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SITTING DAYS—2007

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RADIO BROADCASTS
Broadcasts of proceedings of the Parliament can be heard on the following Parliamentary and News Network radio stations, in the areas identified.

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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 Robert Francis McMullan 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

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

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<td>Tuckey, Hon. Charles Wilson</td>
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<td>Turnbull, Hon. Malcolm Bligh</td>
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<td>Vaile, Hon. Mark Anthony James</td>
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<td>Wakelin, Barry Hugh</td>
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<td>Windsor, Antony Harold Curties</td>
<td>New England, NSW</td>
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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>The Hon. Joseph Benedict Hockey MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Human Services and Manager of Government Business in the Senate</td>
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<td>The Hon. Peter Craig Dutton MP</td>
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<td>The Hon. Teresa Gambaro MP</td>
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<td>Assistant Minister for the Environment and Water Resources</td>
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<td>Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister</td>
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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, Shadow Minister for Justice and Customs 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 Shadow Minister for 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, Shadow Minister for Urban Development and Shadow Minister for 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 Attorney-General and Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate
Senator Joseph William Ludwig

Shadow Minister for Sport and Recreation, Shadow Minister for 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 Careers
Senator Jan Elizabeth McLucas
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The SPEAKER (Hon. David Hawker) took the chair at 9 am and read prayers.

AGED CARE AMENDMENT (RESIDENTIAL CARE) BILL 2007

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Pyne.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Mr PYNE (Sturt—Assistant Minister for Health and Ageing) (9.01 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The Aged Care Amendment (Residential Care) Bill 2007 proposes to amend the Aged Care Act 1997 to implement the government’s decision to reduce the number of funding levels in residential aged care and provide supplements for residents with complex healthcare needs, including palliative care, and for residents who have mental or behavioural conditions, including dementia.

Since coming to office in 1996, the Howard government has worked consistently to ensure that older Australians needing long-term care have access to a high-quality and affordable aged-care system capable of meeting their needs and preferences.

The government’s continuing commitment to aged-care reform and investment has been demonstrated by substantially increased outlays on residential care, by the very significant growth in care places, and by its recognition of the complex care needs of residents of aged-care facilities.

In 2005-06, the government’s total expenditure on ageing and aged care was $7.1 billion, of which $5.3 billion was paid for residential care subsidies—an average subsidy per utilised place of $34,000. The budgeted amount for the subsidy in 2006-07 is another $300 million more than that.

In 2003, the government commissioned a review of pricing arrangements in residential aged care. The government immediately addressed the main recommendations raised in Professor Warren Hogan’s report by providing $2.2 billion as part of its 2004-05 budget package Investing in Australia’s Aged Care: More Places, Better Care—the largest single investment in aged care by any Australian government. The total investment by the government for the care of older Australians between 1996 and 2008 is $67 billion.

As part of the 2004-05 budget package the government committed to introducing new funding arrangements for residential aged care. Aged-care homes may claim government subsidy for providing care to a particular resident based upon their funding classification. The resident classification scale has been the instrument used to assess the overall level of dependency of an aged-care resident. The resident’s funding classification has been determined on the basis of this assessment.

Over the last two years, the Howard government has consulted and worked with the residential aged-care industry, including nursing and care staff, to develop a more effective assessment and funding instrument which will reduce administrative effort and costs for aged-care providers.

The amendments proposed in this bill will streamline the administration of the current system and free up nurses and other residential care staff to deliver higher quality care. This will occur through a number of measures to ensure that care needs are assessed more effectively, and that paperwork is required only where it serves a clear purpose.

Specifically, the bill seeks to replace the resident classification scale with the Aged Care Funding Instrument as the means of
allocating the basic subsidy in residential aged care. The bill will introduce changes necessary to reduce the number of funding levels for basic care, as well as provide payments for residents with complex healthcare needs, including palliative care, and for residents who have mental or behavioural conditions, including dementia. Subsequent amendments to the aged-care principles will detail the manner in which specific levels of funding are calculated for residents with different care needs. To support the introduction of this bill, I am tabling a policy paper today which outlines these changes.

The Aged Care Funding Instrument will remove unnecessary red tape by reducing the amount of documentation and record keeping which aged-care staff generate and maintain in order to justify the funding received for each resident. Appraisal procedures using the resident classification scale can sometimes be too subjective and very time consuming. In addition, many aged-care homes currently invest considerable staff time in ongoing documentation to ensure that their residents’ care plans and progress notes are found to be consistent with their appraisals for funding purposes when the homes’ appraisals are reviewed for audit purposes. This process is known by industry as ‘validation’.

The Aged Care Funding Instrument is specifically designed to address these problems. The Aged Care Funding Instrument has fewer questions than the resident classification scale and is targeted to assess an aged-care resident’s need for care more objectively. The validation process will also be streamlined so that single questions or specific groups of questions can be reviewed rather than every aspect of the appraisal.

The government and the aged-care industry have worked together to develop the proposed funding model. A national trial was undertaken in 2005 in which nearly a quarter of all aged-care homes participated. The trial found that aged-care assessors and government review staff can achieve a much higher level of agreement on classification levels using the new instrument—over 90 per cent. Another trial has been undertaken to refine the validation method and to clearly define the record-keeping requirements for funding.

A resident’s classification for funding purposes currently expires after 12 months. The bill amends the act to remove the requirement for providers to annually reappraise residents. This change will eliminate over 60,000 annual reappraisals completed by providers which result in no change in the amount of funding. It is also proposed that residents who enter aged-care homes from hospital be reappraised after six months in recognition that their care needs can change more quickly than other residents’ care needs.

Approximately 12,000 residents move from one aged-care home to another each year. The bill will amend the act to allow providers the choice either to accept the classification based on the appraisal by the previous home or to submit a new appraisal. Additionally, the integration of the new funding model into the proposed e-commerce platform for transactions between the Department of Health and Ageing, Medicare Australia and approved providers will reduce paperwork and improve efficiency in the longer term.

Maintaining the resident classification scale and associated processes costs over $142 million, involving a loss of 5.8 million hours. Within the $142 million, a cost of $116 million is attributed to the resident classification scale appraisal process alone—this can be compared to the Aged Care Funding Instrument impact of $5.21 million.

The Howard government will continue to work closely with the aged-care industry to
implement the new system to make sure that it reduces unnecessary red tape for funding purposes and more efficiently directs funding towards the care of residents according to their needs. To ensure a smooth transition, a national training program for residential aged care is being developed and will be delivered to up to 10,000 aged-care facility staff and managers right across Australia prior to the Aged Care Funding Instrument commencement.

Providers have a responsibility to appraise the level of care needed by residents accurately when claiming Australian government subsidies. Currently, the act allows the departmental secretary to suspend providers from making such appraisals in the small number of cases where providers have repeatedly failed to appraise accurately. The bill proposes to amend the act so that, in such cases, the secretary may put a stay on a suspension from making appraisals or reappraisals subject to a provider entering into an agreement with the secretary. The agreement may include additional training of management and care staff or the appointment of an adviser for a specified period of time to assist a provider to conduct proper appraisals.

The introduction of the Aged Care Funding Instrument will not change the responsibilities under the act for aged-care homes to provide quality care. Failing to provide the care required to meet the individual needs of residents constitutes a breach of the act and this will continue to be the case.

The transition arrangements proposed in this bill will ensure a continuity of subsidy levels for all residents classified on the basis of an appraisal using the resident classification scale before the Aged Care Funding Instrument start date until they require a higher level of care. In addition, this bill will ensure the continuity of entitlement to specified care and services provided to high-care residents who were eligible for these services before the Aged Care Funding Instrument start date.

