick snapshot of the state of our teaching profession and the supply of teachers in Australian society at the moment. The statistics are readily available from the department, and some feature in the report. Between 2001 and 2003, one in five domestic stu-
students in teacher education courses dropped out during their course. Fewer than 60 per cent of teacher graduates from initial teacher education courses were actually working full time in education in the year after they completed their course. Education authorities report anecdotally that up to 25 per cent of commencing teachers leave their current teaching position, and possibly the profession, within their first five years of teaching. Some 70 per cent of teacher education students in 2005 said they intended to work as a teacher for no more than five years. In 2002, of the over 365,000 Australians with teaching qualifications, over 115,000 were working outside education.

As well, we have significant difficulty with the ageing of our teaching workforce. In 2001, six per cent of teachers were under 25; 22 per cent were between 25 and 34; 28 per cent were between 35 and 44; and 43 per cent were over 45. And there are suggestions now that maybe about 50 per cent of our teachers are 50 or over. It was as early as 2003 that the ministerial council of state, Commonwealth and territory education ministers concluded shortages of 20,000 to 30,000 teachers could occur later this decade.

When it comes to specialised teacher qualifications, we see appalling statistics in physics, chemistry and maths—the key, core disciplines of science and maths. Over 40 per cent of senior school physics teachers lack a physics major, 25 per cent of senior physics teachers have not studied the subject beyond first year at university, 25 per cent of senior chemistry teachers do not have a major in chemistry, 25 per cent of science teachers do not have a science qualification, around 25 per cent of maths teachers do not have a major in maths and nearly 10 per cent of maths teachers have not studied any maths at university at all. We have an emerging crisis in the number of teachers, in the specialised attributes of those teachers and in retaining teachers within the profession. That leads to a crisis in the quality of teaching within Australia.

What does the committee unanimously recommend we do about that? I think there are some significant strands underlying the importance of the committee’s report. What can we do to attract young Australians to teaching? What can we do to attract young Australians to stay within that profession? What can we do to attract young Australians to specialise in key core discipline areas? Some of the suggestions that the committee have made are to me eminently sensible, including that teachers in their early years should be subjected to some form of mentoring program conducted by more experienced teachers. This is a very sensible idea. The committee suggested that teachers in their early years, particularly their first year, should be the subject of rigorous induction procedures and that a standard year’s teaching load should be reduced to enable that induction to occur. The committee said we should require ongoing professional development as a matter of course and that it should be recognised. The committee suggested that through the work of Teaching Australia, we should move to national accreditation of teacher qualifications. This, to me, is a sensible course to pursue. Just as it is sensible to pursue national curricula in other areas, it is sensible to pursue a system of national accreditation when it comes to teachers.

The committee also referred to the entrance requirements and the current public policy attitude to university students studying education. I think that the government sent a very important message a couple of years ago, in 2003-04, when it reduced the HECS up-front contribution for those students who wished to study teaching. Whether or not people take a sceptical view about whether HECS is or is not a deterrent to students studying—and I take the view
that a high HECS contribution can be a deterrent to young students from working families—if you reduce the HECS contribution in key areas you send a public policy message that the nation believes that studying and teaching in these areas is important. The committee sensibly recommends that there should be a long-term evaluation of that.

The committee also makes the point that the cluster funding arrangements for the Commonwealth contribution per university student studying an education or teaching course ought to be the subject of a very serious review. We do know that the government’s current cluster funding arrangements are historical and we also know that very many of them bear no relationship whatsoever to the real cost of providing quality courses to students in particular course areas. That particularly applies in education in the practical on-the-job and classroom training that is essential for and required of graduating teachers. This is a very important report. It underlines the importance of quality teaching in the classroom.

I said earlier that it is a difficult thing for public policy to judge the quality of a teacher in the classroom, but I think we have to go down that road. I do not subscribe to the current minister for education’s simplistic view that you can somehow judge the quality of a teacher in the classroom simply by looking at results in standardised tests. That is simplistic and narrow. But there are a whole range of things we can do to ensure quality teaching in the classroom, including the committee’s recommendations on mentoring, induction, ongoing professional development, accreditation in specialised areas and a national system of accreditation. This report is important because it goes to a fundamental area of importance to our social and economic future. Without quality teaching we will not see quality students emerge. That will be to our economic and social cost. I commend the committee’s report to the House.

Mr MICHAEL FERGUSON (Bass) (4.30 pm)—I rise to speak on the report of the House Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training inquiry into teacher education, Top of the class, which has today been tabled in the House of Representatives. I have found it a very fulfilling and satisfying experience to be a member of this committee and, in particular, to be involved in this inquiry. We on the committee have worked in a fashion which I think the parliament and the people of Australia can be very proud of. I have observed very good working relationships between the committee chair, the member for Cowper, and the deputy chair, the member for Port Adelaide, and among the members of the committee. The subject matter of the inquiry was not easy, but we approached it in a spirit of genuinely wanting to see improved outcomes for people who study at university to become teachers.

The inquiry was a very interesting experience. We approached it with trepidation because it is just the latest in a very long list of antecedent inquiries over my lifetime. I would like to think that this will be the last such inquiry. It would be nice to think that, with all of the work that has been produced over the last few decades in this area, we are actually in a position today to take a holistic approach to those, to take the good from all of them and to actually implement them. I know that one of the great frustrations for people in this sector around Australia has been the fact that many reports and inquiries on this subject in the past have been ignored. While I think there will be more inquiries in the future, I hope that this report is taken note of and adopted by the government, and I see no reason why the opposition would not be minded to do the same.

In that spirit, I offer a little anecdote from back in the days when I was a schoolteacher. In my last year of teaching, one of my more memorable students, a young lady by the name of
Rebecca, quite indignantly complained to me that a person who wanted to study to be a veterinarian had to study for some six years and they only have to look after animals, yet a person who wanted to train to look after children—that is, to become a teacher—had to train for only four years. She was quite indignant about this situation, the implication of course being that it should have been the other way around because children are more important than animals. The comparison is not a fair one, and after all she was only joking, but it does highlight that there is a very important link between the quality of a teacher’s preparation as an undergraduate and their quality as a teacher in the classroom.

The report today is, I think, the result of a committee inquiry which approached this subject by really looking to again speak with and hear from universities, parents, teachers, schools and other peak bodies. Today I strongly believe that we have an opportunity to look at these reforms, stare them in the eye and actually take this opportunity—and I heard one of the previous speakers describing this as an opportunity.

There are 12 far-reaching reform measures which are being recommended, including the need for a truly national system of accrediting university courses; making practicum more effective and building genuine partnerships which can actually empower practicum to be a very useful experience for student teachers; the need for a reliable research base to inform this policy area in teacher education into the future; at last, sanction for a genuine induction for graduate entrants to the profession; career-long learning and development; and, of course, the funding issues which come with any reform initiative.

I know that our report does explicitly state that the committee has been very impressed by the dedication and professionalism of both the profession itself and those who are preparing future teachers. In attempting, though, to fulfil our mandate of honestly looking this sector in the eye and being able to assess the quality of teacher education in Australia, we certainly did find that the quality varies widely between providers and depending on exactly what institution and what stream a student is in. This makes sense given that faculties as entities within universities operate in an academic environment which allows for freedom to be innovative, creative and clever, and maybe even do some risk-taking about the approaches that they adopt in preparing teachers. But equally it has to be said that universities and faculties are free as well to be very dull, uninnovative, uninspiring and traditional—if you like, resting on the methods of the past because, after all, that is what you are familiar with.

At a political level over the last few years there certainly have been concerns expressed by different parties or different people about the quality of our future teachers. That does point, as always, to the quality of the experience that they are being exposed to at university. This needs to be tested. As was indicated earlier today, the committee, in accepting that there might be some evidence for this, was not in a position to make a broad-brush judgement because, unfortunately, as strange as it may sound, the research base is simply not there on a basis that you could rely upon with any certainty.

In that regard, I think we will find that there will be people, particularly in the media, who will be perhaps disappointed that the document is not more political, and that it does not give a hard time to academics for being too left, quasi-psychological, uninspiring or unimaginitive, or not producing teachers capable of teaching in a classroom and managing that very difficult environment. But, equally, there is no bill of clean health here either. We have a lot of work to do in this country in establishing a research base which we can rely upon when those
people who replace us in this parliament are again confronted with issues to do with teacher education. I hope that the Australian government at this opportunity takes up our recommendation of establishing that very important longitudinal study along with, of course, the educational research fund—call it what you will—to put education in this country in an informed position. Unfortunately, that is not where we are at today.

Teacher training in Australia is certainly not in crisis. It is with a good deal of heart that I say that. But we certainly can do better. I do believe that our community is ready for further education reform and that we need to see that beginning in our universities. On the evidence that is available here, it cannot generally be said that teacher training produces graduates without the necessary suite of knowledge, skills and strategies to teach effectively, but it is happening in some quarters and we will need to be courageous enough to meet our obligations and to challenge it.

The country is also confronted by the fact that we do not have at this time a set of professional standards for either teacher registration or teacher education that is nationally consistent. That is a very important initiative. I think it is one of the centrepiece recommendations from the committee’s report. I think that will need to be handled in a very delicate fashion with our state and territory colleagues, because we will all have to own this if it is to be successful in the future.

Adopting this recommendation has a risk in that if it is not handled carefully and with a genuine spirit of goodwill with state and territory colleagues we run the risk of bringing those professional standards in a nationally consistent way down to a lowest common denominator. We must be very careful that that not be allowed to take place and that we in fact strive to lift standards, which can only result in better learning outcomes for our kids. I think Rebecca would be impressed with our report. I think she would see that we are actually attempting to harness the information we have to hand in a way that reforms education, makes it stronger and makes it better for people in her situation in the future who are challenged with questions of the difference between four and six. I thank the House.

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (4.40 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training entitled *Top of the class: report on the inquiry into teacher education*. I commence my comments by extending, as other speakers have, my thanks to the chair, the member for Cowper, and the deputy chair, the member for Port Adelaide. It has been quite rightly identified that this inquiry, given the highly political nature of education as an issue of debate in the community, could have become quite divisive. Thanks to their leadership and the partnership approach taken in this committee we managed to work our way through some fairly difficult and challenging issues to come up with what were solid and practical responses in a way that, as the chair made clear in his comments, focused on what would be a good outcome rather than on what was an ideologically correct position. I think at the end of the day that is why the committee feels so comfortable with the unanimous support that stands behind this report.

Before I get to the recommendations I would like to take the opportunity to personally acknowledge the work of the committee secretariat. I suspect that the process that we went through was not the standard process for many committee hearings. I do not think there was a single person on the committee who was not absolutely engaged and interested in debating out both the content of the report and the recommendations. It was a very vigorous engage-
ment of minds, which my colleague the deputy chair has often talked about, not only between the members of the committee but with the secretariat. It puts a lot of pressure on the secretariat personnel to have to do that, with fairly vigorous members of parliament putting their views. It was handled extraordinarily professionally and resulted in a first-class report being produced. To all members of the secretariat, past and present, who lived through that process with us I extend my thanks for their professionalism.

I would like to address some of the context in which this report now enters the educational debate in this country. Many speakers have made the point that it was certainly not in evidence received by the committee that there is a crisis in teacher education. Indeed, I think it would be fair to read from that statement that we do not believe there is a crisis in teaching. What we do believe is that there are looming serious challenges and significant pockets of shortfall that need to be addressed and that one way of addressing that is through the manner in which we educate and train our teachers and provide them with support in ongoing professional development.

What are those challenges and those glaring gaps at this point in time? One challenge is that we have brought down a report on how to produce a quality teacher in a time period where the issue is going to be how you get a warm body in your classroom. That is a real challenge. Already we are seeing significant shortages, and the shadow minister for education, the member for Perth, talked about some of those in his contribution. There are significant shortages in certain aspects of teaching, in particular in maths and sciences, in languages other than English of course and, increasingly, in some of the technical subjects being taught in schools. When we combine that with the fact that the teaching workforce is ageing, we are looking in the near future at a significant demand for teachers in the classroom. So the pressure will be on to simply push people through in numbers in order to address that shortage. I think there is no more critical time for a report such as this one about quality; to be saying to governments and all the partners involved in teacher education—the universities, the employing authorities and, indeed, the young training teachers themselves—that this is exactly the point in time when you need to make sure that you are maximising the quality outcomes, because the pressure for quantity is going to be significant.

I think that, with regard to this report and its recommendations, there is a real urgency about making sure that these very practical measures are put in place to ensure that we do not end up in that bind where schools are simply faced with the fact that any teacher in the classroom is better than none and so that some of the things that the shadow minister talked about, such as people teaching maths with no maths qualifications, do not continue to occur. That is the overall workforce plan and the context in which we bring down the report.

We also bring it down with the recognition that, for many young people, the teaching profession has undoubtedly become less and less attractive, particularly secondary teaching. We know that societies have become more complex and communities deal with multiple challenges in terms of drug and alcohol issues, crime rate issues and neglect issues that are confronting classrooms around our country. We know that to some extent some of the very good developments we have had through encouraging our children not to unquestioningly obey authority, with all of the problems that had in the past, have also meant that it is much more difficult to assert authority. For many teachers that is a real challenge, particularly, as I said, in the secondary system.
I talk to a lot of young people. I have a son doing teacher training at university. There is nobody more critical of that than those who have just come out of school. They know what horrors they were, so it is very difficult to encourage them to feel positive about becoming a high school teacher. It is interesting to listen to their conversations. Part of the reason that I think we get an overapplication for primary school teaching and an underapplication for the high school teaching is that they have this view—they know how horrible they were at 14 but they were not too bad at seven or eight so, if they would like to teach, perhaps the primary school option is the better one. That is a real challenge.

Some of the programs that we are recommending in this report will, I hope, start to address that. What happens is that you get a big supply of kids applying to do primary teaching and not so many applying to do secondary. The universities say, ‘We can fill up classes full of primary school teachers and get the funding for that, so we will do it regardless of whether there are actually jobs for them at the other end of that process.’ Some of the really serious recommendations in this report about workforce planning and tying the funding of university courses to that planning are very important, because if you make courses available in the areas you are more likely to have kids look at it and say, ‘I actually really liked science at school, so maybe being a science teacher would not be a bad option.’

The other really good thing that has happened is that we have seen a movement towards mature age entry in particular into secondary training because of options like the one- and two-year diplomas in education. Many of them are even going into the full degree courses. That is a good outcome too. The recommendations in here actually provide for opportunities to not close down and become prescriptive about the entry level. I think the committee very wisely, under a lot of pressure to talk about entry-level criteria—should we test, should we enforce interviews, should we have psychological testing of people on their appropriateness to the profession?—listened through all of that and worked our way through. I think that, quite rightly, the committee at the end of the day said that the real test is what comes out the other end. You can spend your whole life arguing about what criteria and characteristics you can or should measure at the intake level.

There needs to be a good course providing plenty of practical experience from the earliest stages that allows people to self-deselect, if you like, if they recognise early on that they are not suitable for the classroom; a good course that measures the standards that young people reach at the end; an ongoing induction program that supports that through provisional to full registration; and then an ongoing professional development program that says, ‘If you want to get registration and reregistration and promotional-level standardisation then you will do ongoing professional development.’ I think that this report is a sound basis for all the things that we need to do to ensure that quality can be sustained under the immense demand for more and more teachers that is going to face us in the next 10 to 20 years. I commend the report.

Debate (on motion by Ms Hall) adjourned.
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Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Committee
Report

Debate resumed.

Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (4.51 pm)—As I said during the tabling in the House earlier today of the report *Skills: rural Australia's need* by the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, a skilled rural workforce is critical to our economic future. It is also important for the survival of rural industries and rural communities in the face of increasing international competition. I think it is evident that the level of education in our agriculture workforce in the past has a low incidence of post-school qualifications, particularly at the tertiary level. Rural workers need to be skilled and there are significant gaps in our capacity to address those shortages.

It was evident through the many submissions and deputations to the committee that we need to address negative perceptions of rural industries. There are positive career prospects available in forestry and agriculture and the many support and research services surrounding those industries. In order for the skills to be developed, the committee realised there was a need to develop some national strategies, such as a national program for rural skills training in schools, a national framework for the reinvigoration of our agriculture colleges, a review of the Australian Apprenticeships scheme with reference to consistency in the funding of FarmBis, scholarships programs and/or HECS exemptions at the higher education level, and pathways that allow for transition from VET to university in the rural skills training and education area. We also need to have a strategy to promote the role of agriculture and forestry in Australian society and in schools. Primary industry careers are not seen as sexy and desirable as there are negative pictures being painted by the presence of long-term drought and long hours of work. There is a drought on and you can generally make a lot more money working in the mines than you can on a farm—so why would anyone want to study agriculture?

The number of agricultural education courses in Australia has been declining for years but there are still students enrolling at universities and colleges around the country in the hope of making a future from the land. A recent ABC program stated that the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology says this area of education has lost its identity, focus and relevance, and needs to be revamped. The institute’s Chair of Education in South Australia, Geoff Thomas, who gave evidence to our committee, has written a discussion paper claiming university courses need to become less specialised, and focused more on people and less on plants and animals.

One of the lecturers in horticulture at Charles Darwin University, Emily Hinds, said there was a perception that horticulture was just glorified gardening. She says it is tough to get people interested in the courses but that there are new career prospects opening up, including in environmental science and in the rehabilitation of mining sites. Her students are looking for jobs in areas like nurseries and landscaping, and many are keen, in changing careers, to spend more time outdoors.

I believe that future careers in the rural sector are an immense challenge and very exciting. So much is changing, and although there are problems there are huge rewards for those who can solve some of those problems. It was this I was trying to address when pursuing the need for vocational education and training to be more responsive to and flexible for the needs of primary industry. Training should provide people with real skills and meaningful qualifica-
tions so our young people can take up those challenges with the energy required to problem solve. Young people are prepared to take on the challenges, but they need to have the tools to do so. They also need to have career paths so they can continue learning and training and continue to be rewarded for their work.

In addition to the recommendations for rural skills and training, further recommendations have been made with regard to the regulatory framework for VET, vocational education and training. The Australian Quality Training Framework needs to be revisited to allow greater flexibility in the appointment and accreditation of training instructors, particularly in relation to the recognition of prior skills and competencies, and to make adoption of new training packages and competencies in rural skills faster and easier. That came through in a big way.