In conclusion, I am fortunate today to be appointed the Minister for Ageing. Can I thank those ministers who have been responsible for the introduction of the Aged Care Funding Instrument, of which I will be the great beneficiary having actually done nothing about implementing it in the first place. But I am delighted that the previous ministers, Senator Santoro and Ms Julie Bishop, the member for Curtin, initiated these changes. They have done a terrific job in bringing about this legislation. It will make a substantial difference in aged-care facilities, and I am delighted to be the beneficiary of their very hard work. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr STEPHEN SMITH (Perth) (9.11 am)—On indulgence, Mr Speaker, I know you will give me the opportunity of congratulating the assistant minister on his promotion.

Debate (on motion by Mr Stephen Smith) adjourned.

SCHOOLS ASSISTANCE (LEARNING TOGETHER—ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH CHOICE AND OPPORTUNITY) AMENDMENT BILL 2007

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 28 February, on motion by Ms Julie Bishop:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr STEPHEN SMITH (Perth) (9.11 am)—The Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 appropriates additional funds on behalf of the Commonwealth parliament to provide infrastructure grants for Australian schools. As a matter of principle, any expenditure by the Commonwealth to enhance the facilities of
our schools, whether to the government or non-government sector, is to be welcomed. However, we do not support the cynical way in which the government changed the guidelines midstream for the Investing in Our Schools program, reducing the amount of funding government schools can apply for from $150,000 to $100,000. Labor support the bill, but our concerns on this point are reflected in a second reading amendment, which I will formally move at the conclusion of my remarks.

Labor acknowledge the infrastructure shortfall our schools face and support the injection of additional funds into the Investing in Our Schools Program. We note, however, that as well as changing the guidelines for government schools, essentially cutting access to the funding for many schools, the Howard government has not committed to continuing this program beyond the current funding round.

Education is the cornerstone of our social and economic prosperity, with school education at the forefront of our success in an increasingly globalised and competitive world. Australia must increase the number of exceptional school graduates and the average performance of all our school graduates, and reduce the numbers of those who fail to complete secondary schooling. We need to ensure that all young Australians have access to the resources they need to help them maximise their educational potential. This bill will increase funding for capital grants in non-government schools and the literacy, numeracy and special learning needs programs. Labor support this increase in funding to our schools as we believe that a greater investment in education is the key to securing our long-term prosperity.

The bill provides an additional $181 million for the Investing in Our Schools Program and transfers $48.7 million of uncommitted funds for government schools from 2006 to 2007, bringing the total commitment for government schools for 2007 to just over $362 million. One can only question why such a significant amount of funding, nearly $50 million, remained unspent when, by its own admission, the government has been flooded with applications. I hope that the government has not just been playing politics and delaying the allocation of this money so that it can be spent in the run-up to a federal election.

Meanwhile, as I indicated earlier, government schools across the country have had the rug pulled out from under them after discovering halfway through a program that they are no longer eligible for the amount of funds under the program that they had previously been relying upon. When the program was announced as part of the coalition’s 2004 election commitments, the then Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Nelson, indicated in a letter to all school principals that:

… the maximum amount an individual school community will receive is $150,000 over the next four years.

The same amount was included in the guidelines for previous rounds of the program and in the advice issued on the website of the Department of Education, Science and Training at the time. That said, schools could apply for several projects up to a $150,000 limit over the life of the program. The guidelines for the latest round, however, which were released on 19 February this year, indicate that government schools are now eligible for a total of only $100,000 in funding.

When the Prime Minister and the Minister for Education, Science and Training selectively leaked and then formally announced the additional funds for the Investing in Our Schools Program, they failed to draw attention to the fact that they were changing the
rules, making many government schools ineligible for the additional funds we are discussing here today. The Prime Minister made the announcement at Balcatta Senior High School in the electorate of Stirling in Perth, Western Australia. Minister Bishop when she was there said that she was delighted that Balcatta Senior High School was able to access federal funding for air conditioning and ICT and computer equipment for the school library. What she did not mention, though, was that under the new guidelines for the program Balcatta Senior High School would not have been eligible for the funding it received, which totalled over $140,000.

The minister has defended this change to the guidelines and was quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald on 15 March this year as saying:

It was never intended, nor was there funding for, all schools to receive $150,000.

When did we see that in the 2004 election commitments of the government or at any time thereafter until now? The minister may like to tell this to the schools that will now miss out on these funds—schools like Capel Primary School from the south-west of Western Australia, which has approached my Perth office, which received close to $100,000 through the program in 2005. While there is no certainty that Capel Primary would have received additional funds through the final round of the program, they are now not even eligible to submit an application, potentially missing out on $50,000, an amount, on the advice I have received, that would take the school over 10 years to fundraise. In New South Wales alone at least 50 primary schools which are hoping to apply for funding are no longer eligible under the new guidelines.

While the announcement of new funds failed to highlight the funding decrease for government schools, the Howard government is also hiding the fact that it has failed to guarantee the future of the Investing in Our Schools Program. By announcing the extra funding for this program, the Howard government on the one hand is saying that our schools need more funding for infrastructure but on the other hand is changing the rules midstream and then leaving them hanging in the balance wondering if they will have access to vital funds after the current round.

Mr Rudd and I have made clear this week that a federal Labor government will have a schools infrastructure funding program. That occurred on Monday when Labor released an innovative new policy directions paper for local schools working together. The Local Schools Working Together pilot program will provide capital funding for government and non-government schools in growth regions across Australia. Financial incentives will be available in the first instance when new government and non-government school communities choose to share infrastructure.

The pilot program will provide $62.5 million in capital funding for an estimated 25 pilot projects across Australia to encourage new models of schooling. The program will be evaluated after three years and will be targeted towards, but not limited to: newly establishing schools in areas of high growth and communities where infrastructure is currently under strain, underdeveloped or simply unavailable; projects between schools from the government and non-government sectors which address areas of critical need, such as the development of science and language laboratories and information and communications technology infrastructure; and new or upgraded facilities for existing schools which demonstrate it is viable to share facilities or resources with a nearby educational institution. This program builds on Labor’s education revolution and our previously announced commitment to provide
up to $200 million in capital funding to build 260 childcare centres on school sites.

The Investing in Our Schools Program does not allow for innovative projects such as those envisaged through Labor’s Local Schools Working Together pilot program. This prevents collaboration between the educational sectors in cases where there would be a clear benefit to local schools and their students from sharing new resources. There are already examples of resources sharing between private and public schools in Australia. In South Australia, the Golden Grove ‘experiment’, as it has been called, has been running successfully for more than 15 years, with a government, a Catholic and a joint Anglican-Uniting Church secondary school all operating from the same site. Mr Rudd and I visited the co-located schools—

The SPEAKER—Order! I am sure the member will refer to him as the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr STEPHEN SMITH—How could I, of all people, make such a mistake, Mr Speaker! The Leader of the Opposition and I visited the co-located schools on Monday. These were built in a greenfields community in Adelaide’s north in the 1980s as part of a joint schools project. There was an identified need for a public secondary school in the area and demands for religious schools. Three schools were developed on the one site to meet this demand for choice in schooling, but they were co-located to ensure all of the schools would be able to provide high-quality facilities for their students.

The result was Golden Grove High School, a public comprehensive coeducational secondary school, sharing a campus with Pedare Christian College and Gleeson College, a Catholic school. Each school has its own oval and quadrangle area, but the schools have many shared arrangements such as a recreation and arts centre. The campus shares specialist facilities, including science and computer labs, electronics rooms, music facilities, libraries and trade training workshops. The three campus schools have their own philosophies, identities, buildings and management, but share some specialist buildings and sporting and cultural facilities. The schools work cooperatively in the sharing of facilities, and senior staff members conduct regular meetings to administer their use. As a result of the schools collaborating, they have been able to afford outstanding facilities—far better than the schools could possibly aspire to if they were acting alone.