Flexibility in courses should ensure that subjects such as hydrology, dam assessment and farm drought proofing are on the agenda as well as animal husbandry. We have gone beyond just dealing with land management; we have to be conscious of sustainability while dealing with the economic side of agricultural industry. We also need to invest in research within rural industries. There needs to be greater certainty in funding research, especially for those with a proven track record.

Developing industries need to be recognised, such as the contribution of the beekeeping industry for Australia’s agriculture. In the past we have exported honey in mass quantities to have it mixed with inferior European product. Tasmania has now proved there is a huge market for our honey labelled as Australian, with its high quality. It is the best in the world. It is something we should put further research into, especially the marketing and ways of overcoming quarantine controls that do not recognise our disease-free status.

Another area in which we have been a strong advocate is that of on-ground services. The Australian government needs to develop, in conjunction with the state and territory governments, a national extension framework to coordinate national extension services throughout Australia and to define the roles of all those involved. A specific extension component in all funding arrangements for research organisations should be provided by the Australian government. This needs to be in addition to, and not at the expense of, research funding.

This report provides a plan for the future of rural skills in Australia. Given the critical nature of the issue, the need to embrace education and training and make changes to VET, the availability and adequacy of research and the provision of extension and advisory services are key areas that need to be addressed if the skills needs of rural Australia are to be met. I believe this report is important. There is a huge gap between the skills available in the regions and those that we should have. This report must not be left to become mouldy on a shelf somewhere. The recommendations are there to be implemented. It does not matter which side of politics one comes from, the problems have to be addressed. So I am recommending the report to the government and any government in waiting.

Mr SCHULTZ (Hume) (5.00 pm)—by leave—I acknowledge the very difficult job the secretariat had in putting together this report of the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry on rural skills. The previous secretary, Mr Ian Dundas, resigned from his position and went on to other things. I wish him well. I thank him for the significant contribution he and his wife, Marlene Dundas, made to this committee. I also compliment Janet Holmes, the new secretary, who is ably assisted by Mr Bill Pender, and the other secretarial staff on the significant contribution they made in pulling this information together in a very brief period.
of time, not having had full carriage of the inquiry from day one. I think that needed to be said because I know all members of the committee are very much appreciative of the significant contribution the secretariat have made to this report.

I also pick up on the point my parliamentary colleague the member for Lyons made about a highly skilled rural workforce being vital to the economic future of Australia. I do not think over the last three or four decades that governments—territory, state and federal—have understood just how significant the contribution of people in rural Australia has been to the economy of this country. I think we take it for granted from time to time. Sadly, during the modern-day era, we have tended to see exercises of futility in the quest to pass some services offered by government on to the private sector. Governments have foolishly given away work that they supplied to the rural sector and therefore have left the very valuable experience of extension officers, who have made an enormous positive contribution to rural and regional Australia.

I am mindful of the fact that three members of the New South Wales parliament in another phase of my employment career crossed the floor and voted against the whole government because they were concerned that a very valuable service that was supplied by the government was being removed. We predicted that it would create a massive problem in the rural sector. Sadly, we were proven to be correct. One of those members sits in the chamber with me here today—Tony Windsor, who was then the Independent member for Tamworth. That is the sort of thing that governments fail on when they do not seriously consider the ramifications of downsizing or of rubbing out a department that is costing the taxpayer a bit of money but is delivering unexpected positives for the economy of the country in keeping rural industries alive. That particular action over the years has instilled a negative perception surrounding agriculture and forestry. We heard evidence about the problems associated with that perception. The report illustrates the point I make on this issue. On page 12, under the heading ‘Getting people in—changing perceptions of agriculture’, the report states:

1.38 Training people in rural skills is vital, but the people have to be there to train. As Mr Arthur Blewitt, CEO of the Agri-Food Industry Skills Council, told the committee, ‘worrying about skills is not terribly relevant unless you have people out there who want to work in those areas’. Or as Mr Graham Truscott, General Manager of the Australian Beef Industry Foundation, put it, ‘there is a people shortage first and a skills shortage second in the industry’.

1.39 One of the critical issues facing Australian agriculture and forestry is convincing people that there are worthwhile careers to be had in those industries. Mr Julian Breheny, a research officer with the Western Australian Farmers Federation, noted that agriculture ‘is seen as a sunset career or sunset industry’, while Dr Walter Cox, Chairman of the Board, Agricultural Research Western Australia, stated: ‘Currently, agriculture is seen as a second-class career rather than as a first-choice career’.

Unfortunately, that sort of mentality has flowed on into the high-skills area. Career officers have treated agriculture as a thing that the students really should not participate in if they want to make a future for themselves outside of their schooling time. Sadly, that has had a significant impact on people.

But it goes beyond that. How can we have in this country a situation, for example, where people come and give us evidence on the serious situation that is occurring in the honeybee industry? We heard evidence about the honeybee industry. In relative terms, as far as Australia is concerned, it makes a reasonably meagre contribution to the economy of the country—about $60 million. What that does overlook is the fact that the honeybee pollinates 60 to 70
per cent of our plant life, thereby creating a massive food source for the nation as a whole and enhancing the export potential and domestic potential of foodstuffs in this great country of ours.

Sadly, the cost-cutting exercise has created a problem there. It is obvious that the training organisations and the universities have seen very little financial return or income coming from the sorts of industries where small groups of people want to pick up a course and learn that particular skill in that particular industry. As a result of that, we have seen a situation where we no longer train people in the honeybee industry. What have we done? We look to importing people from Third World countries to prop up the honeybee industry, one of the most significant industries in terms of its outcome for this great country of ours. The committee has put in some very relevant recommendations in terms of the honeybee industry. Also, more importantly, it has made some very sensible recommendations centred on extension officers—the training of extension officers and why we need them.

I would like to take this opportunity whilst I am on my feet to compliment the committee, particularly those members who have given a personal commitment to make sure that the committee keeps functioning in an appropriate way by making themselves available in sometimes very difficult circumstances when we move around the countryside taking evidence. It is true to say that we took 117 submissions and attended some 22 public hearings. We talked to hundreds and hundreds of people about this issue. It was only because of the commitment of these people as parliamentarians that we were able to bring the information back, get it disseminated by our very capable secretariat and then come up with what I believe is a very good and sound report which hopefully the minister and the government will pick up by way of the recommendations contained therein.

I have been fortunate to be chair of this committee for a couple of years now. It was very successful in issuing a report on the impact of feral animals on agriculture. The committee is working together in a unified way in the best interests of rural and regional people. I thank each and every member of that committee for the contribution that they made. Without any further ado, I commend the report to all members of the parliament and particularly our rural based parliamentary colleagues from both sides of the House. I think it is an excellent opportunity for them to learn just how significant the rural skills needs are in Australia and it needs the support of all of our parliamentary colleagues to make sure that the recommendations are enforced and followed by the government.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DJC Kerr)—I thank the honourable member. I am sure that all members of the committee would endorse the generous remarks you have made with respect to your colleagues and the staff of the committee.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR (Corio) (5.09 pm)—I am pleased to rise in the House today along with my parliamentary colleagues from across the political spectrum to endorse the House Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry report *Skills: rural Australia's need*. I congratulate fellow members of the committee on their dedicated efforts in producing this report, and members of our secretariat for their professional energy, skill and untiring work in supporting all members throughout the course of this inquiry. This report into skills in the rural sector mirrors the situation that Australia faces in the general economy—that is, Australia needs specific, significant additional investment in education, training, research
and skill development if it is to maintain its competitive edge in global agricultural markets in coming decades.

We all know what a highly skilled occupation farming is today. Not only are farmers production specialists in the modern farming environment; they are also required to have significant financial, marketing, mechanical, information technology and land and farm management skills to underpin production activities. That is to name just a few. For farming in Australia to survive in the new millennium we need to farm smarter and, as I mentioned at the press conference, we need smart farmers.

The key to ensuring that our farmers have the skills to become more productive and competitive in these corrupted global markets in the new millennium is to increase our investment as a society in rural research, education and training. That is the central message of this excellent report, _Skills: rural Australia’s need_. Australian farmers face enormous challenges in coming decades—climate change, radical changes in consumer tastes, energy constraints, corrupted markets, food standards and safety, water and drought issues. They are but a few of those big issues that have to be met head-on by the sector if it is to continue to play a pivotal role in the economic development of rural and regional Australia and the national economy.

The recommendations in this report range from the general to the quite specific, but there are several propositions that underpin them and the report. Firstly, there is a central role for the Australian government in the ongoing development of the rural sector’s skill base, be it in properly funding the education and training efforts of agricultural and other institutions. Secondly, there is a need for a high level of cooperation between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments in the skilling of the sector. Thirdly, the image of agriculture and forestry as sophisticated sectors in the Australian economy in which people can work and make a career needs to be actively promoted right from primary and secondary schooling to ensure a reasonable career interest in this sector from young people. Fourthly, there has to be a substantial increase in investment by the Australian government in rural education and training if the sector is to hold its own in the future.

I direct the House to important recommendations relating to farmers’ access to high-speed broadband, reinvigorating agricultural colleges, the establishment of agricultural courses at Australian technical colleges and the need for a national extension framework, as an indication of the practical measures that are contained in this report that are necessary to enhance and secure the future of agriculture in this country.

In an article in the _Financial Review_ on 24 February 2007 entitled ‘When the farming has to stop’, the writers, Andrew Clark and Angus Grigg, refer to an American geographer, Jared Diamond, who, in his book _Collapse_, says that the range of problems that could become crippling in other developed economies—overgrazing, salinity, soil erosion, water storages, man-made droughts—have already become severe in Australia. I am sure members could add to the list. It is a chilling assessment, and what will be required in future is for farmers to possess a highly developed skill set just to stay in the game. I hope this report stirs some action in government and the general community in this area, where it is acknowledged the future of family and corporate farming resides in the skills of our Australian farmers.

I congratulate the member for Hume on his chairmanship of this committee. I think he is held in high regard on this side of the House as well as the other, and I congratulate him on his leadership in producing this essential report for Australia’s agricultural community.
Mr FORREST (Mallee) (5.14 pm)—I want to join the other members of the House Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry who have spoken to this important report, *Skills: rural Australia’s need*. I would like to go right back to its origins. Back in late 2004 there was enormous uncertainty coming out of Victoria with the actions of the University of Melbourne in announcing it was closing seven rural campuses that were predominantly responsible for the delivery of agricultural education. There was quite a furore about that. There has been some resolution: they are still operating, they are not closed, and they have changed their spots. I sought the support of the chair and members of this committee to have an inquiry, and the terms of reference reflect my concerns. There was also an expansion for us to have a look at the whole role of extension services occurring in agriculture. It is good after that long period of collecting evidence to stand here now and deliver a report which has some very strong recommendations included in it.

If you look at the terms of reference you will see that the first one was for the committee to inquire and report on:

1. The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector, including access to vocational training and pathways from vocational education and training to tertiary education and work.

I have been enthusiastically following that theme in my work on the committee because I think it is important given that a lot of the evidence submitted to us was as much about image as anything. There is an image that agriculture is not a positive area in which to exercise some training and seek a career path. That is not true. The member for Corio has highlighted the fact that there are incredibly exciting things happening in agriculture today. There is the use of the technology of geospatial satellites, there is the need to be familiar with soil structures and there are water issues. I know that farmers today in the part of the world that I represent grow wheat on four inches of rain. Historically they had up to 11 inches, yet they can still produce reasonable returns from a reduced rainfall. But this all takes a massive input. My concerns are that we need to continue to find ways to invest, as the member for Corio has said, to ensure that we have a profitable agricultural sector in the future.

There were 29 recommendations that we laboured over and asked the government to respond to. Time does not permit me to speak to all of the recommendations, but all of them are incredibly important. The first one I will make reference to is recommendation 3, which relates to what I have said about trying to do something about this negative image. That recommendation says:

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments and industry, develop a national strategy for promoting agriculture and forestry in both primary and secondary schools.

I think the key is to start in primary school so that youngsters have the opportunity to be exposed to some of the exciting things that are in fact happening in agriculture. I commend that recommendation to the government.

The second recommendation which excites me, and which I am pleased that we have been able to strongly recommend, is for a complete reinvigoration of the agricultural college network right across Australia. Previously I had thought that the particular problem on this issue was only Victorian based, but we discovered from evidence that there is exactly the same situation in all of the states—although we discovered some very exciting models in the way
agricultural education is being pursued in Western Australia. Deputy Speaker Haase ought to take note of this. He is probably aware that there are great opportunities for networking between the education sector, industry—

**Mr Adams interjecting**—

**Mr FORREST**—Yes, that is true, but we are talking about agriculture and not mining.

Recommendation 8 makes a very strong call:

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, develop a national framework for the reinvigoration of Australia’s agricultural colleges, including:

- Stable and sustained funding for agricultural colleges in each state …

This will probably need some coordination as they cannot all be the trainers of grain producers or the trainers of dairy producers or the trainers of fat lamb or even beef producers. They will need some coordination as to which colleges are best placed to deliver specific centres of education. The recommendation says we need better mechanisms to ensure the connection with industry occurs—and it is not just agricultural industries; it is also those industries that have a direct connection to agriculture: the machinery manufacturers and providers.

The next recommendation which I want to speak to is recommendation 11. It was good to collect evidence, although some of it is different and disparate in terms of support. Take the FarmBis program, which commenced in 1998. I think the general consensus was that FarmBis is regarded as a highly successful program which is actually at the farming end to lift the standards of knowledge of the farming sector itself, whose members are often mature and have long ago lost some of their important study skills. To give some idea of the success of that program, when it first started there were around 82,000 primary producers participating and then a second stage of the program in 2004 had 72,000 participants. Because it was an initial program with a terminal life to be completed in 2008, in the current budget cycle, I think it is important that the government notes that we are recommending that FarmBis be continued because the evidence is that it is delivering.

Recommendation 15 is the recommendation I want to next comment on. The committee recommends that the government, in conjunction with universities and again in conjunction with the state and territory governments—we have to recognise that the states have a very strong role in the provision of education—‘develop consistent and comprehensive pathways for the articulation’ of vocational education and training. This is where youngsters might start such training as early as in year 8 or year 10. They would be exposed to a farming operation or some ancillary service, be it in agronomy or something else. There would be pathways for a youngster to go from their VET training on to some additional training, perhaps post-secondary, that could lead them to become the plant breeders or the soil scientists and PhDs of the future. What a rounded program it is for someone to ultimately end up with a PhD degree if they have started at the ground with their hands dirty and have that knowledge process. So we are recommending very strongly that there be a greater articulation of the whole process, because it is the one thing that Melbourne university missed in Victoria—they did not understand how to make those connections and they failed. Their focus was at the post-tertiary level. They wanted graduates and PhD students. What they fail to understand is that a PhD student in 10 or 12 years time can start from a year 8 or year 9 secondary student. That is why I feel very strongly that is an important recommendation.
I too would like to thank my colleagues, particularly those in the committee secretariat. As the chairman has said, it was a tough job but Janet Holmes has done a sterling job. She came on board on 12 December and finalised the preparation of the report. To all my colleagues, thank you, and to the government I say: ‘Listen to this report. There is accumulated evidence here. We will be looking for a very positive and early response in the interests of Australian agriculture and rural Australia in general.’

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (5.24 pm)—I thank the Main Committee for the opportunity to speak on this report entitled Skills: rural Australia’s need. It is a very fine report. On behalf of the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, I express my appreciation to the secretariat. They have done a huge amount of work in pooling together all the evidence and the associated material received by the committee over an extended period.

In addressing the report, I think it is fair to say that a quintessential image of Australia used to be the sight of a burly man in a bluey, sweating it out on the floor of a shearing shed, clippers in one hand, the other hand firmly keeping the sheep between his legs. It used to be a common sight in rural Australia but, as severe skills shortages grip rural communities, the role of the shearer, along with so many traditional agricultural and forestry jobs, is fast becoming a thing of the past. This report is about challenging Australia and addressing some of these issues.

Nationally, I think it is also about time we accepted the importance of the rural sector. In that context, Australia historically has had a great wool industry. But it needs about 640 new shearers trained every year in order to keep up with the needs of wool growers and to maintain the 5,000-strong workforce. Yet, far from keeping pace with this demand, the rural skills sector is fast falling behind. Farmhands are now listed as an endangered species and experienced rouseabouts are a rare commodity. Drive into any rural town and the locals will tell you the all too familiar story: increasingly, young people are leaving rural communities for the cities and the mining areas, where they can earn double or more what they can earn on the land and in local regional communities. Those who stay behind are part of a diminishing yet ageing group who are faced with increasing stress and workloads in an increasingly challenging industry. Their life is not easy. Recent years have not been kind to rural areas, which not only face a severe skills crisis but have battled the worst drought in 100 years as well as bushfires and progressively more-competitive global market forces.

As this report rightfully points out, agriculture and farming jobs are no longer fashionable. Unfortunately, they are defined by negative perceptions of a less than dynamic industry with little to offer ambitious young job seekers. It is seen as the sector you turn to if all other options have failed. These, I believe, are very damaging perceptions which I hope this report will assist in turning around. They have effectively contributed to reducing agriculture to merely farming and the forest industry to merely logging. Many of the recommendations in this report are practical. They seek to reverse this oversimplification of two of our most important national industries and, importantly, two key industries for rural, remote and regional Australia.

In that context, I point out that agriculture contributes around three per cent of our GDP, while forestry is responsible for about two per cent of our GDP. Combined, the two industries employ over 410,000 Australians and not surprisingly are the lifeblood of many rural and re-
regional communities. The value of these industries to those communities is well appreciated locally, yet this understanding of the importance they play dramatically declines as you head into regional and city centres. Here we need to work on educating the communities as to the pivotal role agriculture and forestry play in our society and the diverse career prospects open to those people who are prepared to seek them out. That is what this report highlights. I say that because agriculture is more than just farming. It involves scientific research, sustainability, an application of science, farm management, succession planning, human resources and a whole host of fascinating career paths—an opportunity for anyone who wants a challenge in life.

I believe, as a result of this report, that state and territory governments, in association with the private sector and the Australian government, have to work together to develop a coherent approach to the provision of rural skills training and education. The committee, through its report, recommends the development of a national strategy on rural skills training. Let us stop sweeping it under the carpet and face up to our collective responsibilities in partnership with the private sector.