The collaboration has even extended beyond the campus. The local district’s seven secondary schools have combined to develop a package of vocational education and training courses available to students. Each of the three schools operates the same timetable to enable cross-campus study and there is constant communication concerning the joint use of the shared facilities. Beyond this, though, the separate schools have their own ethos, traditions, rules and manner of operation.

The Golden Grove educational precinct has been successful in raising the profile of public schools, with Golden Grove High School being in high demand. In Golden Grove, all three schools benefit from the joint approach. The Catholic school, Gleeson College, has asserted:

The facilities we share, as a campus, offer students well resourced and equipped learning areas that would be unaffordable as stand alone schools. As a campus we also offer very broad curriculum opportunities for senior students too.

In addition to the educational benefits of the project, the schools have achieved significant efficiencies from sharing facilities at Golden Grove, including a capital saving of $40 million and an annual recurrent saving of $5 million.
Here in the Australian Capital Territory, Holy Spirit Primary School and Gold Creek Primary School have recently become the first schools in the Australian Capital Territory to share facilities. The schools, which the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Rudd, and I visited yesterday, are located together and share facilities including a car park, resource centre, canteen, gymnasium and oval. Both education systems provide funding for equipment and resources for the shared facilities, such as computers and books for the library and gymnastics equipment for the gym. The gym, library and canteen are much larger than would be found in single new schools because both education systems have contributed towards their building costs.

As well as committing to this innovative policy that will encourage government, Catholic and independent schools to work together locally, Labor is currently developing a comprehensive schools infrastructure funding election commitment that will provide funding for the infrastructure needs of Australian schools. Instead of welcoming this positive new policy announcement from Labor and acknowledging that collaboration between public and private, religious and secular schools is a good idea, the minister simply accuses Labor of recycling a 2004 election policy.

Regrettably, the minister is really clutching at straws and simply should have embraced a good idea. Labor’s 2004 election commitment was for so-called education precincts, which dealt with a range of matters, including curriculum, assessment methods, teaching materials and professional development. Yesterday in question time the minister for education criticised Labor’s Local Schools Working Together program. In response, at question time, I asked the minister the following question:

Can the minister tell the House how much money the Howard government has allocated over the past 11 years specifically to enable Catholic, independent and government schools to share school facilities?

In her answer, the minister said:

The Howard government has a number of programs in place that encourage schools to share resources. The Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools project, the school chaplaincy project and the Investing in Our Schools project are all programs that are designed to ensure that schools can share resources in appropriate circumstances.

Unfortunately for the minister, not one of these programs relate to schools—whether government, Catholic or independent—jointly sharing infrastructure facilities. The Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools program, for example, is a school based approach to developing and testing the effectiveness of strategies for improving learning outcomes for boys. Under the government’s school chaplaincy program, schools can share a chaplain but not infrastructure facilities. And under the government’s Investing in Our Schools Program, guideline 5.3, Ineligible Project, says:

.iOSP funding is not available for projects located at an eligible school, which are for the benefit of an ineligible population of students, including Kindergarten/Pre-school ... and transient student populations ... An example of this would include the building of an environmental centre to be used by students at the applicant school as well as visiting students from other schools and the wider community.

So the assertions made yesterday by the minister in question time were, frankly, a nonsense. The correct answer is that, after 11 years of the Howard government, there is not one program, and not one dollar has been spent, to specifically enable government, independent and Catholic schools to share facilities. The minister would have been better off simply admitting that, rather than bungling yesterday in question time as she did.
In addition to our Local Schools Working Together program, Labor has this year released a range of positive policy proposals on education, including providing universal access to 15 hours a week of high-quality early childhood education for all four-year-olds; encouraging young Australians to study and teach maths and science; and establishing a national curriculum in the core areas of maths, English, science and history, in collaboration with the states and territories.

Earlier this week, Labor also made a commitment about schools funding. The Leader of the Opposition, Mr Rudd, and I have made it crystal clear that: we believe a greater investment should be made at all levels of education, including schools and schooling; we will fund all schools on the basis of need and fairness; we will not cut funding to any school; and we will not disturb the current average government school recurrent cost indexation arrangements for schools’ funding.

Which schools parents decide to send their children to is entirely a matter for them. It is their choice. Parents make their decisions on the basis that they want to maximise their child’s potential and give them the best start in life. Often parents make these decisions at considerable personal financial cost, and often that choice is based on a variety of reasons, including religious or personal conviction. A Rudd Labor government will support parental choice. We will do that by funding all schools, whether government, non-government, religious or secular, based on need and fairness. A Rudd Labor government will be concerned about the quality of education rather than engaging in a government versus non-government schools debate. That is, in my view, very much behind us.

Previous attitudes by federal Labor to a so-called hit list in non-government schools were wrong. Our objective is to raise standards in all schools—government and non-government. Funding all schools on the basis of need and fairness will also ensure we do not end up with a two- or three-tier school system. Federal Labor has made it crystal clear, through its continued education revolution policies, that it will make a greater investment in education at every level. This includes schools and schooling.

Labor will not cut funding to any government or non-government schools. We are about supporting schools rather than taking money away from them. We will invest in our schools. As a consequence, no school will be worse off and no school will have its funding cut.

Federal Labor is now working on options for funding schools and on its approach to the next four-year schools’ funding round, the 2009 to 2012 quadrennium cycle. This will be reflected in Labor’s detailed schools funding election commitments. Federal Labor will consult widely with the Catholic and independent education systems, as well as the public sector, on our approach to schools funding generally and on detailed funding issues.

In response to those statements by the Leader of the Opposition and me, I noticed yesterday the minister suggested that that would mean that our commitment to funding all schools would see funding frozen for Catholic and independent schools. That, frankly, is a nonsense. The Leader of the Opposition and I have made it crystal clear that we believe a greater investment should be made at all levels of education, including schools and schooling; that we will fund all schools on the basis of need and fairness; that we will not cut funding to any school; and that we will not disturb the current average government schools recurrent cost indexation arrangement for schools funding. It is not possible for funding to be frozen under
that approach. So rather than clutching at straws, the minister should not, as she did again yesterday in question time, continue to embarrass herself on that point.

I am very pleased that Labor’s policy approach to the funding of schools has been warmly welcomed. I note the press release issued by the Executive Director of Schools at the Sydney Catholic Education Office, Brother Kelvin Canavan, who warmly welcomed the announcements. I also note the press release from the Executive Director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia, Mr Bill Daniels, who did likewise. I note also that Mr Stephen O’Doherty, the CEO of Christian Schools Australia, Dr John Roulston, the Executive Director of Independent Schools Queensland, Mr Dick Shearman, the General Secretary of the Independent Education Union, and Mr Ian Dalton, the Executive Director of the Australian Parents Council, all did likewise with media releases on 19 March.

I am very pleased with the response we have seen both to the Local Schools Working Together infrastructure program and also to the general commitments that the Leader of the Opposition and I have made so far as schools funding is concerned. I indicated at the beginning of my remarks that I would move a second reading amendment. I move:

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 welcomes the additional funding for the Investing in our Schools program beyond the current funding round.

The SPEAKER—Is the amendment seconded?

Ms George—I second the amendment.

Mr HARDGRAVE (Moreton) (9.31 am)—I enthusiastically support the government’s Investing in Our Schools program for a wide range of reasons. There are millions of reasons in my electorate alone—millions of Australian taxpayers’ dollars are going to school communities so that P&C’s and principals can get the priorities dealt with that they know have not been met by state governments over many years. That is at the heart of this matter. Let us get down to the heart of this. Under the Australian Labor Party there has never been a program like this because the Labor Party like big governments, big unions and big business, and they want to organise things that way. State Labor governments steal from schools in this country. They steal management fees from public works departments that need to conduct works in those schools. They steal from teachers and students and from the parents who send those students to those schools. They steal one dollar out of every four that this government sends to state governments to help with meeting the cost of public education. State governments steal it. They take it off the top.

You would think that, if you are going to fund an education system, the first thing you would do is ask: ‘What is at the heart of this?’ At the heart of this is the relationship between the professional educator and the student. So how do we resource that? How do we actually back that relationship in a way that makes sure there is bang for the buck—value for the dollar—and the results are achieved? Get the money as fast and as close as you can to that equation. In other
words, get the money into the classroom. But no! The way the education system operates in this country, because of our apparently cooperative federalism, is that state governments take their slice off the top before any money floats through to any classrooms. I keep saying that it is like that Yes, Minister episode about the most efficient hospital in the national health system being the one with no patients. The way that education works in this country is that you pay the raft of bureaucrats in central office first and you pay for the teachers and the education process last. It does not matter how many students are in the classroom. The preservation process for the bureaucrats at head office is first and foremost the priority of spending.

New South Wales is the worst offender, with thousands of people at ‘education central’ who get paid big dollars and, surprisingly, are all card-carrying members of the Labor Party—I have no reason to doubt that my claim is correct. That is the way this political operation of state governments works. It is certainly true in Queensland. The way to get ahead in education in Queensland is to leave the classroom, not stay in the classroom, become a bureaucrat within the system at the district office and then leave the district office and go to head office—and by that time you had better be a card-carrying member of the Labor Party or you will not last. That is the way state governments organise their spending priorities on education in this country and it is an absolute disgrace.

The breath of fresh air which occurred after the 2004 election was the Investing in Our Schools Program. It for the first time identified the fact that the Australian government had never been big enough to trust local communities to know what their priorities were. I want to give some background to the House as to how this all came about. This is my story and it is true, because I would not be saying it to the parliament if it were not. I visited schools in my electorate, including Wellers Hill State School. The soffits were falling out of their buildings. This is a great old school. It has the best part of 100 years of history and service to our local community. The buildings were old and needed paint. They could not get paint onto the buildings; the soffits were falling out—the building structure was falling apart. They were asking, ‘Why doesn’t the federal government spend more money on education?’ and I thought, ‘We are now spending record amounts.’ I heard the Minister for Education, Science and Training say yesterday that there has been a 160 per cent increase in expenditure. Over $9 billion a year is going from this government to state governments. Bearing in mind that their first priority is to spend a quarter of that on bureaucracy, not on building maintenance, you can understand why the soffits were falling out at Wellers Hill State School.

I went to MacGregor State High School, my old school. I left there 30 years ago. I was the vice-captain there—or, as they used to say, the school captain in charge of vice, but that is an old story! The old manual arts block, where I learnt my woodworking and metalworking stuff in year 8 in 1973, was built in 1968. It is still there now and still servicing the community. I went into the staffroom; talk about occupational health and safety—the staffroom wall had three- and four-inch gaps in it where the building was falling apart. In order to keep the manual arts building safe, they had to put five-ply up on the louvres of the windows—something not known to members from the south—which should have created airflow for all the students and indeed the teachers in the classroom. But the louvres had to be covered off because they were breaking as the building was collapsing. Its foundations had given way. The state government would do nothing about it. The school principal, Karyn Hart
AM, a former National President of the Australian Secondary Principals Association, showed me around all of these things. I do not want Karyn to now be subject to a witch-hunt—although anybody who tried would fail because she is a very formidable person, a very capable woman, a very dedicated educator. She said to me as the local federal member, ‘Where’s the federal funding to fix this?’ I said, ‘But, Karyn, we’re giving you record amounts.’ Again, it is back to this: record amounts are being stolen off the top before any money goes to resources.

I have been to Salisbury State School. It has provided almost 100 years of dedicated service to the people of that part of my electorate. The root systems of the Moreton Bay fig trees have now got into so much of the sewer main that two toilet blocks are not working. The school was given a quote for $125,000 to fix it, 10 times their current annual maintenance budget. Would the state government help them out? No. So what do the kids do? They queue in the toilet block that is working, while the school shut down the toilet block that was not. It is an absolute disgrace.

Back to MacGregor State High School. The assembly hall that was built a couple of years after I left—so it is about 27 years old—is falling down the hill. It is actually falling down the hill towards the main oval. The thing was not built properly. It is going to cost millions of dollars to fix, and frankly it should be fixed up. Just the other day I had the school captains from MacGregor high at my regular Moreton youth advisory group meeting, where all of the high school captains in my electorate come and talk to me about issues in their school, and they are still telling me that essentially the hall is not usable. It is deemed unsafe. And this is not a small high school; this is the third largest high school in Queensland. When I attended the school 30-odd years ago, it had 1,650 students. It still has 1,650 students. It is a huge high school, and the rotten Queensland Beattie Labor government’s priority is to spend money on the bureaucracy first and on buildings and resourcing student needs second. So, again, here entered the Investing in Our Schools Program.

All of those schools said to me, ‘We want something to help us with projects.’ I wrote to the Prime Minister about this in 2004 and I said: ‘I am sick of being accused of under-resourcing education when I know we’re putting in record amounts. I am sick of taking the fall for state governments who see the priority as spending money on big offices and flash cars and big bureaucracies of Labor Party card-carrying members’—the sort of environment we would have if there were ever a Rudd Labor government elected, I must add; we would see the same thing in Canberra. I told the Prime Minister, ‘We need to directly invest in our local schools; we need to do it.’ I reckon I gave the loudest scream of support when the Prime Minister made an announcement at the campaign launch in Brisbane City Hall in September 2004, because he backed my idea—and I am sure other colleagues made the same suggestion; I do not think that just because Gary Hardgrave put it forward on behalf of the people of Moreton $1 billion was put down on the table for this, but $1 billion was. This bill is about adding another $181 million to the task, to say to schools who have not taken full advantage of the Investing in Our Schools Program: you need to get onto this and do something about your school.

My big frustration and concern in all of this, though, and I put this on the record, is that, based on the performance of state governments—who fund the big bureaucracies first, the buildings, facilities and classroom needs of students last, with all the professional educators left till last, all of the good teachers told, ‘Leave the classroom if you
want promotion; we don’t want to give you performance based pay, we don’t want to pay the better teachers more than the worse teachers; we want everyone paid the same’— with those sorts of approaches and their pattern of conduct, we will just see further cost shifting like we have already seen under the Investing in Our Schools Program.

I have had schools tell me that Department of Public Works officials and Education Queensland officials have ‘heavied’ them about ensuring that it was Queensland Public Works who did the work in the grounds, that they in fact have tried to undermine this program. This program was about saying, ‘We trust school P&Cs, we trust school principals, to hire people to do a job to fix something up, to build something in the school that makes a difference to the students.’ In fact, P&Cs all over my electorate have said that anything involving Queensland Public Works generally costs 40 per cent more than the going commercial rate. There is a lot of building activity going on in Queensland, so you can imagine the premium dollars Public Works Queensland are charging for things. We have had examples of Public Works officials saying, ‘We want a slice of that action,’ and then I have heard other people say that Education Queensland have said, ‘We want a management fee for anything that is done in the school.’ This is all about cost shifting.

I see the parliamentary secretary, Mr Farmer, who is responsible for this program, in the chamber. He has been to my electorate. He went to Robertson State School and he talked to people there. He understands what I am talking about. He knows all too well that the potential for more of this cost shifting, the potential for more theft of this program’s moneys by state governments, is going to be there. It is something that we all need to realise. We need to realise the priority must be resourcing the classrooms where the teachers, the professional educators, work with the students. That must be the priority.