We all appreciate that the national strategy is well overdue and that it should encompass primary and secondary schools—vocational education and training are a must for Australia to go forward—as well as higher education institutions. The current system of education and training provision is inadequate; it is not meeting the needs of industry, as the report clearly spells out. Some within the agriculture and forestry industries have criticised the current system for being inflexible, unresponsive and unable to recognise the often informal nature of rural expertise. I tend to identify with those criticisms, which were brought out in the report.

Obviously there will always be financial and resource constraints governing a sector overall. That is why a national strategy needs to focus on targeted ways forward that provide enough flexibility to accommodate Australia’s vastly varying rural communities yet address the issues that are common throughout rural Australia. The recommendations in the report provide a framework for action—a framework to achieve a national strategy—and they should be seriously considered as a matter of urgency by all sides of politics at state, territory and national levels.

The report also correctly highlights the need for closer cohesion between the research undertaken and its application in the field. We all appreciate that, historically, Australia is well known for its first-class research, which has led to many breakthroughs worldwide. The agriculture and forestry sectors are not exempt from this, yet there is industry concern that much of the research being undertaken is not reaching those farmers who need it most. Once again, the report contains many recommendations that not only go a long way towards bridging the gap between the science lab and the farm gate but also encourage industry to consider the implications for the quality of research being undertaken with short-term funding mechanisms and an ageing research population. In essence, that is the case with agriculture generally, not just the farming community.

At the heart of the report is the fact that rural industries are not being given the recognition that they should be given by us. We only to have cast our minds back to earlier this month and the government’s failure to provide the necessary assurance on managed investment schemes. After heavy pressure, the Prime Minister finally caved in and allowed the continuation of the scheme for the forestry sector but called for a review of the scheme in all other non-forestry
areas. Almost overnight, this decision wiped more than $300 million off the value of agribusiness companies. Managed investment schemes have injected over $2 billion into rural communities for plantation expansion alone. With the industry on the verge of realising another $4.5 billion in investment in value-added processing capacity, it has the potential to deliver another 4,600 jobs to rural Australia, which are required as a matter of urgency.

This is the avenue of growth available to the Howard government if it should decide to invest properly in rural Australia instead of considering changes to investment laws that would lead to the loss of up to 10,000 jobs directly and indirectly in rural communities over the long term. Incorrect decisions made in 1997 and changes in the investment regime in the plantation industry have had a huge impact. The industry is entitled to some certainty. We should at least make sure that these issues are put to bed once and for all.

In conclusion, we as a nation need to get serious about rural Australia not just because, historically, Australia has been built on the sheep’s back but because rural Australia is a sector with enormous potential and with a key role to play in our future. The report is about all of us saying: ‘Good work is being done through the committee structure of this House. We now have some practical recommendations for taking the sector forward, provided it is given a hand-up by state and territory governments, in association with the Commonwealth.’ This is not a handout; it is the assistance industry requires to solve the problems that it confronts on a day-to-day basis. I commend the report to the House and I thank the secretariat for the wonderful assistance given to the committee.

Mr SECKER (Barker) (5.34 pm)—It is certainly a pleasure to follow the member for Batman and other members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry in discussing the committee’s report entitled Skills: rural Australia’s need. It is one of the truly bipartisan committees of the parliament, with members working together for the betterment of agricultural, fisheries and forestry industries all around Australia. Whether Labor, Liberal or Independent—and I see the member for New England is in the chamber—all members of the committee have worked well together to try and come up with recommendations that will help agricultural communities.

I am a beneficiary of agricultural training. I went to Urrbrae Agricultural High School in South Australia. I did a two-year agricultural course, so I have firsthand knowledge of how it works. I am very thankful I did that course because it taught me many things that I perhaps would not have learnt on the farm or through reading and so on. I recognise the importance of training, not only for agriculture but for all areas of skills shortages in rural areas.

It is interesting to note that in my electorate of Barker we have had outstanding changes—almost a quiet revolution—in training. When I was first elected, a little over 200 children were in VET—vocational education and training—in schools. There are now over 2,000. That is a pretty astonishing change to the way we think about training, certainly in my electorate, and I am sure that is followed quite closely by other electorates around Australia. At the same time, when I was first elected, there were 363 apprentices in training. There are now over 3,000—another astonishing change. So things are happening, but this report quite rightly shows that we do have some weaknesses.

I would like to make some comments about those weaknesses and some of the recommendations we made. It was my feeling—and I do not say this for any particular reason, such as one state verses another—that New South Wales needed the greatest changes and emphasis in
training in agricultural areas of any of the states that we visited. I do not want to put blame on New South Wales but that was certainly the feeling I got from speaking to people there.

I would like to focus on the rural skills and education recommendations that have been identified throughout this report. Before I do that, I acknowledge the chair, the member for Hume, for his able chairmanship of that committee, and the secretariat, which, as usual, did a wonderful job in helping us come to our decisions.

This country has an Australian apprentices program which provides a valuable mechanism for structuring and funding training in rural skills. We know, through the evidence obtained, that this scheme is not as effective as it should be in providing training to rural trainees and apprentices. I clearly support the overhauling of the administration of this system to ensure that funds and places are directed where they are needed to provide the best outcome for those undertaking the training and, ultimately, improving the skills base of our country. We need to have the appropriate people teaching these skills and we need to have the training conducted in the most appropriate manner. That is pretty easy to say, but we got some very clear evidence that that is not happening.

I should also acknowledge the work that this government has done in setting up Australian technical colleges across Australia and the difference that will make to our future as a nation. By setting up more ATCs, we are increasing the training opportunities in traditional trades skills provided to regional areas. I would, however, like to see one established in my electorate of Barker to allow us to increase the skills my people can provide to our rural areas—even though we are kicking lots of goals. There is a perfect model for an Australian technical college in the electorate of Barker, which would be based on a multicampus facility rather than on the one- or two-campus facilities that we have.

Mr Forrest—Bordertown would be good.

Mr SECKER—Bordertown would be quite good, because we could service some of my neighbouring constituencies across the border—and I am sure they would take that up. Along with the committee, I believe that the government should give urgent consideration to establishing agricultural courses at Australian technical colleges with close links to rural areas and consider expanding campuses to such regions as the Barker electorate, which covers the Barossa, Murraylands and Riverlands in the south-east, all of which are important areas requiring skills in agriculture and forestry.

Another way we can continue to enrich the skills of our rural regions is through the FarmBis program, which is a jointly funded by the Commonwealth and the states on a matching basis. FarmBis aims to foster a culture of continuous learning amongst primary producers and encourages them to plan for their future training needs as a part of their overall business planning. The educational and training activities funded by FarmBis are directed at farm management related activities and include general business management, including strategic planning; financial management; marketing; human resource management, including leadership; natural resource management; and production management. FarmBis is a very useful and highly successful program and it is extremely important that the Australian government makes a long-term commitment to the program to give certainty to the industry. It is pretty important that people know where they are going.
Unfortunately, each state has different criteria, and the level of funding for training is proving difficult to manage across borders and national initiatives. There is a further difficulty when one state decides to withdraw from the FarmBis program—and I see that because I have towns in my electorate that are very close to the Victorian border, and in fact to the New South Wales border as well. They come to me and say: ‘Why are we treated differently from our cousins across the border? Isn’t it the same FarmBis program?’ So we really should get some consistency across the whole system. What this clearly does is indicate to a state that it will be disadvantaged while its neighbours move forward and make their businesses bigger. What we need to do is create a nationally consistent approach for FarmBis funding administered directly by the Commonwealth—one management area for all. We have heard very similar thoughts when it comes to managing the Murray-Darling Basin. We clearly need to keep this program and continue to provide it past its current expiry date of 2008.

I agree with the committee’s recommendation that the Australian government develop a national strategy for facilitating industry initiatives in rural skills training, including a coordinating body and funding mechanism for industry initiatives. Currently, a number of industry and producer groups have taken the initiative to develop and package courses directly relevant to their needs—and I welcome that. Who knows the skill shortages better than those who are actually involved in that industry? We have the benefit of those industries identifying needs at a local level—another way of thinking globally but acting locally. The government can use this information and play a coordinating role to prevent different industry groups from reinventing the wheel through lack of communication and coordination.

We need to get our rural areas skilled up to ensure the future of our agriculture, fishing and forestry industries and to keep this nation’s rural areas going. In my own electorate we have a large forestry industry. I went to great pains to, first of all, get a university operating in the region and, secondly, to get Southern Cross University to offer a forestry course. That has been very useful. The more skills people have, the better our future looks. That is a positive for this country and particularly for my electorate of Barker.

I want to see the people of my electorate receiving a higher education in these areas through increased access to scholarships and higher standards of training through the various programs this country offers to our rural people. They will go on to work and manage these industries with the best skills possible because we will have developed our rural or urban skills as a nation. In this particular case, we found there were some distinct differences and failures in the system in rural areas. I think part of that is to do with the distance we have to travel, which anyone who represents a rural electorate would understand. I thank all of those involved in the inquiry. It has been a great pleasure and an honour to be part of this committee and this inquiry.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (5.44 pm)—As with other members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry I would like to commend the committee secretariat and also the chairman, the member for Hume, for the way in which he has conducted this committee not only for this inquiry but other inquiries that we have embarked upon as well. I listened with interest to the member for Barker and I thought he made some interesting comments on his own background and how that embraced what is happening in his part of the world at the moment.
I will reflect on my background because there are some similarities. I went to the Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School, and I am pleased to say that the committee as part of its deliberations visited that school and I think received some very good evidence from people at the school. I then went on to the University of New England and studied agricultural economics and did a number of other things after that when I was involved in the farm sector. I am 56 years old—I know I look a lot younger—and during that period of my life there was a degree of optimism in agriculture. In the last 15 to 20 years a degree of pessimism has developed. To give a parallel: my elder son, who is 24, went to the same high school, attended the same university and did an agriculture business degree and a degree in natural resource management and cotton production, is now flying a helicopter for a mining company in Western Australia. I think that encapsulates the situation. Obviously there are tremendous opportunities out there. He was the top boy in agriculture in New South Wales. That is not suggesting a big loss to agriculture but I think it says something about how young people are making decisions about their future. Obviously money is an important ingredient in that decision, and the drought and other issues are having their impact as well.

Having young people in agriculture is very important, but I think my age group is about the average age for farmers—the member for Barker being a good deal older. One of the things that I would like to say relates to the policy mix and the way in which government sells the agriculture message, the food production message—and in a sense this also represents the community. I think there are a number of things that we really do have to take on board. Firstly, the policy mix that state and federal governments have had over many years has essentially centralised population. The economic centralist view is that the most effective way to service the greatest number of people in the lowest cost per unit is to put them in a feedlot. That is what we are doing in a sense by concentrating people into our major urban areas, because it is cost-effective.

Just today in the main chamber we had a debate about the cost of urban land and the cost of people living there. What we have done in our policy mix is move people towards those scenarios, and in a sense we have developed an artificial economic base that cannot afford the removal of pressure from our major metropolitan areas because the price of land, the price of accommodation, the price of property and the debt ratios that people have in those communities is so unsustainable that if it actually returned to the real price we would have an economic collapse, and obviously governments would lose their places as well.

The basic question we have to ask in terms of the issues that were raised here today about the role that agriculture plays in our society and the basic question that governments have really got to ask in terms of the policy mix is: do we want agriculture? Do we really want agriculture, or does it provide a cluttering up of the inland that requires roads and other infrastructure to be provided and river systems to be irrigated from et cetera? If you look at the policy mix of the governments, you can see that it is really sending a message that we do not want agriculture. It is making it harder and harder for agriculture to exist. When we look at the sorts of things that the farm sector can do to come to grips with a corrupt world market in terms of most of our grains and most of our products, government policy—federal government policy in particular, but also the states—has been anti the development of agricultural pursuits.
If we look at the renewable energy sector, for instance, we see that anybody who moves into the ethanol or biodiesel sector as of now, under government policy that will come into place in 2011, will be taxed for producing renewable energy. It is this debate that really encapsulates the problem that agriculture has. Because agriculture in Australia has to compete in a world market, and because it produces surpluses, it has to do so at a very cost-effective rate. The profitability for those people in that sector is being eroded, and that is why young people are not going back into the agricultural sector. So I think we in this parliament really have to have a serious look at whether part of that surplus food production that we generate out of this country should be transferred into another market—the energy market, the fuel market. That has a whole different driver in terms of a price regime and could in fact really be a profitability driver for agriculture as we know it, not only in the grains sector but also in the sugarcane area.

The other area in which I think we have been negligent in the current climate change debate is the carbon debate. The Prime Minister put in place a task force to look at carbon sequestration, carbon marketing emissions et cetera. Agriculture was not even included in that committee. The accumulation of humus and organic matter in our soils and some of the new technologies in terms of pasture production are an ideal carbon sink, and we should be looking at the opportunity that agriculture has in terms of entering another market—not only the food market but also the carbon market. There are enormous opportunities there now that carbon trade is starting to take place in the states.

No-till agriculture, where humus and organic matter have advanced, where the infiltration rate of soils has improved, where the soil quality has improved and where soil erosion has decreased are all things that are part of what we should be looking at if we really want to bring agriculture into the new century and address its future in a positive way rather than leaving it back out there, as government policy has tended to do, as producers of food have to face the world market at any price—a corrupted world market price and an artificial domestic cost structure. Blind Freddy can see that that will mean that the farm sector and our young people, whom we would like to encourage into that sector, are going to be marginalised in terms of their profitability base.

Another issue is agroforestry. Even in the $10 billion plan that the Prime Minister is currently talking about, we again have a range of mixed messages. A few years ago we were being encouraged to plant trees because it was going to drop the watertable and improve salinity. Now, in the fine detail of this plan that has been cobbled together on a very small piece of paper, in my view, we see that farm forestry or agroforestry is going to be reinvestigated because of its possible interception of water from the Murray-Darling system. Those are some of the issues where we need some clarity in terms of the long-term nature of agriculture. One of the earlier speakers mentioned managed investment schemes. These are the issues about which we really need to get some long-term certainty in place so that people can make commitments to the agricultural sector.

Briefly, Cotton Basics was raised here earlier. It is a very good training package and can be used as a model for other areas. The agricultural colleges are something that we really have to revisit. Once again, I commend the chairman, the member for Hume, and the others involved in this committee, particularly the people behind the scenes who made a massive contribution. (Time expired)
Debate (on motion by Mr Neville) adjourned.

**APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 3) 2006-2007**

Cognate bill:

**APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 4) 2006-2007**

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 15 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 deficit;

(b) reverse the reduction in education and training investment;

(c) acknowledge the connection between climate change and human activity and tackle the serious threat climate change poses to Australia’s long-term well-being;

(d) address critical structural weaknesses in health such as workforce shortages and rising costs;

(e) expand and encourage research and development to move Australian industry and exports up the value-chain; and

(f) address falling levels of workplace productivity;

(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 GAVAN O’CONNOR (Corio) (5.55 pm)—The Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2006-2007 and the Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2006-2007 cover expenditures in addition to those outlined in the government’s 2006-07 budget. The additional expenditures entailed in both bills total around $2 billion, which is a net figure of savings measures outlined in Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2006-2007. In Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2006-2007 the government seeks additional appropriations of $1.8 billion, with savings in the order of $464.2 million, leaving a net figure of $1.37 billion to be appropriated. In Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2006-2007 the government seeking additional appropriations of some $637 million. As outlined in the minister’s second reading speech, these appropriations are designed to meet requirements that have arisen from the last budget.

I support the second reading amendment that has been moved by the honourable member for Melbourne in this debate. When we look at these expenditures we see that they are not insubstantial and they call into question the government’s prowess in managing its budget. We have witnessed in this House year after year some chronic underspends by the government, enormous surpluses being generated that have not been accounted for at budget time and generally some expenditures that we on this side of the House take significant issue with. I refer to the blatant use of appropriations in the budget for advertising purposes, particularly in the lead-up to an election.

I would like to draw the attention of the House to an article that I noticed in the *Australian* today. The report, headlined ‘Howard $1bn pledges shortfall’, goes into some excruciating
detail of the chronic underspends that the government has been involved in since it came to power and more recently. The reporter goes through the 2004 election commitments and we see that the announced cost for the 100 per cent Medicare rebate was $1.7 billion. The actual cost was $1.67 billion. There was a difference of $43 million. When we go to some of the other figures we can see they are quite substantial. For the mature age worker tax offset, a $1.039 billion program ended up spending $1.42 billion. That was out by some $38 million. There was a commitment of $2 billion over five years for the Australian water fund. The actual cost was $601 million, with an underspend of $399 million. For the 30 per cent childcare rebate there was an underspend of $455 million. The tax break for entrepreneurs was costed at $1.25 billion but $948 million was spent. That is an underspend of $302 million.

I mention these figures because we find that the government is very long on promises and beats up the amount of money it is spending on various areas in its budget. But, when you drill down in estimates, you find that it either has not spent it or has chronically overspent it. It leads one to question why, with the amount of money flowing to the highest taxing government in Australia’s history, we do not have a better accounting record of those expenditures. I canvass the economic situation that the government claims has been responsible for the enormous revenues that have been generated to the Commonwealth over the past 10 years. I remind government members that it was Labor that left them the rolled-gold economy that they now claim credit for. It was the Labor Party that broke the back of Liberal inflation—

Mr Neville—Oh, come on!

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—The honourable member for Hinkler scoffs at that suggestion. I invite him to read the historical record on inflation. Before Labor came to power in 1983, the then Treasurer and now Prime Minister, John Howard, left Labor in government an inflation rate in excess of 10 per cent. We brought it down to under two per cent. We broke the back of Liberal inflation and we set the framework for the low-interest-rate regime that is currently being enjoyed by Australians. That is not a figment of my imagination; that is Australia’s economic history—and I am surprised that the honourable member for Hinkler would enter the debate on this point because he more than anybody else would know the facts. He would know that, when he came into the parliament—and I think it was in about 1993, when I entered the parliament—Labor in government had been grappling for a long period of time with the ill effects of Liberal inflation. At the time we left office it was below two per cent. That is a matter for the historical record. Australia’s economic history is there for all to see.