Frankly, it would be easier to put a cost associated with each child’s education and pay the schools direct. There you go—that is my education policy: pay the schools direct on all fronts. Give the $9 billion plus we are giving to state governments this year directly to the schools. Let us trust the principals. Let us trust the P&Cs. Let us trust them to make their purchasing decisions. Let us put the power in their hands instead of in the hands of central office bureaucrats—Labor Party card-carrying bureaucrats, people with strong union affiliations who want to control things. I think that it is absolutely important that we should start to get resourcing of these issues right and invest in our schools. It has been so popularly received in my electorate because it is shown that the trust is justified.

I think of schools like Rocklea State School, a small school with about 70 or 80 students, with no capacity to raise great amounts of funds. But they have got $28,711 from Investing in Our Schools to date. It is not a large amount of money—I think they lose that in sugar allowance over in the Department of Defence—but a huge amount of money from an education point of view for a small school like Rocklea. They installed air conditioning. They were never going to get it under the Queensland government. They top dressed the school oval. They have a fantastic sports day each year and their two teams, Kaltee and Murri, that compete with each other are now competing on a far safer oval.

My old primary school, Runcorn State School, installed a sprinkler for their oval and rejuvenated it for some $38,000. All we need now is some rain so that they can use the sprinkler, I suppose. Salisbury State School got $19½ thousand for the improvement of one of the street entrances, and I
opened it late last year with a group of year 1s. It made the access and the beautification of this great state school so much more appealing. There was Sunnybank Hills State School with ICT and air conditioning—almost $50,000—and Yeronga State School and ICT of some $50,000. Macgregor primary school, the largest state government primary school in the whole state of Queensland, the school my two kids went to, had refurbishment of senior toilets. We had to fix up toilets—$50,000! Where was the state government? They were too busy spending money on wood panelling and flash cars for Labor Party card-carrying bureaucrats in central office instead of doing something for the kids at Macgregor primary school. Nyanda State High School received $50,000 for outdoor learning spaces and shade structures. That was just from the first round. Calamvale Community College got $44½ thousand. There was almost $1 million from the first round alone.

In the second round we saw Graceville State School cover the walkways in this fantastic heritage school. They have now got safer, skin cancer protective walkways—a $136,000 project. Kuraby Special School, a fantastic school, received $41½ thousand to refurbish a classroom. Where is the state government? Missing in action. To upgrade the playground at Kuraby State School there was $72,000. Macgregor State High School gave up on trying to fix up the assembly hall. They finally got the manual arts building fixed because I made such an embarrassment of the state government over the whole matter. They spent $50,000 upgrading classrooms and about $56,000 on building shade structures. That was almost $107,000. Macgregor primary school got another $85,000 for their ICT. There is Milpera State High School—a school which is the first port of call for kids who have come as refugees to this country, where they are taught the basics of English so they can go on and learn other things in other schools like Yeronga and Sunnybank high schools—where for $109,000 we fixed up their canteen. It is a school with no capacity, because of its constituency, to raise anything like that. They now have a canteen they are proud of and they use it as a focal point for social engagement outside of school hours.

Runcorn Heights State School, another fantastic school that looks after non-English-speaking background kids, received $54,000 for playground equipment. Siganto and Stacy, a fantastic local air-conditioning company, provided additional resources on top of the $150,000 that went to Sherwood State School to air-condition their century-old library, and they did it in a very tasteful way, very much respecting the environment. I pay tribute to that company for their generosity in backing further what the Australian government has backed. Sunnybank Hills State School got $85,000 for musical instruments. It is a huge school whose great cultural diversity brings people together through music. There was $70,000 for that and $16,000 for shade structures. The ICT and library extension provided Sunnybank State High School with almost $144,000. Sunnybank State School, a smaller school with a poorer constituency, would never have the capacity to raise this money and they received $150,000 for shade structures and playground and sports courts.

There were three fires late last year in the area: at St Pius X Catholic School at Salisbury, at Moorooka primary school and at Wellers Hill State School. All had buildings destroyed in one night late last year and I spent a dreadful Saturday morning going around and talking to the principals of each of those schools. Wellers Hill had a hall built through the efforts of the P&Cs and we value added to that effort by P&Cs with $150,000 to further upgrade their hall. Then there is
Yeronga State High School, a school which does an enormous amount of good in settling kids who have come from Milpera, the entry level for English education in particular, a culturally diverse school which has African faces as the school captains. We backed that school with $135,000 for an air-conditioning and ICT upgrade. The list goes on and on.

Coopers Plains State School got $136,000 to improve their school grounds. None of this money had ever been put forward by a previous Labor federal government. None of this money had ever been made available for so many of these basic things like upgrading toilets. These are failures of a state Labor government that says: ‘Pay the bureaucrats first. Pay them big dollars because they are card-carrying members of the Labor Party.’ Don’t resource in the classroom equation.’ Instead, this government has shown a sense of trust in the local communities that are built around our local schools. I am proud of the Investing in Our Schools Program and I am pleased that the Prime Minister is resourcing further and giving other schools in my electorate a chance to also get access to these important funds. (Time expired)

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (9.52 am)—As previous speakers have indicated, the opposition will support the passage of the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007. However, the opposition has moved a second reading amendment which is critical of the government for making a sneaky change to the 2007 guidelines of the Investing in Our Schools Program. Before I commence with my comments on my own area, I would like to take up some of the issues the member for Moreton raised. I am very pleased to see that the member for Moreton is endorsing the decrease in the federal education bureaucrats’ pay. I look forward to the cost-cutting measures announced. Those federal bureaucrats will obviously not be having cars—

Honourable member interjecting—

Ms BIRD—Or sugar, indeed. I am looking forward to seeing their new pay packets; obviously the member is keen to ensure that bureaucrats are not overpaid in the system. I suggest from that that he is approaching the minister about reviewing the pay of the federal bureaucrats—a worthwhile project, according to the member for Moreton. He might also want to impose his Stalinist review of whether they are card-carrying members of any particular party, since that is obviously also an issue he feels decreases their ability to do their job. I am sure that, in the great spirit of the bipartisan, non-political approach that he always brings to every contribution he makes in a debate, he will not mind checking whether they are Labor or Liberal card-carrying members and ensuring that they correct that membership.

I want to make the point that schools exist in all of our electorates. Delivering education is one of the biggest service delivery programs that state and federal governments run. As a result, there always is a huge capital works program, there is always an unending list of demands for renewal of buildings and facilities, not to mention the needs for modernising as new technologies and programs come into place. In particular, for example, around vocational education and training there is the need for schools to provide labs, kitchens, workshops and so forth. The demands on capital works programs are something that all governments struggle to meet. It is quite clear that it is the sort of thing where you never actually reach the bottom of the list—it is never going to end.

I welcomed the federal government’s Investing in Our Schools Program as I understood it to be an opportunity for schools across the country to look at particular
smaller scale capital projects that they might be able to implement outside their normal capital works program. I thought it was a good idea and a worthwhile thing to do. I say to the member for Moreton—and I am sure the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education, Science and Training, who is at the table, would not do this; in fact, I have never heard him do it, to be honest—that to devalue a good and worthwhile program by simply using it to attack other levels of government does not particularly help anybody. Certainly, on this side of the House we have had some concerns about that sort of behaviour. Many of us have had experience with schools telling us that we are not allowed to open things even though we have supported their application to the government, particularly if we have an aggressive government member in our area. In fact, I do have a particularly aggressive government Senate member in my area, and some schools are being told that they are not even to invite me to these sorts of openings. I think that is a foolish and counterproductive approach to take. The program is good, and it does do worthwhile things, and we do support the applications that our schools put in. I think when oppositions do that it is incumbent upon governments to treat with respect the elected member for the electorate. I would encourage particularly the parliamentary secretary at the table to continue to give a strong message to his own members—I am convinced that he does not do this himself—that that is not an appropriate way to behave and it is counterproductive to the program.