That current prosperity, which is related to the reduction in interest rates that has occurred over several decades, is directly attributable to the efforts of the then Labor government in breaking the back of Liberal inflation. That is a statistic that the government do not want to entertain much at all. As far as they are concerned the economic history of Australia started in 1996, when they came to power. But once again it is a matter of historical record that up to that particular point in time Australia had enjoyed a growth rate of some four per cent over the preceding four years—that is, Labor handed over to the coalition a rolled-gold economy; it was travelling along at a growth rate of four per cent with an underlying inflation rate that was certainly in single digits, very low and heading lower.

Of course, we can go to a lot of the other statistics—export performance and the job growth levels. I note day after day the coalition members on the floor of the parliament claiming great credit for the low unemployment rates in this country. They do have a weird way of defining
who is actually employed. As we know, according to the official statistic quoted by the coalition, if a person works one hour in the couple of weeks preceding when they are surveyed by the ABS then that person is categorised as employed. We know the government has used many of its labour market programs to warehouse the unemployed in training schemes that are of dubious value—many do serve a purpose but many do not. We know there is chronic underemployment in the Australian economy— that is, that there are more Australian workers working part time than ever before. For the purposes of the survey, if you have a part-time job and work 20 hours then, according to members of the coalition, you are employed. I am afraid you cannot raise a family on 20 hours of work. You cannot pay off a mortgage on 20 hours of work.

Many people are working two and three jobs trying to juggle their family responsibilities just to put tucker on the table. Of course, along comes the coalition with a Work Choices bill that is designed to rip the insides out of the working conditions and wages and salaries of working people yet again. I note that the subject of some of these expenditures in appropriation bills Nos 3 and 4 relate to the Office of Workplace Services. Members of the coalition parade themselves as paragons of virtue and defenders of the family while at the same time they rip the heart out of the income of households and they put enormous physical and financial pressure on those particular households. When you work three jobs just to keep your family together, then something suffers. It is the family that suffers, not only from the lack of money but from the fact that the parents are never home. The parents are never home as they have to juggle a whole lot of responsibilities to make ends meet in the household family income sense. At the end of the day, that substantially impacts on the family.

I refer to Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2006-2007 and the range of measures for which the government has made additional allocations. I refer to the expenditure allocation of $74.2 million that has been made available to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to provide additional support to primary producers in drought declared areas and those who are really facing exceptional circumstances at this time. I note that $17.3 million has been allocated in taxable grants of up to $5,000 for eligible farmers, to give farmers the opportunity to get professional business and planning advice. This is a very important allocation. It is one that I would certainly not quibble with. At this time when some farmers have suffered quite catastrophic drops in their income, they need access to very professional planning advice as to either how they can cope over the next couple of years until there is a recovery or how they should exit the sector due to the difficulties that they face.

I note that today the government made an announcement which allocates some additional moneys to the sector for the purpose of assisting rural businesses. This important initiative will provide assistance to businesses in rural areas with employee numbers going up to 100 people. It is not just the people on the farm and in farm businesses that are having a tough time in rural Australia. The people in the many ancillary businesses that feed off the sector are going through extremely tough times.

I happened to be in the Riverina a couple of months ago and as I travelled around I saw the devastation of the drought: the dry dams, bare ground and the devastated grain crops that would not be harvested at all. On the way back, I happened to stop at a transport operator’s yard. I thought I would pop in to have a chat. I sat with the owner, who informed me that they had suffered a 90 per cent drop in business income. They had a fleet of trucks and were des-
perately searching for other business to at least keep the core business going. This gives you an idea of the devastation that has been visited on rural and regional Australia by this drought. I do not think too many people would argue with the sorts of expenditures that have been outlined by the government. They are ones that I would support.

However, I do take issue. The government continually bandies about this statistic that it has allocated $2.3 billion to drought assistance. Is it $2.3 billion over five years, four years or 10 years? We do not really know. We have drilled down in estimates, we have gone through all the government budget papers and we cannot come up with $2.3 billion. Maybe the member for Hinkler and some other government members might enlighten the parliament. In the first instance, I think some quite extravagant claims are made by the government. In the second instance, it never allocates all the moneys anyway and ends up returning a lot to general revenue.

The second matter I would like to draw the House’s attention to is the expenditure of some $120 million that will be provided for Operation Astute to restore peace and stability in East Timor. As we know, the people of East Timor suffered quite considerably through the Indonesian occupation. Subsequent to that, this new country to our near north has suffered from chronic political and institutional instability. The invasion by the Indonesians of this former Portuguese colony of East Timor in 1975—

A division having been called in the House of Representatives—

Sitting suspended from 6.11 pm to 6.24 pm

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—I was referring to the government’s allocation in Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2006-2007 to Operation Astute to restore peace and stability in East Timor. The Australia East Timor Association was formed in 1975. A branch of the organisation was established in Geelong in the early 1990s. The object of the organisation was to raise awareness of the atrocities committed by the Indonesians in East Timor and to lobby for East Timorese self-determination. For over a decade, the committee in Geelong highlighted the inhumane treatment that many in East Timor were receiving. They lobbied politicians, they wrote letters to the papers, they held street stalls et cetera. The public began to take notice of the issue with the release of John Pilger’s 1994 film *Death of a nation*.

Community groups in the Geelong area continued to remind the council and the public of the atrocities occurring in East Timor, and they included the Geelong branch of the Australia East Timor Association, the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee, Amnesty International and Oxfam CAA. After the Indonesian departure in 1999 community groups in Geelong remained committed to East Timor by helping the people during the reconstruction period, and the City of Greater Geelong formally ratified an agreement to establish a partnership with Viqueque. This was followed by the launch of a community-to-community partnership on 3 November 2000 by Sir William Deane, the then Governor-General.

Community groups, some of them having a long history of lobbying for and assisting the East Timorese, were asked to form the Geelong-East Timor Friendship Committee to link with Viqueque. The first meeting was held in February 2002, just prior to East Timor becoming an independent nation on 20 May. Viqueque is 195 kilometres south-east of Dili, with a population of 60,000. It is a poor district with many needs, particularly in the areas of health and education. Community groups that form the basis of the friendship group have done a lot
to raise money and to increase awareness of the problems faced by that community. I commend the City of Greater Geelong, and in particular the then mayor, Councillor Barbara Abley, for overseeing the effort in East Timor on behalf of the Geelong community.

A whole host of measures have been taken in my community to assist Viqueque, and central to the organisation of that has been the efforts of one of my staff, Rosemary Nugent. I congratulate her on her ongoing commitment to the people of East Timor and for the work that she and her committee, the general Geelong community and other various groups have done in support of the East Timorese.

I also commend the government for the $39.4 million in this bill for protecting Australian families online. I think this is a measure that all people in the House can support. I did want in the time remaining to speak about the $14.6 million to be provided for the introduction of the formal citizenship test; however, I will just confine my remarks to congratulating the Geelong Ethnic Communities Council for another wonderful Pako Festa on the weekend, Geelong’s premiere multicultural festival, which I estimate was attended by some 100,000 people. It was a real success, and I congratulate all the staff of the Migrant Resource Centre and members of the Geelong Ethnic Communities Council on their work in putting on this wonderful festival.

Mr NEVILLE (Hinkler) (6.28 pm)—In this appropriations debate today I want to talk about the city of Gladstone and how four issues swirl around Gladstone and will impact on Gladstone in one way or another. Gladstone, as you know, is the port city in the northern part of my electorate. It has a population of about 28,000, and the Calliope shire, with another 16,000, adjoins it. It is known as the port city to the world, as indeed it is. It is responsible for 12 per cent of Australia’s exports by volume, which is quite remarkable for a city of that size. Its main export commodity is coal. It has other export commodities, including alumina, aluminium, chemicals and timber, but it is essentially a coal port. It is Australia’s second biggest coal port. I will talk about coal, Kyoto, nuclear energy and infrastructure because all these things impact on Gladstone. It is a very good city. It is a city that does things well.

Recently, the Gladstone Observer, the local paper, polled its readers, asking them whether the coal industry should be restricted to protecting the environment, and 60 per cent of the respondents said no. That is not surprising, given that it is the economic powerhouse of Central Queensland and much of the wealth of Central Queensland comes from coal. Five years ago, the Port of Gladstone was exporting 35 million tonnes of coal. Last year, it was up to 43 million tonnes and, as it comes on stream with a new loader at Wiggins Island, it will move up towards 70 million tonnes.

If you look across Australia, you will see that coal is responsible for $24 billion worth of income to this country, $14 billion of it from Queensland. It is responsible for 130,000 jobs. That is a lot of jobs. All around Central Queensland, in the coalfields and in the great towns of Dysart, Moranbah and Emerald and so on, there are many coalmines and more to come on stream when the Surat Basin is opened up as a result of the recently announced rail line. At first, it was thought there might be five mines; it could be as high as nine. So there is a vast rail network and also many rail workers dependent on this. It is one of the most efficient rail systems in Australia. In fact, Queensland is the only state that has profit-making railways and a lot of it is pinned on the Central Queensland system.

Gladstone is also the hub of engineering. There is an engineering alliance, which is both a think tank and a practical group, that gets things done in and around Gladstone and its hinter-
land. We have a university, a TAFE and a group apprenticeship scheme, all heavily dependent on coal or affiliates of coal in one form or another. So you can understand that I am very sensitive about it. Another thing that flows from that is the varieties of coal. There are several varieties of coal, but we have a particularly clean, steaming coal that is much in demand from that area. By using that in the three powerhouses of Central Queensland—that is, Stanwell, Gladstone and Callide, which itself is in three subpowerhouses—you get a degree of reliability, a triangular grid, which you have to have for the aluminium industry. The one thing you cannot have with aluminium is a close-down of power, a freeze-up of the aluminium, as it is extraordinarily expensive. So it is an integral part.

Why we get these industries like aluminium and alumina and chemical companies and why magnesium and nickel have been active there is the low-cost coal fired power. So the answer is not to close these down but to get involved in technologies that reduce greenhouse gas. That goes to the design of powerhouses. As was said in question time today, the government is spending almost $2 billion on the whole climate change agenda, but $1.1 billion of that is for the development of low-emissions and renewable technologies.

In the 2004 white paper, the government spoke about $500 million for the Low Emissions Technology Demonstration Fund, which was the subject of today’s question; $1 million for the Renewable Energy Development Initiative; and $75 million for the Solar Cities program. They are all important, but I concentrate on the first two because they are the ones that could be important to Gladstone. We really need to advance the cause of sequestration because that will be critical in maintaining that industry.

The other great threat to the industry, of course, is Kyoto. If Kyoto is to go ahead in its present form—and I choose my words carefully; I said ‘in its present form’—then Gladstone will not be a beneficiary. We have signed Kyoto but we have not ratified it, and not without good reason. The United States, China, India and Korea, all industrial competitors of ours, have not signed; nor would China or India as developing countries be required to have very strenuous targets—in fact, not any targets initially. So what we have is about 46 per cent of the capacity of the world’s industrial countries not recognising Kyoto in one form or another. So what a silly situation it would put Australia into! In Europe there are another four or five countries that are not meeting Kyoto targets, and there is one in Asia. Spain, Italy, Germany and Japan are responsible for another 11 per cent. Take 11 per cent and add that onto 46 per cent and you are up around 57 per cent. Why would Australia walk into a trap like that? That would be tantamount to trying to run industry in Australia with one hand tied behind your back.

The other thing it would mean is that, effectively, in putting a premium on power that drives all that industry in Gladstone, it would export Australian jobs offshore. That would be the effect. The member for Brand, Kim Beazley, knew that when he came to the last election. He came out with this line: ‘We’ll get special arrangements for Gladstone.’ Everyone knows that, once you put your signature on the dotted line, you are into the Kyoto agenda. I do not think Australia should do so until those emitters that are emitting 46 per cent of the world’s greenhouse gases and the other 11 per cent that are not getting anywhere near their targets do something about it. Then I think there is a case for us to get involved.

It is clear that a lot of the European countries are not meeting their targets. Just to name a few, for example, as I said before, we have Germany, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands and then, in our own area, Japan and New Zealand. Then
we have Norway, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain. We are going to sign up when we are probably one of the few countries in the world that are going to meet our target. What sort of dills would we be to do that?

I am not against a whole range of measures to improve the environment. I favour wind energy, I am a supporter of biofuels and ethanol, I am a supporter of gas sequestration and I am a supporter of using gas as a substitute for coal where it is appropriate. So let us have an end to this fear campaign that is being driven around Gladstone.

Of course, it reaches its high point in Gladstone—there is a union campaign now to call me Nuclear Neville. I just want to make my position very clear in the parliament regarding what I have to say about nuclear power. I think it is an informed debate that all Australians have to have. I am not saying I would sign up to it, but I am saying we need to have a strong debate. We need to ask whether nuclear power is an economic and safe alternative for Australia. Can we, with 22 million people, really sustain nuclear power? It might be that we cannot. Might it have some strategic importance feeding, although not necessarily in the area, the Melbourne and Sydney basins? Is it competitive with coal in Australia? So the economic and safety argument obviously has to be the first one.

The second part of the debate is that we have 40 per cent of the world’s uranium—and Canada has an almost equal amount, another 40 per cent—and we should be asking how we harness that important resource that in the future may be one of the great saviours of the planet in the sense that it will reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We can look at the countries that have oil, particularly those in the Middle East and in the central and northern parts of South America. The oil cartel in those countries impose a tremendous premium on the rest of the world. While I am not suggesting that Australia should act in a similar manner, if we have the new resource for the next generation, should we not be thinking of how we can value add to it? Should we not be enriching that uranium in Australia and selling it on the overseas market to those countries we know will use it responsibly, to those that are signatories to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and not just willy-nilly? We could be an influence for good in the sense that we would control the manufacture of the enriched uranium and we would sell it to those countries that were going to use it appropriately and, in that way, value add to the product in Australia. That is the second debate we need to have.

The third debate is: if there is going to be nuclear power in the future, how do we ensure that Australia handles it properly? How do we store it? Of course, the federal government is looking to a site in the Northern Territory to do that. Geologically, Australia has some of the best places in the world for a repository and perhaps, as part of this debate, we should be asking whether there is a future for us to do that.

The other question we should ask as part of that nuclear debate is whether everything is as dangerous as Three Mile Island and Chernobyl or whether the world has moved on from there. The answer is, yes, it has. I do not know if honourable members were watching a science program on the ABC the other night that dealt with a new technology, known as pebble bed nuclear reactors, that Dr Dennis Jensen, one of our own members, is across. In pebble bed technology, the uranium is encased in a ceramic and in that way you have many minireactors as part of your reactor. That particular technology is infinitely safer than anything that was at Chernobyl or Three Mile Island.
We really have to ask ourselves whether we are looking at the science in this country well enough. Have we informed ourselves or do we say what Peter Beattie said: ‘It is never going to come to Queensland. We will introduce a bill through the parliament and we will never have nuclear power in Queensland.’ I think that will be a bill that the Queensland government or a subsequent Queensland government will regret and will probably have to change. This sort of populist approach is quite silly. I am not here and now on this day advocating that we should go to nuclear power, but I am advocating that we have an informed debate that is not simply driven by fear.

Australia was pretty responsible with emissions in the period between 1990 and 2004, but we can probably do better. During that period, our economy grew by 57.9 per cent whereas our emissions grew by only 2.3 per cent. Some might say that 2.3 per cent was still not so hot; nevertheless, if we could continue to bring that down, that could become a very important thing for all of us.

I do not think I am alone in asking for a debate on this. On 7 June last year on 2NM the member for Hunter said, ‘There is a case for adding value to it’—meaning uranium—‘in the form of nuclear power generation.’ I am not as fearful of nuclear power generation as some people are. It is true that most of Europe uses it. I am not having a crack at the member for Hunter—I think he has been commendably honest. I would like to think that in a bipartisan way we can talk about this and see if we can have a range of measures—sequestration for coal, perhaps nuclear power, wind power, hydro, gas; we need to have a suite of these things including solar power as well in our homes—and in that way make life better for all Australians and particularly for a place like Gladstone. I do not think we will ever see nuclear power in Gladstone because with its abundance of steaming coal it would probably be the last place you would go to put nuclear power.

Finally, I want to talk about infrastructure. The future of Gladstone also depends on being able to control its infrastructure. We have this idea that the companies can pay for the infrastructure. If they want to go to Gladstone, they can do that. But, of course, in point of fact they do not. There you have 28,000 people, which is a very small rate base, having to accept industries of $2 billion, $3 billion and $4 billion in value and the roads and rail connections and all of that. Although the companies pay for some of that, the downstream effect in the communities, whether it is in civic centres, libraries, health services, roads, water or sewage, is that it puts cities like Gladstone under enormous pressure—a pressure far beyond the capacity of the rate base to handle.

Even though Gladstone will not be in my electorate after this federal election, I still have a great sense of responsibility and I will fight for these things right up until I leave the Gladstone area. We have to get more arterial roads into that area. One of them in particular is called Kirkwood Road, which comes off the Bruce Highway. Back on 7 June 2004, the then Minister for Transport and Regional Services, John Anderson, announced AusLink. One of the things in the initial AusLink statement was that the port city of Gladstone would have a special AusLink corridor. I believe that corridor should come in from Benaraby on the Bruce Highway, across the southern suburbs of Telina, Emmerdale and New Auckland of Gladstone and go across the Callemondah overpass and along a road known as Red Rover Road to the powerhouse. That will not mean a lot to members, but in effect it is an arced bypass road right across the southern part of Gladstone.
I found to my surprise that, when I went to push this, the state government opposed it, despite the fact the Labor candidate in the last state election was asking me to join him in getting Kirkwood Road built. I found out after the election that the local main roads department does not even favour it. We have to start talking honestly about these things. Gladstone and cities like that are not going to progress unless we do something about it. Shortly the Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services will table a report. I cannot talk about the content of that report, but I can tell you that, from the evidence we received, there are port problems in most of Australia’s major port cities—access problems—and those are problems we must address in the future. Gladstone needs to be at the top of that list.

Ms ROXON (Gellibrand) (6.48 pm)—In the appropriations debate today I want to speak about the neglect of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has been in government for 11 years—his government has been in place for 11 years—and over that time many of us on this side of the House have highlighted the number of different ways that the government has failed to show concern for the plight of working families, particularly putting pressure on working families and the costs of their living. Today I want to talk particularly about the Prime Minister’s failure to appreciate the importance of dental care to working families, his failure to appreciate the impact of dental care costs on the budgets of working families and his insistence on blaming the states for problems that he could have helped with, that he should have helped with and that he must now take concrete steps to fix. Sadly, in this budget and when talking to the Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2006-2007 and the Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2006-2007, there is nothing relating to dental care and nothing that is going to provide any relief to working families.

It is obvious to all of us on this side of the House that dental care is an area of incredible importance to a person’s overall health. It is an area that has suffered outrageous neglect under this government—although I think ‘neglect’ is the wrong word given that some of the actions appear to be more malicious than simply careless. Before 1996, as many in this House would know, there was a Commonwealth dental program. In 1995-96 it involved a $100 million investment in dental health and it helped to ensure that Australians could get the dental care they needed when they needed it. This was a great Labor government initiative.

In the two years following the introduction of the Commonwealth dental program—

Mr Neville—Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to ask the member a question.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Will the member for Gellibrand give way?

Ms ROXON—I would like to deliver my speech first. If the member wants to wait and ask a question at the conclusion of that, I will be happy to answer it then. In the two years following the introduction of the Commonwealth dental program, eligible cardholders who received publicly funded dental care reported less frequent toothaches, waited a shorter time for a check-up and were more satisfied with the dental care that they received.

But in 1996 the Howard government was elected and immediately set about dismantling that dental program which had helped so many Australian families. It did not just slash the funding for the program; it abolished it entirely. One of the Prime Minister’s first acts as Prime Minister was to abolish a program which made health care more accessible for Australian working families. It was a sign of things to come. Of course the move had predictable effects. We now have around 650,000 Australians on waiting lists for public dental care. That
is over half a million Australians who are waiting for their teeth to be fixed. Many of them are in pain, some suffer infection, some suffer tooth loss and some of these Australians cannot eat solid foods. Some have difficulty swallowing and some have trouble speaking.

These dental issues are serious issues which have serious health implications. They also have serious social implications. Dental problems can affect your appearance and speech and can affect mental health and quality of life. Many Australians with severe dental problems suffer social anguish, no less real for perhaps being a little less obvious. There are people in Australia who have difficulty going out with their friends for fear of being laughed at because of the state of their teeth. They cannot go out to dinner. They choose not to go to their friends’ place because they will not be able to eat dinner and some of them choose not to engage in their favourite social activities for fear of embarrassment.

Just a few weeks ago I spoke to an elderly gentleman who loves to dance. He loves to dance almost more than anything and yet his teeth prevent him from doing so. He is embarrassed by the state of his teeth, so he does not want to dance despite the fact that dancing is the aspect of his life that brings him the most joy. He has been waiting for 2½ years for treatment. Here is a clear example of how health problems can easily lead to other challenges in life. We cannot allow the government to pretend that dental health and general health are not related. Teeth cannot be separated from the rest of our bodies or from our peace of mind. Cut a person off from his hobbies and you cut him off from his support networks. It is the role of government to do all it can to help Australians who need our help—Australians who need but cannot afford dental care most certainly fall into this category.

Labor is not the only voice in this debate about the acute need for the Commonwealth to play some role in dental care. Highlighting the poor oral health of people on low incomes, ACOSS has now called on the federal government to ensure that all people on concession cards have access to a free basic course of dental care every two years. The Health Services Union recently launched its campaign for Medicare to cover the cost of dental treatment for Australians aged under 18 and over 65 as well as low-income earners. The Australian Dental Association, in its prebudget submission to Treasury, has called for a Commonwealth funded oral health program to increase access to care for those who are economically disadvantaged and in need of dental care.

Labor is currently examining a range of options to help working families get the dental care they need. We are committed to establishing a Commonwealth dental program to provide the assistance and support that the community needs. ACOSS, the HSU, the ADA—all, like Labor, recognise the need to improve the oral health of the Australian population. We all recognise the need for the Commonwealth to take a leadership role. We may have different approaches, but we all recognise the fundamental responsibility for the Commonwealth to play a role in improving the dental health of all Australians. We will work with these organisations to keep the pressure on the Howard government to act in this area.

Do not think for a second that the fact that this government has allowed over a half a million Australians to languish on public dental waiting lists does not have a dramatic flow-on effect for the rest of the health system. The longer you wait for care for small treatable dental problems, the more likely you are to see those small treatable problems develop into large, less treatable, more intransigent dental problems which might lead you to the hospital gates. It is no coincidence that between 2000 and 2005 the number of six-year-olds admitted to private
hospitals for rotting teeth rose by 95 per cent. In other words, the number of six-year-olds with dental problems serious enough to have to be treated in hospital almost doubled in those five years. Over the same period, the number of children under 12 admitted to private hospitals for rotting teeth rose by 42 per cent. These children are suffering more than they need to, in many cases because they did not get preventive treatment early enough. Not surprisingly, this has flow-on effects for the adult population. The oral health of Australian adults is ranked third worst in the OECD. Young adults aged 18 to 24 have on average about five teeth with untreated decay. This demonstrates a crazy degree of neglect in a largely preventible area of health.

Labor believes that all Australians deserve to have the dental care they need when they need it and in enough time to prevent small problems becoming bigger ones. But that is not the case right now. For many Australians it is not the case for at least two reasons. Firstly, public dental waiting lists are horrendously long. Over half a million people are on waiting lists, some for many years. That is unacceptable and I have made that point clear already. Secondly, thousands of Australians simply cannot afford to pay for the dental care that they need. For a low-income family without private health insurance, dental care is expensive; for many working families, it is simply unaffordable. This is a government that claims that it cares about families. It pretends to be sticking up for family values and then fails to come through for families any time that it actually matters—in this case, when a child is suffering from tooth decay. We need to look after those Australians. In doing so, we will not only help suffering Australians; we will also save our public health system many millions of dollars by avoiding serious diseases that could have been treated earlier.

Making sure that low-income families can get the dental care they need when they need it is not only the compassionate thing to do; it is also economically responsible. But the Prime Minister has two responses to the dental crisis facing Australian working families. The first response is to blame the parents. On New Year’s Eve, instead of saying that, as leader of the Commonwealth, he was prepared to do something about the parlous state of dental care, the Prime Minister lectured parents on the need to stop their children from drinking bottled water. Fluoridated water is an important preventive measure but it is not the whole of the matter. We must acknowledge that not all parts of the country have access to it. Drinking fluoridated tap water would certainly help many people in the future, but it will not solve the dental care accessibility crisis or the dental care affordability crisis, and it will not do nearly enough to tackle the waiting lists which are keeping hundreds of thousands of Australians waiting years to have somebody do something about their aching teeth.

The Prime Minister’s second response to the dental crisis is to blame the states. This is an approach that we are becoming very familiar with it. He does it on health, he does it on education, he does it on water. Any time there is a problem that he could have or should have acted early on—and he has now been in government for 11 years and is looking pretty tired on these issues—he simply blames the states. Just a couple of weeks ago he said again that he believes that dental care is not the responsibility of the Commonwealth government and that the waiting lists around the country are entirely the fault of the states. It beggars belief that his decision to cut $100 million a year from dental services has had no effect on waiting lists. This is the blame game that we have come to know so well, and it has several clear steps: the government fails to do something that it should have done, a problem becomes apparent, the gov-
ernment denies the existence of any problem and, finally, the government blames other people for its own failings. In this case, the Prime Minister is not content with having just one scapegoat; first he blames the states and then he blames parents as well.

A couple of weeks ago Tony Abbott agreed with his Prime Minister, saying that dental care was the states’ problem, not his. But at the same time he acknowledged that dental care was inextricably tied to other health issues. These two statements, placed side by side, just cannot make sense. Labor’s point is that dental care cannot be easily separated from other health issues and, as such, it makes sense for the Commonwealth to take some responsibility for dental care. This is just another example of the government’s illogical, inefficient approach to health care. Despite overlaps, inefficiencies and 11 years of problems in the health system, they resist calls for reform and instead resort to blaming others for what are clearly their areas of responsibility. Tony Abbott also has his facts wrong—

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)**—Order! The member will refer to members by their titles.

**Ms ROXON**—I beg your pardon. The Minister for Health and Ageing also has his facts wrong. He said in an interview two weeks ago that ‘public dental services have always been a state responsibility’. But of course that is not true. We know, for example, that there was a Commonwealth dental program which this Prime Minister scrapped when he was elected. But quite apart from that, and perhaps the minister at the table might be surprised to hear it, the health minister is also unaware of very basic facts about his portfolio. For example, there is a provision in the Constitution—section 51(xxiiiA), if the minister would like to look it up—which makes it abundantly clear that the Commonwealth does have the responsibility and power to act in this area. No-one in this chamber should for a minute think that I do not believe the states share some of this responsibility. We are not talking about whether the states have any responsibility; we are talking about whether the Commonwealth plays any role in fixing what is a national problem.

For the government to pretend that they have no national responsibility on this issue, that they somehow do not have the power and that it has never been an issue for them, is absolutely ridiculous. Not only that, but the health minister, in his desperation to make the point that it is the states’ fault, also managed to mislead parliament, claiming during question time that state funding of dental services had fallen from $374 million to $327 million per year. In fact, the most recent data—easily available to anyone who bothered to look for it—showed that state government expenditure has actually increased to $503 million per annum. The state governments had to step up their investment after the Commonwealth deserted them in this field. But without Commonwealth investment it is ordinary Australians who lose. We can argue across the table as much as we want in this place about what the states should do and what the Commonwealth should do, but the bottom line is that the Commonwealth is not contributing any money to try to fix what is a national problem. Every person around this chamber, including the two members sitting opposite, know that there are people in their electorates who cannot get the dental care that they need. It must be embarrassing to be in the government ranks and saying: ‘We don’t have anything to do with fixing it. We are not prepared to even contribute in any way that might make a difference to those waiting lists or to the access that working families have to the dental care that they need.’ So desperate, it seems, is the minister to sheet home the blame for the national dental crisis to the states that he is prepared

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to use outdated, incorrect figures to buttress his case. He is not going to get away with that sort of pretence. He cannot do that. He can say that the states share some responsibility, he can put pressure on them to do more, but when the Commonwealth entirely washes its hands of this issue it is pretty hard to take it seriously.

Dental care is an important aspect of overall health. Poor dental care causes pain, it causes embarrassment and it costs our health system millions of dollars through lost opportunities to catch small problems before they become big problems. The government have simply washed their hands of this issue. They cut $100 million a year from dental care and, in a spectacular act of dubious logic, have managed to convince themselves that the awful state of dental health in this country is nothing to do with them. They have not convinced us and they have not convinced Australian working families.

The Labor Party and the Leader of the Opposition have offered solutions. The Leader of the Opposition has committed to making dental care more accessible to low-income families. Labor is determined to help solve this problem, but the government are intent only on washing their hands of it. This is in the face of a growing number of Liberal backbenchers, government backbenchers, calling for their own government to act. Members know what is happening on the ground. They know that their government is failing people who need this dental care. We have now seen a range of members who sat on the blame game committee that issued a report recommending the Commonwealth re-establish a Commonwealth dental scheme. That was signed off on unanimously, with the majority of that committee being government members. Still we see nothing from the Prime Minister.

We have seen in the media calls from other backbenchers to take some action in this area. There are a number of ways that the Commonwealth could help solve this problem, but it is determined to do nothing. For the government to ignore this issue and to pretend that it is entirely and solely a responsibility of the states is irresponsible. This is costing us not just in health dollars but also in damage in particular to children whose teeth could have been fixed, who did not need to go to hospital to have their problems solved but who have been forced to do so by the government’s neglect.

Mr Neville—Mr Deputy Speaker, I seek to intervene.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Is the member for Gellibrand willing to give way?

Ms ROXON—Yes.

Mr Neville—Is it not a fact that the Keating government’s four-year program was a catch-up program which was completed by the coalition and was not in the forward estimates of the Keating government?

Ms ROXON—It is interesting that government backbenchers are prepared to ask about a Labor program that was in place. They are prepared to acknowledge that there was a Commonwealth program in place to help the states in dealing with this issue. If you want to make a comparison: the Prime Minister is saying that he will do nothing about this situation. He is not prepared to take the leadership that a previous Labor government took in helping to solve this problem. It did not say it will blame the states or point the finger at someone else. It is a great pretence by the government to say that it is just a state issue. The Commonwealth has a role to play in this, but it is not prepared to play that role. It should be prepared to play that
role because, every day in our electorates, people are suffering from the Commonwealth’s refusal to be involved.

Mr Griffin (Bruce) (7.06 pm)—I rise today to speak on Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2006-2007 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2006-2007 and address some of the issues in these bills that relate to my responsibility as the shadow minister for veterans affairs and defence science and personnel. I want to talk about the recent tenders conducted by DVA with respect to the provision of veterans home care and community nursing services.

Firstly, the recent tender for the provision of veterans home care services: the Veterans Home Care program provides a wide range of low-level home care services designed to enable veterans and war widows and widowers to maintain their health and wellbeing and remain living independently in their own homes. The program provides care services to more than 70,000 veterans and war widows to assist them in living in their own homes for longer. These services include domestic assistance, personal care, safety related home and garden maintenance and respite care. This is a very important and worthwhile program that gives real help to the veterans community.

In June last year a nationwide tender process was undertaken for the delivery of veterans home care services. This is the first time such a review has occurred since the start of the program in 2001. I have some very real concern about the way this tender process was conducted. Naturally, as a result of this tender process, some existing assessment agencies and service providers did not have their contracts renewed. This in itself is not a problem, although it did raise issues for the veterans community that I feel were not addressed by this government. One of my concerns is that there was a lack of consultation among the users of the Veterans Home Care program. Most veterans first heard of a change in their providers and, therefore, carers via a letter over the Christmas period.

By their very nature, the recipients of veterans home care are vulnerable and are suffering from physical and/or mental frailties. To learn of this change at short notice caused understandable anxiety among those receiving this letter at an already stressful time. At the recent estimates round, the department was asked what consultation took place with the recipients of these services. Mr Ken Douglas, the general manager in the Department of Veterans’ Affairs responsible for service delivery, replied, ‘I am not aware of any specific consultation that we undertook during that tender period.’ Mr Douglas did say that consultation occurred among the National Treatment Monitoring Committee and the National Ex-service Round Table on Aged Care, but these are bodies that the recipients of the service have probably never heard about. It is no wonder that the recipients of this care did not know what the changes would mean for them.

The government should have explained these changes better. The veterans community deserved much more than a mere letter at short notice over the Christmas break making them aware of this change. Better consultation with the recipients could have prevented a lot of undue anxiety, stress and concern. What worries me most about this tender process is that throughout it the government failed to acknowledge the importance and value of the relationship that often exists between carers and veterans.

Many veterans have been with their carers for five years or more. Over this time they have formed a relationship with and an understanding of each other. Obviously, carers who have worked with veterans over such a long period better understand their needs and also provide a
warm friendship—the value of which cannot be underestimated. There is no doubt in my mind that the new providers will be providing the same tangible services to the veterans community. However, the intangible value of long-term relationships and companionship that is so important among the vulnerable was ignored by the government.

During the Christmas period, my office heard from many veterans about their concerns in respect of this tender. We heard from Sid Lucas, a 105-year-old veteran from Rosebud in Victoria, who was concerned about losing his long-term carer, Chris. Sid had known Chris for a number of years and could not imagine not having him around. There was also William Young, an 83-year-old veteran from Mount Martha in Victoria, who was concerned about losing Glenda, another long-term carer. Both still have their carers as their new providers are yet to find replacements, so they are still waiting and are still worried. These are just two examples of veterans who contacted our office and wanted their concerns to be publicly noted as they felt they were being ignored by this government. I have heard of more that have been affected in the same way, including a younger veteran who required these services due to a disability he suffered. That veteran has two young kids that he has to support. He was worried what the effect on his kids would be when his carer changed as she had grown close to the kids and provided them with much-needed help.

The minister has publicly stated that the tender round had nothing to do with money. If that is the case, I question exactly what criteria could have been used to determine who the new providers would be. I would have thought that the value of existing relationships between carers and veterans would have been high among any criteria for a contract of this sort. Instead the government seems to have focused solely on the provision of tangible services. I believe that this was a mistake. It does not reflect the reality that a number of those receiving this service have special needs, are often vulnerable, both physically and mentally, and benefit greatly from having a companion that understands what they need. This government needs to understand one thing and understand it clearly: carers are not just cleaners; they are companions. Instead of conducting a tender process that would have been more suited to a tender for mere cleaning services, this government should have recognised the value of carers. There should have been greater consultation, and the value of long-term relationships between carers and veterans should have been recognised.

In a situation similar to that of the veterans home care tender, a national tender for the provision of community nursing services was conducted last year. Community nursing is a service provided in the person’s home to restore health following illness, to allow a person to maintain the best level of independence and to allow for dignified death. This service is available for gold card holders where the person has a clinical need for the nursing and has been referred by a local medical officer. For white card holders the condition requiring nursing must also be an accepted disability. This is a very worthwhile and valuable program for the veterans community. At the time of the tender, concerns were raised among some veterans and providers about the lack of consultation provided. There were also concerns that new providers may not provide the same type of service that had previously been provided. The government typically dismissed all of these concerns.

I want to read from an email that I received from the daughter of a veteran from northern Tasmania. She remains very concerned about the services her father is receiving from one of the new providers that were selected in this tender. I will leave out the name of the new pro-
vider. This email has raised a number of concerns which, I have been told, had been raised with the minister and department on a number of occasions. The email says:

I have had to prompt the new provider re my father’s due dates for catheter changes (September 25th); with our previous service provider all aspects of Dad’s care was always organised and projected, and always attendance times were negotiated.

My father had a fall on Friday 22nd September. As a result he required 2nd daily dressings. I advised the new provider of this, but was told there would be no available nurse until the afternoon of Monday 25th. I question if unavailability of nursing staff breaches the DVA contract requirements, as service is supposed to be 7 days per week.

On October 2nd I requested for my father to have an earlier shift for Wednesday October 18th, as he was due to be admitted at 8.00 am for day surgery. The new provider advised me some days later that his roster had been altered for an early start for Wednesday 11th October (one week early). Bearing in mind that veterans do not require mistakes such as this to be made by their providers; not all have family members “on tap” to pick up the mistakes.