Having said that, I am going to criticise the parliamentary secretary at the table. This program has been popular and many local public schools in my electorate have taken advantage of the funding available to develop many projects. ICT projects in particular have been very popular. These all enhance the learning environment of schools. Most local public schools in my electorate have received some funding under the 2005 and 2006 rounds of the Investing in Our Schools Program.

When the funding rounds were opened and applications invited, I, like many colleagues in this place, wrote to each of the local schools informing them of this program and the closing date, and enclosing a copy of the guidelines of the program for their information. Many of them invited me on site to show me what they were proposing. I provided what advice I could to them and encouraged them to get their applications in, and indeed offered to put in letters of support for those applications. Local school principals and parents and citizens associations started to complete the documentation for applying for funds and collating the quotes. To be honest, that was a bit of a challenge for many schools. It was not something they were familiar with doing. But most of them got those processes in place. Then they crossed their fingers and hoped that the particular important capital works program in their local school did get funding.

When the Prime Minister announced the new allocation of $181 million to the program late in February, I again welcomed the extra funds. Again I wrote to all local schools making them aware that the final funding round of the program was now open. I knew as I read the guidelines for the final funding round that there would be some controversy. Buried in the guidelines is a sad and sneaky change to the amount of funding local schools had been expecting from the government in this program.

Local school principals and P&C presidents in my electorate knew instantly what the sneaky change in the guidelines meant for their school. Instantly my phone started ringing, the emails started flowing and handwritten letters from P&C members...
started arriving. The main thrust of the complaints stems from the government shifting the goalposts. I have received numerous letters from school principals and local P&Cs, but none better sums up the sneaky way the government has shifted the goalposts than one I received from a local public school.

The letter from the principal, which I received on February 23, said:

We are incensed by the changes to the original guidelines ... Imagine our shock ... Since the beginning of the programme, DEST had been stating and reaffirming that government schools had access to $150,000. However, without notice, this amount has been reduced by a third but only to those schools that had not expended the entire $150,000 prior to this year ... What has annoyed my community and I is that the ‘playing field’ is no longer even, that groups that have complied fully to the goals and aims of the programme now find themselves disadvantaged for doing just that.

This particular school had a couple of very worthwhile projects planned. During the last round of funding, the school received a grant to install air conditioning. But with the climate change debate, some of the students realised that air conditioning contributed to emissions. The students thought that this year’s project should try to be carbon neutral. So they suggested that solar panels should be investigated. I think that is a great initiative of the school. Not only were the parents consulted but so was the student body. They were excited that they had come up with what they thought was a great idea that would contribute to a decrease in carbon emissions and the global warming issue.

Regrettably, this project is now impossible because the new funding limit imposed in this round by the government means the school is ineligible to apply under the 2007 funding round. This is despite the school having been informed by the department that its balance in the final year of funding was nearly $33,000. A local P&C president sent me a letter on 12 March. It said:

Why did the programme’s rules alter so drastically? Who would have expected the total grant would be reduced and the rules would change ... we have been extremely disadvantaged by the changes and this has put a disappointing end to our plans to showcase what public schools can achieve.

I made a representation on 23 February to the parliamentary secretary, who is at the table. I both faxed and mailed the letter. This was at the point at which I had become aware of it, because of the email from the principal. I immediately faxed it to the parliamentary secretary to get his response and find out what had happened. To date I have not received an acknowledgement, and certainly no response. The 2007 guidelines state on page 3:

Under the 2007 guidelines a school community may be funded for projects that will take their total approved grants from all rounds of the IOSP up to a maximum of $100,000 over the life of the programme.

The 2005 guidelines—that is, the first round of the program—said, also on page 3:

The limit for funding in respect of any one school is $150,000 over 2005-2008.

Not surprisingly, many of those schools on getting those guidelines and seeing that they would be looking at $150,000 up until 2008 decided that the best way to manage it—many of them are small schools—was to stage it over the years of the program. That is a logical thing to do, one would think, as with the school that put the air conditioning in last year and wanted to proceed with the kids’ initiative to put solar panels in under this year’s application.

As we on this side constantly warn, the government has a tendency to be tricky and sneaky. I am very disappointed that has occurred with this program. To add insult to injury the government has now started to run a line in the media to justify this sneaky change in the 2007 guidelines. The so-called
Wollongong based Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, as ABC Illawarra reported last Friday, suggested:

... the misunderstanding lies in the fact that the original program has ended.

The ABC Illawarra report continued:

The Senator says a new program then started with a different funding level.

Where in the Prime Minister’s media statement announcing the extra allocation of funds for the Investing in Our Schools Program does he state that the original IOSP had ended? In fact, it is very clear that the original Investing in Our Schools Program is still continuing because it has been made clear that the 2007 round is the last funding round in the program.

The government seeks to suggest that local principals and P&Cs have simply misunderstood the original intention of the Investing in Our Schools Program and the funding that would be available. Local schools and their P&Cs have misunderstood nothing. They were clearly led to believe one thing in 2005 and had it repeated in 2006. Further, the department advised them, before the release of the 2007 guidelines, what their balance was on the account that they could claim. They clearly believed that the funding for any one school was $150,000 for the period 2005 to 2008.

Now the 2007 guidelines for the final funding round have inexplicably changed, and when asked why by local schools and local P&Cs the claim made is that the original Investing in Our Schools Program has ended. If the senator is wrong then I would suggest that the parliamentary secretary at the table should contact the local ABC and confirm that that advice is wrong and let the senator know that it is wrong. No other member of the government that I have heard has been using the justification of Senator Fierravanti-Wells to explain why the 2007 guidelines renege in such a sneaky way on the previous commitments of funding.

I suspect the minister and the parliamentary secretary still do not have any firm justification or explanation for the guideline change—I am a bit bemused as to what it could be myself—and that is why I have not yet received a response to my representation on behalf of local schools and P&Cs in my electorate. The government should reaffirm its original commitment to the funding limit available to any one school as was stated very clearly in the 2005 guidelines of the Investing in Our Schools Program.

Local schools have planned projects on the basis of those particular guidelines. Local members such as me have endorsed the program and supported and encouraged schools to participate. In fact, I have taken a pretty hard line with schools in my area which did not take up the federal government’s offer and put applications in. I have asked them why and looked at what they could do to progress that. This government should not be sneaky with this program. It is a program that is valued, as members on both sides of the House have said.

People are very confused as to why the goalposts changed at the very end of the program. In the case of the particular school I referred to, you have a group of kids who, in all good conscience, participated in putting forward suggestions—really worthwhile suggestions—into the program and who are now very disappointed at the waste of time, because when the new guidelines came out they found out that the $33,000 they had been told by the department was theirs was not there. It is a foolish decision, I would suggest, that has no real benefit.

The worst thing that could come of this is that the government finds that the full monies are not expended at the end of the program because schools that were participat-
ing, were active in supporting the program and were staging their projects now cannot put applications in. I would hate to see that happen. I would suggest that the government review that decision, particularly given that it has allocated extra money to the program, and look at reopening it to those schools who had good, planned programs in place and are now very disappointed that such a change has denied them the opportunity to participate in that final stage of the program.

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (10.07 am)—I am particularly pleased to be able to rise in the House today to support in this public arena the Investing in Our Schools Program. As honourable members on both sides of the House have conceded, this has been an extraordinarily popular program. It has become necessary because of the failure of state Labor governments to use the proceeds of the GST to adequately invest in schools, particularly government schools, and to adequately make sure that the infrastructure of those schools is up to date so that students in 2007 are able to obtain the best possible education through excellent educational facilities.

The Investing in Our Schools Program has a number of great virtues, particularly with respect to government schools. It has enabled government schools, their principals and P&Cs to reach over the heads of the state educational bureaucracy and deal directly with the Australian government in applying for funds for much-needed infrastructure. It is a most incredible program, and I have seen so many benefits flow to schools in my electorate as a result of this particular program. When I say ‘schools in my electorate’, I refer to both government and non-government schools.