On Sunday 5th November the support worker arrived 1hr & 15 minutes late for the morning shift. This is not the first time this has happened. There is never an explanatory phone call, so I can only wonder at the new provider’s policy and expected protocol in this situation (this is cause for concern re mobility, fluid and medication issues).

On Thursday 18th January 2007 a similar instance to the above point occurred, whereby a worker still hadn’t arrived one hour after her expected arrival time. After the incident on 5th November I requested, at the very least, for the new provider to give me a courtesy call if this was to happen again. But no call to explain was given, again I had to phone the provider to discover what was happening for my father that morning.

This is completely unacceptable and I urge the minister to properly consider the issues this correspondence raises.

I have talked about two national tenders that the department has conducted over the last year relating to very important services provided to the veterans community, namely the Veterans Home Care program and community nursing services. In both cases the government failed to consult properly with the recipients before a change in their service. They have failed to acknowledge the value of existing providers’ experience and knowledge and the intangibles that form over time with existing providers. This is an insensitive and out of touch government. In both of these cases these problems could have been averted.

I accept that new tenders may have been required but if, as the minister insists, this has nothing to do with money, why not include the intangible values that attach to long-term providers in any evaluation of potential tenderers? Also, in both cases the government could have conducted tenders for all new services required. By this I mean that existing carers and nurses could have remained in place with their clients until their services were no longer required. Any new clients could have been provided with a carer or nurse from the new providers following the tender round. This would have ensured continuity of service and provided the department with a chance to re-tender to new organisations.

Finally, the government could have consulted much better with the actual recipients of these services. In fact, if it had listened to and consulted with the community, it would have heard from them that the two suggestions I have just outlined would have helped to solve their problems. I know this because it is from the veteran community that I got these suggestions after listening to their concerns and anxieties. This government needs to pick up its perform-
ance in relation to its tendering of these services. It should stop treating the veterans as mere economic units and start listening to what they really want and need.

This brings me to the current review of the chaplaincy services in South Australia. I have recently outlined my concerns with regard to this review—firstly, that the churches are not included formally as members of this review and, secondly, that the review will be used to reduce the level of funding for this vital service. Despite Labor calling on the government to include the churches as representatives on this review, the government has failed to acknowledge the benefits that this would have. There is no chaplaincy expertise on the current review panel. I cannot understand why the government will not allow the churches to play a formal role in the review, especially considering that they fund a portion of the chaplaincy services provided.

If I were to be cynical I would say that it would seem that the government specifically does not want this type of expertise as it has already made up its mind on the issue. At the recent estimates round the department head, Mr Sullivan, would not offer any guarantee that the funding for this service would not be reduced. The actual providers of this service describe it as: ‘Spiritual care provided in a person-centred manner to patients and their families and to staff who are in crisis due to illness or other life troubles. It involves deep listening, compassion, wise counsel, prayer and spiritual religious rituals that support the person in the midst of difficult circumstances.’ From this description it is not hard to see how valuable this would be to the veteran community.

I have made my view on this clear before and I will restate it now: chaplaincy services play a major role in the rehabilitation of veterans and their families. I strongly oppose any reduction in these services, especially given the unique rehabilitation and mental health challenges that are often faced by our injured veterans. Apart from this current review into these services in South Australia, I have concerns surrounding possible reductions to the chaplaincy funding provided to other states, especially Queensland, Western Australia and New South Wales. I will continue to seek information from DVA on any proposed funding cuts to these services anywhere in Australia.

I want to finish by outlining some of the positive work done by the Leader of the Opposition with respect to protection of the Kokoda Track. We are all aware of the mess the government has made of the works and maintenance of Anzac Cove in Gallipoli. Labor has been chasing the government with regard to concerns it has over the potential impact of mining and logging on the Kokoda Track. Only after Labor raised this issue on a number of occasions did the government act by sending a delegation to Papua New Guinea to investigate the issue. We are still to learn of the actual outcomes of this delegation. In contrast, the Leader of the Opposition released his policy on this issue on 21 January this year. I will now read from his announcement:

A Federal Labor Government would campaign at the United Nations to place the historic Kokoda Track on UNESCO’s official world heritage register list to ensure its protection.

I have spoken to the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Sir Michael Somare, to offer Australia’s support for the world heritage listing.

As we approach Australia Day and our thoughts turn to our national identity, I would like to see the 96-kilometre historic Kokoda Track receive permanent and final protection.
The formal UNESCO listing would complement a master plan released last year by the Kokoda Track Foundation ... which proposes a Kokoda National Memorial Park and the development of a sustainable echo-trekking strategy.

A Federal Labor Government also commits itself to working with the KTF to find ways to protect the historic site. Listing on the UNESCO world heritage register would help to protect against threats such as mining exploration and logging.

In addition to political and diplomatic support in the World Heritage Committee—

Labor—
could also provide the PNG government with technical assistance and expert advice and support of the lengthy and detailed listing process.

Critical to this plan would be ensuring that people from all over the world can continue to visit and trek through this historic site.

Kokoda is not a war. It is certainly not a holiday. It is a pilgrimage.

A World Heritage Listing for Kokoda would be a cause for celebration for all Australians as we approach Australia Day.

Last year, there was a strong and heartfelt national outcry about a mining exploration plan near the Kokoda track—and we never want to see the track under threat again.

Kokoda is beginning to take its place alongside Gallipoli in Australia’s military history.

The bravery of the young men who fought on the Kokoda track was crucial to our survival during World War II. In 1942 Australian troops fought one of their most difficult battles on the track as they halted the Japanese advance towards the PNG capital, Port Moresby, and Australia’s northern coastline.

The Australian Army sustained heavy casualties in the campaign, with approximately 625 killed and over 1,600 wounded. In addition, the Army sustained more than 4,000 casualties as a result of illness caused by the difficult conditions on the track.

The bravery and the symbolism of Kokoda must never be forgotten—or disturbed.

I would like to see Australia and PNG work together to protect this historic Kokoda track for future generations.

This was a positive step forward that I warmly welcome and it stands in stark contrast to the government’s general inaction in this area.

There continues to be a number of very important issues facing the veterans community that are currently not being addressed adequately by this government. I have outlined my concerns in regard to some of these issues and I will continue to raise concerns about a wide range of issues throughout this year. The concerns I outline go to the core of providing for the health of our veterans and their families. The government needs to be doing better in this area.

I am also pleased to outline again the action that Labor has taken in respect of the protection of the Kokoda Track. The Kokoda Track holds an important place in our military and cultural heritage and I am very pleased that the Leader of the Opposition has taken action that will help provide for its future protection.

I would also be remiss on this occasion not to take a minute to just cover one other issue in relation to the Kokoda Track—that is, the recent comments by the defence minister with respect to this issue. In his defence, the Minister for Defence maintains that he was not comparing the nature of the military action on the Kokoda Track with that in relation to Iraq. I take him at his word and I have no doubt that that is in fact what he meant. However, I have to say that I think it was an incredibly insensitive intervention by him in the first place in a deliber-
ate speech to link the situation we face today to what occurred on Kokoda. The minister has to understand that major events in our military history such as Kokoda cannot be used in the manner in which he sought to. The fact of the matter is that the circumstances around what occurred at Kokoda have a special place in our history here in Australia where there are many veterans who survive and live on with the events that occurred, the injuries that they sustained, the memories that they have and the loss of many of their comrades. For the minister to endeavour to raise that in the context of recent circumstances I think was unfortunate and ill-advised. I note that it has been commented on by the RSL, by veterans themselves and by many others in the community as being not the thing that he should have done. I certainly endorse the fact that he should think more carefully before he uses such analogies in the future.

Mr NAIRN (Eden-Monaro—Special Minister of State) (7.22 pm)—I am pleased to bring what has been a lively debate on Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2006-2007 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2006-2007 to a close. I would like to thank all of those members who have made a contribution. The debate has touched on a wide range of issues of interest to members, including the general state of the economy and issues emerging in members’ electorates as well as more general policy issues such as policies to address climate change. The additional estimates bills seek appropriation authority from the parliament to meet requirements that have arisen since the last budget. The total appropriation being sought through the additional estimates bills this year is somewhat in excess of $1.8 billion and arises from changes in the estimates of program expenditure and from policy decisions taken by the government since the last budget.

The initiatives for which funding is sought in these bills reflect the government’s continuing commitment to maintaining stability in our region, enhancing our national security, investing in families, investing in a more skilled and dynamic workforce, investing in alternative transport fuels and providing additional assistance to those suffering the effects of the drought and those receiving structural adjustment payments following measures to protect the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

I will now take an opportunity to outline the more significant measures contained in the bills. Australia must be prepared to respond and help where necessary with respect to stability in our region. The appropriation bills provide funding to substantially strengthen the Australian Federal Police’s capacity to respond to international crises, particularly in our region. An additional $64.7 million will be provided to the AFP to fund Australian police deployments in East Timor, including the contribution to the United Nations integrated mission in East Timor, and to expand the international deployment group by about 114 personnel in 2006-07. The expansion will allow the AFP to respond more quickly and comprehensively to crisis situations and will help to strengthen law enforcement capabilities across our region.

The increase in the AFP deployment complements the initiative to increase the size of the Australian Army. An additional $46.2 million will be provided to deliver stage 1 of the Enhanced Land Force initiative to increase the size of the Australian Army by one light infantry battalion. This will ensure that we have the capability to act in a manner commensurate with our regional responsibilities and to contribute to coalitions in areas further afield. In addition, it is proposed to provide $49.6 million to implement a number of innovative recruitment and retention initiatives to ensure the Australian Defence Force is able to attract and retain the
people that are essential to the maintenance of our defence capabilities. It is also proposed to provide $139.4 million for Operation Astute to restore peace and stability in East Timor, plus $49.7 million to acquire protective equipment to enhance the security and effectiveness of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. These provisions will ensure that the government can continue to provide the right mix of law enforcement and military responses to emerging challenges in the region.

With respect to investing in our families, we are committed to educating children and families and legislating and regulating to reduce the dangers lurking on the internet. The appropriation bills propose funding to create a national filter scheme to provide every Australian family with a free internet filter as part of a comprehensive package of measures to crack down on the scourge of internet pornography. The National Filter Scheme is the centrepiece of the government’s Protecting Australian Families Online package, which is the single biggest commitment to protecting families online in the history of the internet in Australia. This is not only in respect of pornography but also for young people being contacted on the internet. The filter will assist in protecting young children with respect to so-called chat rooms. The Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts will be provided with $34.9 million in 2006-07 to commence implementation of the initiative, which also includes measures to provide Australian libraries with free filters so that computer corners at libraries across Australia will be child friendly.

One of the biggest skills challenges we face as a nation is to improve the basic skills of our workforce. Almost a third of Australians aged between 25 and 64 are without year 12 or an equivalent qualification. The government’s Skills for the Future investment program will help build a more highly skilled and responsive workforce to support Australia’s long-term economic growth. As part of this program, the Department of Education, Science and Training will be provided with $38.6 million to support people aged 25 years and over who do not have year 12 or an equivalent qualification. Each year, up to 30,000 vouchers valued at up to $3,000 will be made available to individuals in this group to undertake accredited literacy, numeracy, basic education and vocational certificate II courses. These work skills vouchers represent a major investment in closing the gap between the skills rich and the skills poor in our community and are a symbol of the government’s commitment to individual advancement and economic opportunity. The department will also be provided with $15 million to promote career opportunities under the Skills for the Future initiative.

The government’s energy white paper established a balanced framework for supporting alternative transport fuels. To capitalise on Australia’s liquefied petroleum gas resources and to accelerate investment in alternative fuels as well as provide motorists with more and cheaper fuel options, the government has introduced measures to encourage consumers to purchase new LPG vehicles and to convert existing vehicles to use LPG. An additional $136.1 million will be provided to the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources to implement the initiative, under which individuals who purchase a new factory-fitted, LPG-powered vehicle for private use will receive a rebate of $1,000, while individuals who convert their car to LPG for private use will receive a rebate of $2,000.

Australia is currently in the grip of the worst drought on record and, more than ever, farmers are struggling. The appropriation bills propose funding for additional assistance to farmers suffering the effects of this drought. An additional $12 million will be provided to the De-
partment of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to support primary producers in regions that have been declared eligible for exceptional circumstances assistance and an additional $14 million to support primary producers in regions that have been declared eligible for interim income support. In areas that have been exceptional circumstances declared for more than three years a further $17.3 million will be provided as taxable grants of up to $5,500 for eligible farmers to obtain professional business and planning advice. The department will also be provided with $30.9 million to assist former and current tobacco growers to move into other business activities.

The government is committed to providing structural adjustment assistance to people in the fishing and fishing-dependent industries who are affected by rezoning in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The government will provide an additional $84 million for the Great Barrier Reef structural adjustment package, including $27.4 million to enhance the package. Enhancements include changes to ensure that the assistance covers the approved full cost of restructuring a business, a further 20 per cent increase in payments for approved applications for business restructuring assistance, extension of the provision of financial and relationship counsellors to the region for a further 12 months and measures to expedite the assessment of applications.

I wish to emphasise that the capacity of government to respond effectively to areas of need, such as in the areas I have just outlined, is only possible because of our continuing strong management of the economy and ongoing economic reform. The 2006-07 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook reported that the economic and fiscal outlook for Australia remains sound, although the economy is being affected by a severe drought. Since 1996, the economy has enjoyed a long period of sustained growth. In 2006-07, it is forecast to grow by 2½ per cent. During this sustained period of growth the unemployment rate has fallen to 30-year lows, while inflation remains moderate. The consumer price index fell by 0.1 per cent in the December quarter 2006, to be 3.3 per cent higher than a year ago. The December quarter outcome was the first fall since the March quarter 1999 and reflected a sharp fall in petrol prices. In the period ahead the CPI is expected to grow at a moderate rate, reflecting the unwinding of high fruit and fuel prices and an easing in underlying inflationary pressures. The fiscal outlook continues to remain sound. The government expects an underlying cash surplus of $11.8 billion for 2006-07, which is marginally stronger than the 2006-07 budget forecast. Surpluses are also forecast over the forward years.

These projected underlying cash surpluses emphasise Australia’s sound fiscal outlook at a time when many of the major advanced economies are continuing to experience significant deficits. The continuation of the government’s sound economic management will ensure that Australians continue to benefit from the higher standard of living that comes with low inflation, solid and sustainable wage growth, very high levels of labour force participation and the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years. I note that the OECD’s recent economic survey of the Australian economy commented that Australia’s recent macroeconomic performance continues to be impressive and that living standards have steadily improved since the beginning of the 1990s and now surpass all G7 countries except the United States.

Commonwealth net debt was eliminated earlier this year, falling from a peak of 18.5 per cent of GDP in 1995-96. Net worth is projected to be positive for the first time in 2008-09. The government transferred $18.6 billion to the Future Fund last month. That amount con-
sisted of the first instalment of the 2005-06 budget surplus of $10 billion and a further $8.6 billion, which was the first instalment received by the government from the sale of Telstra. This amount is a significant contribution by the government to the Future Fund to help meet the government’s superannuation liabilities. By addressing superannuation liabilities, the Future Fund will strengthen the government’s financial position and help reduce pressures on the budget at a time when the government will be facing the spending challenges of an ageing population.

At the commencement of the debate, the honourable member for Melbourne moved an amendment to the second reading motion. The government does not support the proposed amendment. The reasons for that should be quite clear. I have already dealt with many of the specific issues that were raised in the amendment. The people of Australia have enjoyed unprecedented economic prosperity, thanks largely to the government’s impressive macroeconomic management. Through its commitment to sound financial management, the government has put the budget in surplus, retired government net debt and commenced saving for its future obligations. This will free the next generation of Australians to meet their own challenges, unencumbered by the legacy of past Labor governments, which spent way beyond their means. The government stands by its achievements in economic policy and workplace relations. We reject the unfounded assertion that the budget documents fail the test of transparency and accountability. These bills are important pieces of legislation, underpinning the government’s programs and reforms and deserve widespread support. I commend the additional estimates bills to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—The original question was that this bill be now read a second time. To this the honourable member for Melbourne has moved as an amendment that all words after ‘That’ be omitted with a view to substituting other words. The question now is that the words proposed to be omitted stand part of the question.

Question agreed to.

Original question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Ordered that this bill be reported to the House without amendment.

**APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 4) 2006-2007**

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 8 February, on motion by Mr Nairn:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Ordered that this bill be reported to the House without amendment.

**Main Committee adjourned at 7.38 pm**
QUESTIONS IN WRITING

Crosby/Textor Contracts
(Question No. 1737)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 22 June 2005:

1. Is he aware that the Child Support Agency (CSA) entered into a contract on 16 May 2005 with Crosby Textor Research Strategies to the value of $41,250.
2. What services are being provided under this contract.
3. What was the rationale for appointing Crosby Textor to conduct this work.
4. Was the Minister’s office consulted by the CSA on which firm to engage.
5. Was a call for tenders issued; if not, why not.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

In October 2004, the CSA discussed the need to develop a communications strategy and plan with the Minister’s office and informed the Minister that it intended to reengage Cosway Australia to assist. Cosway Australia had worked with the CSA on a number of previous occasions. At CSA’s request, Cosway submitted a proposal to undertake the work. That proposal included using their partner company, Crosby Textor Research Strategies, to undertake part of the work, due to their expertise and Canberra location. CSA accepted this proposal, including the use of Crosby Textor on 16 November 2004 (not on 16 May 2005). The invoice for the services supplied, for $41,250, was issued by Crosby Textor Research Strategies to CSA on 11 April 2005 and paid in May 2005.

The requirement was not put to tender. The reason for this was the plan needed to be developed quickly and the cost of the services was below the threshold required for a mandatory process. Crosby Textor was appointed based on their capability and experience, value for money, and their ability to undertake the work immediately.

Consultancy Services
(Question No. 1777)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 23 June 2005:

1. Did the department or any agency under the Minister’s portfolio engage the services of a public relations, public affairs or media management consultancy in 2004; if so, what was the (a) purpose and (b) cost of each engagement.
2. What was the name and postal address of each company engaged for these purposes.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

The Department of Human Services was established on 26 October 2004.