It is a hands-on program that helps the Australian government to identify individual needs. These have in fact been identified initially by the individual schools. The funding brings a sense of relief to school communities because it lifts a very heavy fundraising burden from their shoulders. I suppose what really happens is that the fundraising burden continues but they are able to achieve many more positive outcomes because of the infusion of Australian government money. Most of us who are parents know that it takes a lot of pie and lamington drives, spellathons and school fetes to generate the money needed to complete many worthwhile school projects. The Australian government is certainly not suggesting that school communities ought not raise what they can as they can. This program is intended to be a top-up to assist local school communities to overcome the disadvantages of a lack of investment in the infrastructure and the repair of their schools by state Labor governments.

I think all of the honourable members of this House would be able to tell good news stories of the benefits to local schools from the Investing in Our Schools Program. One of the more memorable launches of infrastructure through this program in my electorate was the official opening of some new practice cricket nets at Talara Primary College, at Currimundi in the city of Caloundra. This school has an excellent reputation. It is a newish government school that has been going for less than 10 years. Talara Primary College has become so popular that it has had to draw boundaries around it and say that only families who live within those boundaries are able to access education for their children at the college. This school is in a region which has experienced significant and continuing population growth. The population of the Sunshine Coast region over the next 10 to 15 years could go close to being doubled, which presents enormous challenges as far as infrastructure is concerned, not only in the area of education but also in respect of roads and so on.
Through the Investing in Our Schools Program, the government was able to support this school project to the tune of $21,000. I suspect that a number of the students, teachers and parents at the official opening probably got some sense of satisfaction out of watching me after I was given the honour of being the first batsman to participate in this facility. I did manage to hit some of the deliveries but I do not suspect that I am at risk of being chosen for any Australian test team. As these cricket nets are of particular benefit to Talara Primary College, I am quite certain that some of its students will be able to become much better cricketers and may well obtain selection to an Australian cricket team in the future. One onlooker even suggested that on that occasion I made some 19 runs before I was dismissed. If that was true then I have to confess that it is by far my highest score in the cricketing arena. I can tell you that those nine- and 10-year-olds were certainly generating some pace.

I was also able to represent the Minister for Education, Science and Training at the official opening of new resource facilities at the Sunshine Coast Grammar School, which had been funded under this program. Its headmaster, Mr Nigel Fairbairn, must be congratulated for such a wonderful educational facility. I was thankful that this funding program was able to offer support to the student and teacher community through a new computer and library centre. This facility, complete with new computers, received $60,000 in Australian government funding through the Investing in Our Schools Program. The total value of the project was $118,454. The Australian government put forward part of the money, which effectively amounted to seed funding, and then the school community was able to raise the rest. This means that the Sunshine Coast Grammar School will continue to be able to deliver quality educational services to its 1,200 students.

Having seen first-hand the satisfaction brought to so many of the schools in Fisher through this program, I was particularly pleased to hear the announcement that it would be extended and increased. The Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 will facilitate an increase of $181 million to the Investing in Our School Program. This breaks down to an additional $127 million for state government schools in 2007 and an additional $54 million for non-government schools through 2007 and 2008. The additional injection of funds will lift total funding for the program to $1.818 billion over 2005 to 2008. Of that figure, government schools will receive some $827 million and non-government schools will receive some $354 million. In addition to these extra funds, the bill will also provide a funding guarantee for the capital grants program. It will provide for some $11.7 million for non-government schools for 2008, which effectively guarantees the funding level until the end of that year.

The improvements to school facilities brought about by the Investing in Our Schools Program and the capital grants program will help to create a more comfortable and, for that matter, more enjoyable environment for students, which can only help to support their educational goals. Of course, Australia’s children are Australia’s future, and whatever we the Australian government can do to assist positive outcomes for Australian students is good not only for the students but also for the long-term prognosis for educational outcomes in our country and, more generally, for the country itself. To further enhance the learning abilities of Australian students, this bill will allocate some $9.445 million for national projects in the Literacy,

I listened carefully to what Labor members have said and I have read the second reading amendment. In particular, I observed the contribution made by the honourable member for Cunningham. I want to place on record my regret that it has been necessary to drop from $150,000 down to $100,000 the maximum amount that government schools can apply for. A number of schools in my electorate have gained the $150,000. I think it should be recognised, though, that it was never a pledge that every school would get $150,000. But there is no doubt that some schools that had planned, in this part of the program, to submit an application for $150,000 will now not be able to do so, and I personally find that a matter of regret. I have expressed my views to the minister and I understand that this is necessary for responsible economic management.

The program has been inordinately successful and very popular. A certain amount of money has been allocated for the program, which is being extended by virtue of this bill. However desirable it might have been to continue the maximum cap of $150,000, I understand that it would simply not have been economically responsible to do so. In the interests of giving as many benefits to as many schools as possible, this has been an on-balance decision—a decision which I regret. Since I respect the minister immensely—I think she is one of the best ministers in this area, along with Dr Nelson and Dr Kemp—I have to accept that her judgement in this matter is appropriate in the circumstances.

I think most Australians regret that state governments have been running away from their funding responsibilities for government schools in particular. That is one of the reasons why this government has had to pick up the slack and meet the needs which have been left unmet by Labor governments around Australia. This government is acutely interested in both government and non-government education. We believe that children ought to be given choice and that parents ought to have not merely a legal choice to choose non-government or government education but, rather, an economic choice. I believe that, when history is written about the education policies of this government, what will be recorded very positively is that we have given an economic choice to so many more parents to choose independent, Catholic or other Christian education in a way which was not previously available to parents and families under previous governments.

These funding initiatives will help to enhance the school environment and give educational support to students across Australia. I am very proud to be a member supporting a government which has brought in the Investing in Our Schools Program. It seems to be one of the most popular education programs, with both government and non-government schools, that I have ever seen. What I like about the program is that it is not just being done for the political benefit of the government of the day; it is a program that is getting real infrastructure on the ground in government and non-government schools.

Even the opposition, which so often these days is carping and negative, cannot find within its heart—if it has a heart—the ability to criticise the good that flows from this program. The only criticism that has come is that the cap—that is, the maximum available—has been reduced from $150,000 to $100,000. These initiatives are absolutely vital and they are very positive. They are part of the ongoing benefits that this government is making sure flow through to government and non-government schools. I am very
pleased to support the bill before the House, which I commend to the chamber.

Dr EMERSON (Rankin) (10.20 am)—The Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 will increase funding for the Investing in Our Schools Program by $181 million over the four-year period from 2005 to 2008. I certainly welcome that increase in funding, as I welcomed the Investing in Our Schools Program.

In the area of Logan City, most of which falls within my seat of Rankin, we have been very successful in applying for grants under the Investing in Our Schools Program. Most of the grants that have been sought have been successful. I have been delighted to provide letters of support in most cases, and we have therefore enjoyed a lot of success in improving the infrastructure of our schools. For those who do not know Logan City, in large part it is not a wealthy part of Australia. Unemployment in Logan Central is around 16 per cent. In fact, in that part of Logan City which is highly welfare dependent, the unemployment rate has risen in the last couple of years whereas in other parts of Australia it has fallen. While I welcome the fall in the unemployment rate in other parts of Australia, it is a matter of great concern that unemployment in Logan Central and suburbs such as Woodridge and Kingston is around 16 per cent and has been rising.

The only way of dealing with that problem of unemployment is to reform our education system. Mr Deputy Speaker, you will have heard me speaking on many occasions about the imperative to improve our education system, to break that cycle of dependency and despair by giving all young people, especially those from disadvantaged communities, a decent opportunity in life. Education is a key that opens two doors—one leading to prosperity and a strong economy and the other leading to opportunity for all in a fairer society. We can as a parliament do no greater service to our community than to improve the education opportunities for young people.