Core Department

1. No
   (a) N/A
   (b) N/A
2. N/A
Australian Hearing
(1) Yes

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<td>Marketing and Communication events and campaigns for Australian Hearing</td>
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(2) The PR Edge
658 Church Street
RICHMOND VIC 3121

Centrelink
(1) No
(a) N/A
(b) N/A
(2) N/A

Child Support Agency
(1) Yes

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<td>Cosway Australia Communications Counsel</td>
<td>Advice for communication issues for the Child Support Agency</td>
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<td>Crosby Textor Research Strategies Results</td>
<td>Develop a Communications Plan for the Child Support Agency</td>
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<td>Interactive Consultants</td>
<td>Develop a communication strategy to support employers during the transition to new electronic arrangements</td>
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</table>

(2) Cosway Australia Communications Counsel
PO Box 593
MILSONS POINT NSW 1565
Crosby Textor Research Strategies Results
PO Box 3632
MANUKA ACT 2603
Interactive Consultants
2 Ambra Place
ARANDA ACT 2614

CRS Australia
(1) No
(a) N/A
(b) N/A
(2) N/A

Medicare Australia

(1) Yes

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<td>Cultural Perspectives</td>
<td>Raise awareness around sending and taking Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme medicines overseas</td>
<td>$47,057.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>School of Thought</td>
<td>Raise awareness and promote take-up of HIC Online</td>
<td>$5,852.00</td>
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<td>Morris Walker</td>
<td>Develop and implement public relations opportunities relating to a campaign to raise awareness around sending and taking Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme medicines overseas</td>
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(2) Cultural Perspectives

The Atrium
340 Darling Street
BALMAIN NSW 2041

School of Thought
37 Scott Street
NARRABUNDA ACT 2604

Morris Walker
1/285 Canberra Avenue
FYSHWICK ACT 2609

Health Services Australia

(1) No
(a) N/A
(b) N/A

(2) N/A

To prepare this answer it has taken approximately 9 hours and 25 minutes at an estimated cost of $526.

Oil for Food Program
(Question No. 2900)

Mr Rudd asked the Prime Minister, in writing, on 8 December 2005:

Will the Minister provide details of all contact between himself, his office or the Minister’s department and the Australian Wheat Board in relation to the Iraqi Minister for Trade’s threat to cancel the AWB’s contracts for the supply of wheat to Iraq in August 2002.

Mr Howard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Contact between the government, including myself, my office and my department, and AWB Ltd in relation to this matter is addressed in detail in the report of the Inquiry into certain Australian companies in relation to the UN Oil-for-Food Programme.
Media Training
(Question No. 3373)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister representing the Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation, in writing, on 29 March 2006:

(1) Did the (a) Minister and (b) his personal staff receive any media training in 2005.
(2) What was the cost of the media training.
(3) What was the name and postal address of each company engaged to provide media training.

Mr McGauran—The Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

1 (a) & (b) No

Telstra: Payphones
(Question No. 3424)

Mr Laurie Ferguson asked the Minister representing the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, in writing, on 9 May 2006:

(1) How many Telstra payphones have been (a) removed, (b) relocated, and (c) installed in the postcode area (i) 2127, (ii) 2128, (iii) 2141, (iv) 2142, (v) 2143, (vi) 2144, (vii) 2145, (viii) 2160, and (ix) 2161 since January 2003.
(2) What criteria does Telstra use to determine the (a) siting, (b) relocation, and (c) removal of payphones.
(3) What plans does Telstra have to (a) install, (b) relocate, and (c) remove payphones in the postcode area (i) 2127, (ii) 2128, (iii) 2141, (iv) 2142, (v) 2143, (vi) 2144, (vii) 2145, (viii) 2160, and (ix) 2161.
(4) How many Telstra payphones are there in the electoral division of Reid.
(5) What is the furthest distance between Telstra payphones in the electoral division of Reid.

Mr McGauran—The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question, based on information provided by Telstra:

On 8 June 2006 the Minister also publicly announced a number of initiatives to provide customers with a better understanding of their rights in relation to payphone services, improve Telstra’s processes, and improve consumer access to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) in performing its compliance role. These initiatives have resulted in Telstra providing improved information about a consumer’s right to have reasonable access to a payphone and enhancing its payphone removal consultation processes. Telstra has also consulted with low income groups regarding proposed payphone removals, and ACMA has improved its existing processes to provide a clear complaints process in relation to Telstra’s adherence to its payphone commitments.

(a) to (c) The numbers of Telstra-operated street-located payphones that have been removed, relocated and installed in the nine postcode areas in question since 2003 are as follows:

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
Telstra uses the universal service obligation Standard Marketing Plan (SMP), approved by ACMA, to make its payphone siting decisions. Section 3.8 of the SMP specifies these criteria, and is available publicly at:


(a) to (c) Telstra has advised that there is no specific information available for 2007 on the numbers of Telstra payphones planned to be installed, relocated or removed in the nine postcode areas in question. Telstra further advised that it undertakes an annual review in the first half of each year and announces payphone deployment decisions thereafter.

There are 187 Telstra public payphones in the electoral division of Reid.

The greatest distance between Telstra public payphones in the electoral division of Reid is 1.7 kilometres.

Mobile Phone Towers
(Question No. 3630)

Ms Kate Ellis asked the Minister representing the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, in writing, on 13 June 2006:

In respect of mobile phone towers in the electoral division of Adelaide, (a) how many are there, and (b) what are their (i) details and (ii) locations.

Mr McGauran—The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question, based on information sourced from industry and provided by the Mobile Carriers Forum:

(a) There are 24 freestanding mobile phone towers in the electoral division of Adelaide.

(b) (i) and (ii) The details and locations of the freestanding mobile phone towers in the electoral division of Adelaide are as follows:

Monopole: Tynte Street, North Adelaide, SA 5006
Monopole: 125 Strangways Terrace, North Adelaide, SA 5006
Monopole: 4A Manton Street, Hindmarsh, SA 5007
Monopole: 76 Days Road, Croyden, SA 5008
Monopole: 72 Pym Street, Dudley Park, SA 5008
Monopole: 2 William Street, Beverley, SA 5009
Monopole: 1 Scotland Road, Mile End South, SA 5031
Monopole: Corner Burbridge Road and Bagot Avenue, Hilton, SA 5033
Monopole: Wayville Showgrounds, Goodwood Road, Wayville, SA 5034
Monopole: 109-113 Anzac Highway, Ashford, SA 5035
Monopole: 60 Charles Street, Unley, SA 5061
Monopole: 4 Woods Street, Norwood, SA 5067
Monopole: 2 Fullarton Road, Norwood, SA 5067
Monopole: 20 Magill Road, Norwood, SA 5067
Monopole: 70 North East Road, Walkerville, SA 5081
Monopole: Corner of Main North Road and Regency Road, Prospect, SA 5082
Monopole: Lot 20 Grassmere Road, Prospect, SA 5082
Monopole: 615 Regency Road, Broadview, SA 5083
Monopole: 539 Churchill Road, Kilburn, SA 5084
Monopole: Part Lot 51, Churchill Road, Kilburn, SA 5084
Monopole: 406 Main North Road, Blair Athol, SA 5084
Monopole: Gepps Cross, Telsra Exchange, 558 Main North Road, Blair Athol, SA 5084
Monopole: Corner of Grand Junction Road and Fosters Road, Northfield, SA 5085
Monopole: Lot 43 Rellum Road, Greenacres, SA 5086

Breastfeeding
(Question No. 3807)

Mr Laurie Ferguson asked the Minister for Health and Ageing, in writing, on 8 August 2006:

(1) Is the Department of Health and Ageing currently engaged in any campaigns to promote the importance of breast feeding.

(2) Will he provide details of all breast feeding campaigns undertaken by the Department of Health and Ageing over the past 10 years.

(3) Has the Advisory Panel on the Marketing in Australia of Infant Formula (APMAIF) found any companies to be in breach of their guidelines; if so, what actions are open to APMAIF to prosecute or penalize such companies.

(4) What is the policy of the Department of Health and Ageing in relation to the advertising of discounts on baby milk formula.

(5) What is APMAIF’s policy regarding the marketing of non-milk baby food products in packaging that is identical to infant formula.

(6) What has been the response of the Australian Government to the UNICEF and WHO recommendation that “governments should review progress in national implementation of the International Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes, and consider new legislation or additional measures as needed to protect families from adverse commercial influence”.

Mr Abbott—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Yes. The Department of Health and Ageing is managing a contract of $300,000 (over 3 years) for the Australian Breastfeeding Association to continue its work in breastfeeding promotion.
(2) Breastfeeding promotion activities funded by the Department of Health and Ageing over the past 10 years include:

- Australian Breastfeeding Association ($910,000 – 1998-2008) – volunteer organisation funded to promote and support breastfeeding in the Australian community through: training breastfeeding counsellors; updating breastfeeding training manuals; and establishing a breastfeeding case history database.

- National Child Nutrition Program (1999-00 - 2005-06) – $2,170,000 of the total funding from the program was allocated to 15 projects that featured breastfeeding as a key component.

- Curtin University ($268,638 – 2002-03 – 2004-05) – Perth Infant Feeding Study Mark 2 to monitor infant feeding practices among Perth mothers during the first 12 months of a baby’s life.

- Australian College of Midwives ($230,000 – 2002-03 – 2004-05) – Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative to encourage all hospitals to become accredited as “baby friendly” (ie, maternity facilities follow practices known to promote the health and wellbeing of babies and mothers including breastfeeding).

- National Health and Medical Research Council ($426,829 – 2000-01 – 2003-04) – Review of the Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia, incorporating the Infant Feeding Guidelines for Health Workers and Dietary Guidelines for Australian Adults. These Guidelines recommend exclusive breastfeeding of babies until around six months and for all Australians to encourage and support breastfeeding mothers.

- National Breastfeeding Strategy ($2 million – 1996-2001) – produced a range of resources for the general community, health workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service providers.

(3) Yes. The APMAIF recorded thirteen breaches of their agreement in the period 1999 to 2005. As the Marketing in Australia of Infant Formulas: Manufacturers and Importers Agreement 1992 (MAIF Agreement) is a voluntary self-regulatory agreement, the APMAIF cannot prosecute a company found in breach of it. In its Annual Report which is tabled in Parliament, APMAIF reports all breaches of the MAIF Agreement and the companies involved. Depending on the particular breach, APMAIF can request the company to withdraw the advertisement/s or print and circulate a correction to the material or information referred to in the complaint. The requirements of infant formula composition and labelling are set out in the Food Standards Code. State and territory health agencies implement and enforce the Food Standards Code, and breaches of infant formula labelling requirements are referred to them for consideration and action.

(4) The APMAIF guidelines for price promotions of infant formula are supported by the Department of Health and Ageing. The guidelines do not allow price tickets on baby milk formula to have any content other than the price, the name of the product and the amount to be saved.

(5) The MAIF Agreement covers the marketing of infant formula, including non milk formula, where the product is made in accordance with Food Standards Code Standard 2.9.1 – Infant Formula Products. This standard only covers foods intended or represented for use as a substitute for breast milk and applies whether the product is in powder, liquid concentrate or ‘ready to drink’ form. The standard, and as a consequence MAIF Agreement, does not cover baby food which is not constituted specifically as a substitute for breast milk but to be provided as additional to either breast milk or infant formula.

(6) The Australian Government maintains its support for the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and in 2001 reviewed the scope of the MAIF Agreement (which gives effect in Australia to the principles of this code) to determine its continuing capacity to meet the objectives of the code. The Department of Health and Ageing is continuing to work with the signatories...
to the MAIF Agreement and other relevant bodies towards appropriate marketing of infant formula. It is recognised that the infant formula marketing environment has changed since the MAIF Agreement was developed in 1992 and the current Agreement does not cover the spectrum of advertising now in the market place.

Private Health Insurance
(Question No. 3814)

Mr Georganas asked the Minister for Health and Ageing, in writing, on 8 August 2006:

(1) Since the introduction of the government’s 30% Private Health Insurance rebate, by how much have average private health insurance premiums increased.

(2) For the period referred to in part (1), for each of the four largest private health insurance funds, (a) what number of procedures have been removed from insurance coverage and (b) what is the nature of these procedures.

Mr Abbott—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) In 1999, the private health insurance 30% rebate was introduced. Since then, private health insurance premiums have increased by the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>-0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>7.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>7.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>5.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) The Department of Health and Ageing does not collect data on the number and nature of procedures removed from insurance coverage.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport
(Question No. 3819)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 8 August 2006:

Further to the Minister’s reply to question No. 3017 (Hansard, 2 March 2006, page 160), why did the Minister not also mention that one CCTV camera was found to have no focus.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

I provided further information in relation to this camera in my reply to Question on Notice No.3391.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport
(Question No. 3820)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 8 August 2006:

(1) Further to the Minister’s reply to part (1) of question No. 3256, which states that Customs and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs own and operate CCTV cameras at Sydney International Airport, which other Commonwealth departments and agencies (a) own and operate and (b) control CCTV cameras at (i) Sydney International Airport and (ii) Sydney Domestic Airport.

(2) Further to the Minister’s reply to part (3) of question No. 3256, apart from organisations such as the airport owners, airlines and retail outlets, who else operates CCTV cameras at (1) Sydney International Airport and (2) Sydney Domestic Airport.
Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) (a) and (b) The only Commonwealth agencies that have cameras at Sydney International airport are the Australian Customs Service and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. Other Commonwealth agencies have access to the cameras if required for security purposes. It is not appropriate for me to provide further details in this regard. The Australian Customs Service does not own nor operate any CCTV cameras at Sydney Domestic Airport. I am unable to answer this question on behalf of other entities at Sydney Domestic Airport.

(2) Refer to Question 1 above.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport

(Question No. 3834)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 8 August 2006:

(1) Can the Minister confirm that access clearance is required before a person may enter the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport.

(2) Further to the Minister’s reply to part (2) of question No. 3391, are the cameras that were reported as having “no focus” or facing a wall fully concealed from the view of those with access to the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport; if not, can he explain how providing details about the location of these cameras on the public record will harm the effectiveness of Customs’ operations; if not, why not.

(3) Will the Minister confidentially provide details about the exact location of the cameras that were out of focus and facing the wall to myself or the Shadow Minister for Homeland Security; if not, why not; if so, when.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) Access control to the baggage make-up area is exercised by the airport operator, Sydney Airport Corporation Limited (SACL).

(2) No. The cameras that were reported as having “no focus” or facing a wall are not fully concealed from the view of those with access to the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport. It is not appropriate for me to provide further details of their location for security reasons.

(3) Refer to Question 2 above.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport

(Question No. 3836)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 8 August 2006:

(1) Further to the Minister’s reply to part (3) of question No. 3391, which states that there are “overlapping fields of view of Customs cameras”, can the Minister ensure that the field of view lines of other cameras in the baggage make-up areas at Sydney International Airport replicated the precise field of view lines of Camera 2; if not, can the Minister explain how full operational effectiveness could be maintained while Camera 2 was facing a wall.

(2) Can the Minister confirm that Customs operational procedures include the use of separate CCTV cameras to capture footage of objects or persons from all possible viewpoints at the same time instant, to recover complete information about that object or person; if not, why not; if so, can the

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
Minister explain how full operational effectiveness could be maintained while Camera 2 was facing a wall.

(3) Can the Minister say whether the edges, or any area, within Camera 2’s total field of view was not overlapping with other cameras located in the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport; if not, why not; if so, what are the details.

(4) At any instant in time when an object or person entered the intended field of view of Camera 2 during October 2004 and March 2005, did overlapping cameras in the baggage make-up area capture footage from the same angle and trajectory as Camera 2; if not, can the Minister explain how full operational effectiveness could be maintained while Camera 2 was facing a wall.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) Yes. A combination of fixed and pan tilt zoom (PTZ) cameras are placed to maximise the fields of view of Customs cameras in the baggage make-up area. This arrangement of cameras means there is built-in redundancy of view so that if any camera is temporarily out of service, then there is still capacity to cover the entire area.

(2) Refer to Question 1 above.

(3) All areas within Camera 2’s field of view were covered by other cameras.

(4) No. Refer to Question 2 above.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport
(Question No. 3837)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 8 August 2006:

(1) Further to the Minister’s reply to parts (6) and (12) of question No. 3391, can the Minister confirm that Customs has undertaken a formal review into operational procedures to ensure that episodes of suspected interference with CCTV cameras are quickly discovered, rectified, reported and dealt with by appropriate authorities; if not, why not.

(2) What were the specific findings, conclusions and recommendations of Customs’ review into operational procedures.

(3) Can the Minister provide details of the instituted improvements to operational procedures for CCTV cameras in the baggage make-up area of Sydney International Airport; if not, why not; 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) In the first quarter of 2006 Customs undertook an internal review into operational procedures to ensure that episodes of suspected interference with CCTV cameras are quickly discovered, rectified, reported and dealt with by the appropriate authorities.

(2) While the Customs review found that standard operating procedures were being followed in relation to checking the proper functioning of cameras, reporting and rectification of any possible faults, it recommended a more rigorous checking and monitoring procedure, including a requirement for suspected tampering or interference to be reported to the appropriate areas within Customs and to the Joint Airport Investigation Teams.

(3) Customs has increased the frequency of camera checks to ensure the proper positioning and functioning of every camera. Additionally, as part of the Government’s response to the Wheeler Review, Customs will receive funding over four years to expand and modernise its airport CCTV ca-
pability. This measure will increase Customs CCTV capability and significantly increase the re-
cording and retention capacity of Customs CCTV footage. In respect of Sydney International Air-
port Customs’ CCTV capacity has been increased from 66 to 92 cameras in the baggage make-up
area.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport
(Question No. 3838)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writ-
ing, on 8 August 2006:

(1) Further to the Minister’s reply to part (8) of question No. 3391, will the Minister explain how the
effectiveness of Customs’ operations will be harmed by providing details on the public record
about how long each camera was pointing in the wrong direction; if not, why not.

(2) Will the Minister confidentially provide details about how long each camera was out of focus or
pointing in the wrong direction to myself or the Shadow Minister for Homeland Security; if not,
why not; if so, when.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to
the honourable member’s question:

(1) No. It is not appropriate to provide details on the frequency of camera reviews for security reasons.

(2) Refer to my reply to your Questions 3831, 3872 and 3873.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport
(Question No. 3869)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writ-
ing, on 9 August 2006:

(1) Further to his reply to part (4) of question No. 3391, does Customs have any record of impropriety
in the baggage make-up area of Sydney International Airport between October 2004 and March
2005; if so, what are the details.

(2) Has Customs received any complaint about alleged impropriety in the baggage make-up area of
Sydney International Airport between October 2004 and March 2005; if so, what are the details.

(3) Can the Minister be certain that no impropriety took place in the baggage make-up area of Sydney
International Airport between October 2004 and March 2005; if so, why; if not, why not.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to
the honourable member’s question:

(1) Customs does not have a record of any impropriety in the baggage make-up area of Sydney Inter-
national Airport during this period.

(2) Customs has not received any complaint about alleged impropriety in the baggage make-up area of
Sydney International Airport between October 2004 and March 2005.

(3) Although Customs does not have any record of impropriety in relation to cameras in the baggage
make-up areas at Sydney International Airport, I am unable to answer this question on behalf of
other entities at Sydney International Airport.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport
(Question No. 3870)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writ-
ing, on 9 August 2006:

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writ-
ing, on 9 August 2006:
QUESTIONS IN WRITING

(1) Further to his reply to part (6) of question No. 3391, has the Minister read the Customs incident report relating to cameras in the baggage make-up area of Sydney International Airport that were out of focus and facing a wall; if not, why not.

(2) Can the Minister be certain that no misconduct took place in relation to the cameras in the baggage make-up area that were out of focus and facing a wall; if not, why not; if so, what are the reasons stated in the Customs incident report which lead to this assurance.

(3) Will the Minister provide to me confidentially the reasons given in the Customs incident report for the actual or likely causes of (a) Camera 1 being out of focus, (b) Camera 2 facing a wall and (c) Camera 1 facing a wall; if so, when will he provide those details; if not, why not.

(4) Has the Government acted on the Customs incident report’s findings, conclusions or recommendations in respect of each camera; if not, why not; if so, what has been the Government’s specific response to each finding or recommendation in relation to the cameras that were facing a wall or out of focus.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) I have read the service report.

(2) I have nothing further to add to the answer I provided to your Question 3391.

(3) Refer to Question 2 above.

(4) Refer to Question 2 above.

Consultancy Services
(Question No. 3921)

Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, in writing, on 14 August 2006:

Has the Minister’s office, or any department or agency in the Minister’s portfolio, engaged any consultant or other form of external assistance in the preparation of any speech to be made by the Minister in the financial year 2005-06.

Mr McGauran—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

No.

Telstra: Payphones
(Question No. 3976)

Mr Danby asked the Minister representing the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

(1) How many public telephones are there in the federal electorate of Melbourne Ports, or in those local government areas which most closely correspond to the federal electorate of Melbourne Ports.

(2) In respect of the area referred to in Part 1, how many public telephones (a) have been removed over the past five years and (b) are scheduled to be removed (i) this year and (ii) next year.

(3) Is the removal of public telephones by Telstra undertaken solely on a commercial basis, or are social considerations taken into account.

(4) What research has been done to determine the level of demand for public telephones, particularly among the elderly, who may be less likely to have mobile telephones.

Mr McGauran—The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
On 8 June 2006 the Minister publicly announced a number of initiatives that will provide customers with a better understanding of their rights in relation to payphone services, improve Telstra’s processes, and improve consumer access to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) in its compliance role. These initiatives will result in Telstra providing improved information about a customer’s right to have reasonable access to a payphone and enhancing its payphone removal consultation processes. Telstra will also consult with low income groups regarding proposed payphone removals, and ACMA will improve its existing processes to provide a clear complaints process in relation to Telstra’s adherence to its payphone commitments.

1) Telstra has advised that there are 174 Telstra-operated street-located payphones in the electoral division of Melbourne Ports.

2) (a) Telstra has advised that it is unable to provide the number of Telstra-operated public telephones that have been removed from the electoral division of Melbourne Ports over the past five years, as its records from that time are not based on electoral division boundaries.

(b) (i) Telstra has advised that a total of 18 Telstra-operated street-located payphones are scheduled for removal from the electoral division of Melbourne Ports in 2006.

(ii) Telstra has advised that payphone removal decisions are based on an annual review that it undertakes in the first half of each year. For this reason, no specific information regarding payphone removals in the electoral division of Melbourne Ports is available for 2007.

3) The Government recognises that access to payphones is an important community service and it is for this reason that the provision of payphones under the universal service obligation (USO) is set out in the Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999. The payphone USO provides that all people in Australia, wherever they live or work should have reasonable access, on an equitable basis, to payphone services.

Telstra is the primary universal service provider and is responsible for meeting the payphone USO. Payphones are provided in a competitive market. Telstra provides a little over half the number of payphones with the remainder being operated privately, for example, by small businesses or by providers like Tritel.

How Telstra meets its USO is set out in its Standard Marketing Plan, which is approved by the telecommunications regulator, ACMA. This plan details how Telstra installs, removes and relocates payphones, as well as its service quality and fault rectification standards.

Within this framework, Telstra has advised that each proposed payphone removal is also assessed in terms a range of other factors, including:

- distance to the nearest payphone;
- patronage levels;
- public safety issues;
- the frequency and extent of vandalism; and
- complaints from local residents or business.

4) Telstra has advised that its assessment framework for the proposed removal of payphones contains a patronage component, which is a major determinant of demand. Telstra has further advised that it retains a market research company to conduct a customer survey each year with payphone users.

Ms Kate Ellis asked the Minister representing the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, in writing, on 4 September 2006:
(1) Will Telstra be consulting with the public about the proposal to remove 70 payphones from commercial sites in the federal electorate of Adelaide; if so, will the Minister describe the proposed public consultation process.

(2) Does the Minister support Telstra’s decision not to provide the federal Member for Adelaide with a list of the payphones intended for removal from the electorate.

(3) What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the public is adequately notified of the reasons for Telstra’s decision to remove certain payphones from the federal electorate of Adelaide.

(4) Will the Minister provide details of the (a) location of the telephone boxes intended for removal and (b) reasons for the proposed removal of each telephone box from (i) the federal electorate of Adelaide and (ii) all other federal electorates.

Mr McGauran—The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) On 8 June 2006 I announced a number of initiatives that will provide customers with a better understanding of their rights in relation to payphone services, improve Telstra’s processes, and improve consumer access to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) in its compliance role.

As a result of these initiatives, Telstra has improved its consultation procedures in relation to the removal and relocation of its payphones situated in public places. I have also asked ACMA to pay particular attention to Telstra’s payphone obligations to ensure that the public is adequately notified. In addition, Telstra has identified all of its universal service obligation (USO) payphones in towns and cities with a population of less than 50,000, and undertaken to vary its Standard Marketing Plan (SMP) for payphones to clarify its obligations.

In relation to the removal of Telstra payphones, when a payphone is the only one at a public site, consultation must include the posting of a notice on the payphone for at least three months. The notice must indicate Telstra’s intention to remove or relocate the payphone and the grounds on which it is proposing to remove or relocate the payphone, and must invite comments from interested parties. The removal notice will also include an explicit reference to the role of ACMA in monitoring Telstra’s compliance with its USO. Telstra must also provide similar information to the local government authority.

However, according to Telstra’s SMP, a notice does not have to be posted on the payphone if it is removed from a private property. For payphones that Telstra proposes to remove from a private property, Telstra has advised that its consultation will only be with the site owner. As the 70 payphones referred to in the honourable member’s question are located in commercial sites in the Adelaide electorate, Telstra will consult with the respective site owners.

Telstra will make available, on request, to Commonwealth and state members of parliament the location of proposed local payphone installations, relocations and removals in their electorates.

Telstra will now also consult regularly with the Low Income Measures Advisory Committee (LIMAC) on its payphone obligations and in particular its consultation and complaints processes. Telstra will formally consider any recommendations from LIMAC on payphone removals.

Once a decision is made, Telstra will formally respond to any letter or email complaint it has received providing the grounds for the decision and advising that ACMA can be contacted if the complainant wishes to take the matter further.

(2) Telstra has advised that it provided a list of payphones and their street addresses to the office of the Member for Adelaide on 14 August 2006.

(3) See answer to part (1) for information about the consultation process.

(4) (a) See the answer to part (1)
(b) (i) Telstra has advised that the payphones that it proposes to remove from the electoral division of Adelaide are being provided by Telstra on a commercial basis over and above its USO requirements, and that they are not commercially viable.

(ii) Telstra has advised that the payphones it proposes to remove from other Commonwealth electoral divisions are being provided by Telstra on a commercial basis over and above its USO requirements. Telstra has also advised that it is no longer commercially viable for it to maintain all of these payphones, and therefore some of the payphones will be removed.

**Crosby/Textor Contracts**

(Question Nos 4017 and 4019)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Trade, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

1. What contracts, if any, were granted to Crosby/Textor by the Minister, or by any departments or agencies in the Minister’s portfolio, in (a) 2004-05 and (b) 2005-06.

2. What contracts, if any, have been awarded to Crosby/Textor for (a) 2006-07 or (b) 2007-08.

3. In respect of each contract referred to in Parts (1) and (2), (a) what was, or is, the cost and (b) what work was, or will be, carried out by Crosby/Textor pursuant to that contract.

Mr Downer—On behalf of the Minister for Trade and myself, the answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

**DFAT**

1. None.

2. None.

3. N/a.

**ACIAR**

1. None.

2. None.

3. N/a.

**AJF**

1. None.

2. None.

3. N/a.

**AusAID**

1. None.

2. None.

3. N/a.

**Austrade**

1. None.

2. None.

3. N/a.
Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Health and Ageing, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

(1) What contracts, if any, were granted to Crosby/Textor by the Minister, or by any departments or agencies in the Minister’s portfolio, in (a) 2004-05 and (b) 2005-06.

(2) What contracts, if any, have been awarded to Crosby/Textor for (a) 2006-07 or (b) 2007-08.

(3) In respect of each contract referred to in Parts (1) and (2), (a) what was, or is, the cost and (b) what work was, or will be, carried out by Crosby/Textor pursuant to that contract.

Mr Abbott—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) An examination of Departmental and portfolio agency records, covering the financial years (a) 2004-05 and (b) 2005-06 has determined that Crosby Textor Research Strategies was not engaged for any purpose.

(2) An examination of Departmental and portfolio agency records, covering the financial years (a) 2006-07 and (b) 2007-08 has determined that Crosby Textor Research Strategies has not been engaged for any purpose.

(3) Not applicable.

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

(1) What contracts, if any, were granted to Crosby/Textor by the Minister, or by any departments or agencies in the Minister’s portfolio, in (a) 2004-05 and (b) 2005-06.

(2) What contracts, if any, have been awarded to Crosby/Textor for (a) 2006-07 or (b) 2007-08.

(3) In respect of each contract referred to in Parts (1) and (2), (a) what was, or is, the cost and (b) what work was, or will be, carried out by Crosby/Textor pursuant to that contract.

Mr Ian Macfarlane—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) There were no contracts granted to Crosby/Textor in 2004-05 or 2005-06.

(2) No contracts have been awarded to Crosby/Textor for 2006-07 or 2007-08.

(3) Not applicable.

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

(1) What contracts, if any, were granted to Crosby/Textor by the Minister, or by any departments or agencies in the Minister’s portfolio, in (a) 2004-05 and (b) 2005-06.

(2) What contracts, if any have been awarded to Crosby/Textor for (a) 2006-07 and (b) 2007-08.
(3) In respect of each contract referred to in Parts (1) and (2), (a) what was, or is, the cost and (b) what work was, or will be carried out by Crosby/Textor pursuant to that contract.

Mr McGauran—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) (a) Nil
   (b) Facilitation Services
(2) (a) Nil
   (c) Nil
(3) (a) $2,750
   (b) Services provided by Kate Schultze to facilitate a strategy planning meeting for Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation Farm Health and Safety Programme on June 17th 2005.

Crosby/Textor Contracts
(Question No. 4035)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

(1) What contracts, if any, were granted to Crosby/Textor by the Minister, or by any departments or agencies in the Minister’s portfolio, in (a) 2004-05 and (b) 2005-06.

(2) What contracts, if any, have been awarded to Crosby/Textor for (a) 2006-07 or (b) 2007-08.

(3) In respect of each contract referred to in Parts (1) and (2), (a) what was, or is, the cost and (b) what work was, or will be, carried out by Crosby/Textor pursuant to that contract.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Core Department
(1) Nil.
(2) Nil.
(3) Not applicable.

Child Support Agency
(1) CSA granted two contracts to Crosby/Textor in 2004-05. No contracts were awarded in 2005-06.
(2) CSA has not awarded a contract to Crosby/Textor for 2006-07 or for 2007-08.
(3) (a) The cost of the work that was conducted by Crosby/Textor for CSA in 2004-05 was $41,250 plus expenses of $474.19, a total of $41,724.19.
   (b) The work performed comprised a comprehensive review and evaluation of CSA’s Communications Strategy and the drafting of a revised Strategy.

CRS Australia
(1) Nil.
(2) Nil.
(3) Not applicable.

Centrelink
(1) Nil.
(2) Nil.
(3) Not applicable.
Medicare Australia
(1) Nil.
(2) Nil.
(3) Not applicable.

Australian Hearing
(1) Nil.
(2) Nil.
(3) Not applicable.

Health Services Australia
(1) Nil.
(2) Nil.
(3) Not applicable.

To prepare this answer it has taken approximately 10 hours and 5 minutes at an estimated cost of $606.

Defence Property
(Question No. 4990)

Mr Melham asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 December 2006:
(1) In respect of the Defence property located at Allara Street in Civic, ACT; why does this property currently display a sign referring to the application of the Defence (Special Undertakings) Act 1952.
(2) Is this property, or has it been, subject to any declaration under the Defence (Special Undertakings) Act 1952, and when was any declaration in effect.
(3) What “defence special undertaking” is being, or has been, carried out at this location.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(1) The Defence property located at Allara Street in Civic previously displayed this sign on the front mesh gate. This was an old sign that is believed to be a legacy from the original purpose of the site. Over the latter part of 2006, an upgrade of the facility was undertaken to cater for the needs of new Defence occupants of the site. This sign has now been removed.
(2) The site is not currently subject to any declaration under the Defence (Special Undertakings) Act 1952. Defence believes that the sign reflects the original purpose of the site from the late 1960s to early 1970s.
(3) There are currently no activities undertaken at this location which require a declaration under the Defence (Special Undertakings) Act 1952.

United States Air Force Aircraft Movements
(Question No. 4991)

Mr Melham asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 December 2006:
Between 30 June 2005 and 31 December 2006, on what dates did United States Air Force (USAF) aircraft visit Alice Springs Airport and what type of aircraft was involved on each occasion.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
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<tr>
<th>Arrival Date</th>
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Mr Melham asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 December 2006:

Between 30 June 2004 and 31 December 2006, on what dates did United States Air Force (USAF) aircraft visit (a) Darwin Airport, (b) Canberra Airport and (c) Royal Australian Air Force Base Amberley, and what type of aircraft was involved on each occasion.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Data regarding USAF movements through the specified airfields, prior to January 2005, is not readily available. To assemble such information solely for the purpose of answering the question would be a major task and Defence is not able to devote the considerable time and resources required to provide a response.

However, the information from 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2006 is provided below:

(a) Darwin Airport:

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(b) Canberra Airport:

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(c) The information sought regarding RAAF Base Amberley in the honourable member’s question is not readily available as the information would need to be extracted manually from air movement records. To assemble such information solely for the purpose of answering the question would be a major task and Defence is not able to devote the considerable time and resources required to provide a response.

United States Defence Facilities
(Question No. 4993)

Mr Melham asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 7 December 2006:

Has the Government been engaged in negotiations with the United States Department of Defense regarding the establishment of any new defence-related facility or station in Australia for communications, intelligence or other purposes; if so, (a) what is the nature and purpose of the proposed facility or station, (b) will the proposed facility play any role in relation to the collection and/or transmission of intelligence, (c) will the proposed facility be a joint facility with the Australian Government and will the Australian Government be fully involved in its operation, (d) when did the negotiations between the Australian and United States defence departments commence, (e) where will the proposed facility be located and (f) why has the government made no public announcement concerning any negotiations.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Yes.

(a) Discussions have been held with the United States Department of Defense on options for the establishment of any new defence-related facility or station in Australia for communications, intelligence or other purposes; if so, (a) what is the nature and purpose of the proposed facility or station, (b) will the proposed facility play any role in relation to the collection and/or transmission of intelligence, (c) will the proposed facility be a joint facility with the Australian Government and will the Australian Government be fully involved in its operation, (d) when did the negotiations between the Australian and United States defence departments commence, (e) where will the proposed facility be located and (f) why has the government made no public announcement concerning any negotiations.

(b) To date, there is agreement to construct one facility, which will be a satellite ground station to support the United States Department of Defense’s Mobile Users Objective System, which will be a system to provide mobile users narrow-band communication services in the UHF band. This
A satellite ground station is to be constructed on Defence land at Geraldton in Western Australia. Discussions on the possible hosting of other grounds stations, either at Geraldton or other locations, are continuing. Communication systems are capable of transmitting intelligence and intelligence-related information. The National Polar-Orbiting Environment Satellite System would provide United States Forces and other users with information on weather patterns across the globe. Negotiations are continuing, with the Bureau of Meteorology as the lead Australian Government agency, on the probable hosting of the site on Defence land at Geraldton.

(c) As stated above, the Australian Government has agreed that Australia will host a satellite ground station for the Mobile Users Objective System. This will be an unmanned ground station requiring only call-out contractor support and it will be subject to a full knowledge and concurrence regime. The Australian Government will ensure that it maintains full knowledge and concurrence over all capabilities belonging to, and activities conducted by, foreign governments in Australia. Any agreement to host a ground station to support any United States Department of Defense communications or weather system will be subject to agreement on an appropriate full knowledge and concurrence regime, and an assessment that the capability or activity benefits Australia’s interests. The Australian Government has informed the United States Government that any hosting of United States Department of Defense communications ground stations in Australia should be in the context of a satellite communications partnership where we would work collaboratively on developing capabilities from which Australia and the United States would benefit fully.

(d) Discussions on communications capability improvements by both countries are held regularly between the Australian and United States Defence organisations. Informal discussions on the possible hosting of the satellite ground station for the Mobile Users Objective system commenced in 2003.

(f) The agreement to establish a satellite ground station for the Mobile Users Objective System on Defence land at Geraldton in Western Australia will be announced once the details are finalised.