I acknowledge that the Investing in Our Schools Program makes a contribution to improving education opportunities. It does so by improving the physical environment, the facilities that are available to students, which makes their study and their concentration at school that much easier. The sorts of projects that have been undertaken include reading spaces outdoors at Rochedale South State School, for example. That sends a message to the young children there that reading for pleasure is a really good thing to do, and it makes it just a little bit easier. Other programs include air conditioning. In the middle of summer in all parts of Queensland it gets pretty hot, and that affects the ability of children to concentrate. Therefore, providing some funding for air conditioning in at least one or two rooms, whether it be the library or some other refuge to which the children are able to go during the hot hours, is a very good idea. I commend the government again for providing support for those sorts of projects. Shadecloths are another example of a response to the long hot summers that can occur in Queensland.

So without hesitation I support the Investing in Our Schools Program and support the extra funding that is associated with this legislation. It is a pity, as Labor has pointed out, that the maximum funding for particular schools is now going down from $150,000 to $100,000, but I am not going to be miserable and churlish about that—$100,000 sure beats nothing. Those extra funds are most welcome.

I reject the government’s criticism of state governments, especially the suggestion that
the government of Queensland is not playing its part in improving the education opportunities of young people in the Sunshine State. It certainly is doing so. It has improved early childhood education opportunities and it has a ‘learn or earn’ program that is being implemented to ensure that as many young people as possible are able to stay on and finish year 12 or its equivalent through vocational education. All of that is very worthy. It is essential to lifting productivity growth and therefore prosperity in the future and to ensuring that we have a much fairer society.

I want to draw attention to the contrast, however, between the position that successive Labor governments have taken on the broader issue of providing education opportunities and encouraging younger people to go on and finish high school or its equivalent in vocational education and the government’s attitude towards these matters. The Prime Minister has said on a number of occasions now, including most recently in an AAP report, that Labor governments made a tragic mistake during the 1970s and 1980s in encouraging young people to stay on and finish year 12 and then go to university. It was not a tragic mistake at all; it was essential to the fairness and prosperity of this country that those changes were made. When the Prime Minister was Treasurer in the Fraser government, only 36 per cent of young people went on to year 12. That is around one in three. The Prime Minister seemed to think it was a pretty good ratio that one in three young people would go on to the final year of high school.

Successive Labor governments in Canberra—the Hawke and Keating governments—worked to offer income support for parents in disadvantaged communities so that they could afford to keep their children in school, and they also worked to improve the attraction of education to those young people. The consequence of that was that the proportion of young people who went on to year 12 more than doubled, from 36 per cent to around 75 per cent, under Labor. Sadly, under this government, reflecting the attitude of the Prime Minister that it is unimportant that young people should go on to the final year of high school, year 12 completion rates have actually fallen over the last two years. The Prime Minister thinks this is a good thing. He thinks that it is great that young people leave early and then go and do a trade.

Labor strongly support vocational education. We support trades as a career. We recognise that there are young people who feel that they are not cut out for the academic pursuits of going to university, and that is why we support vocational education. This support has always been forthcoming from Labor but has not been forthcoming, I must say, from the Howard government. The previous Minister for Education, Science and Training, now the Minister for Defence, spent his entire period as education minister fighting with the states over vocational education and never wishing to complete a new agreement with the states. So no such agreement was ever reached.

I am sure that the then education minister was trying to impress the Prime Minister that he was really a true-blue Liberal, because true-blue Liberals like to have fights with state Labor governments. The consequence was no agreement and, ultimately, the dismantling of ANTA, the Australian National Training Authority. The state Labor governments and the federal Labor opposition wanted to see the completion of a new funding agreement between the Commonwealth and states, but the Commonwealth, under the then education minister, now the defence minister, played the blame game for all it was worth, saying to the states, ‘It’s all your fault.’ As a consequence, the Commonwealth
never completed a new agreement for vocational education.

If you really want to be confused, listen to the government on vocational education. During a debate at the dispatch box here a couple of weeks ago the Minister for Workforce Participation said to me: ‘I don’t know why Labor is so obsessed with training. We should have young people leaving school without any training.’ So we have the Minister for Vocational and Further Education and the Prime Minister saying that Labor is obsessed with having kids going on to university and they should actually be obsessed with training and then the Minister for Workforce Participation saying, ‘I don’t know why Labor is obsessed with training.’ The government, as we have seen in the last couple of weeks, is in disarray. It does not have a view on the value of vocational education when one of its ministers is actually arguing that Labor is obsessed with training and that what should happen is that young people should leave school early and not engage in training.

Mr Bartlett—What rubbish!

Dr Emerson—It would be worth while for the next speaker, the member for Macquarie, who has just interjected, to have a good look at the Hansard of the minister alleging that Labor is obsessed with training and that young people should just go straight into the workforce. This was the debate over withdrawing the pensioner education supplement for a selected category of disability support pensioners. Why on earth would you withdraw the pensioner education supplement for disability support pensioners? I thought the government was arguing that more disability support pensioners should go back into or participate in the workforce. This was the debate over withdrawing the pensioner education supplement for a selected category of disability support pensioners. Why on earth would you withdraw the pensioner education supplement for disability support pensioners? I thought the government was arguing that more disability support pensioners should go back into or participate in the workforce. Okay, if that is the argument, fine, give them the capacity to do so by giving them a little bit of support—and remember the pensioner education supplement is a small amount of money—to allow them to get the skills to re-enter the workforce or enter it for the first time. But we have had the Minister for Workforce Participation saying that the pensioner education supplement should be denied to such people and Labor should be supporting disability support pensioners going into the workforce but not acquiring the necessary skills to make them attractive and competitive in the workforce. The member for Macquarie would do very well to have a look at that particular exchange.

The fact is that education is the greatest investment that we can possibly make. I note here again in relation to another part of this legislation that there is an amendment to provide around $9.5 million for the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program to continue funding for the program in 2008. Previously no funds were allocated for 2008. Of course, Labor supports that. We have said so many times that the key to dealing with disadvantage in this country is to improve the literacy and numeracy of young people—disadvantaged young people whose parents perhaps may not have had the same literacy and numeracy training that others have had and so you get this cycle. As a result of that the child may not get the tuition at home and therefore needs early childhood development and early intervention to help them with literacy and numeracy.

Labor fully supports that and that is why Labor Leader Kevin Rudd announced in January a range of initiatives under the heading of ‘the education revolution’. Kevin Rudd understands the importance of these measures in breaking that cycle of dependency. Labor fully supports any measures to improve literacy and numeracy in this country. In fact, I can indicate that the Reading Recovery program was implemented in Queensland. People ask, ‘What happened under Kevin Rudd when he was in the cabi-
I can tell you something very good that happened under Kevin Rudd when he was in the cabinet office in Queensland: the Goss Labor government implemented the Reading Recovery program, which has proved very effective in identifying young people, through the year 2 and then the year 5 diagnostic net, at a very early age who are experiencing difficulty with literacy and numeracy. Those children who are caught in the net are identified and then given extra remedial support.

So we do not need any lectures from this government about the value of literacy and numeracy support. What we do need, however, is to ensure that our teachers are fully capable of providing the best education possible to our young people. I pay tribute to the teaching profession, because it is a profession that overwhelmingly is full of dedicated people—dedicated to improving education opportunities for young people.

There is a debate going on at the moment about merit based pay arrangements for teachers. It has long been our contention that we should be trying to locate the best teachers in the most disadvantaged schools, because that is where they can do the most good. The education minister, of course, has been saying that there should be a performance based pay system and that that system should be partially funded by the Commonwealth. That is something that in principle we can find some comfort in, but the Treasurer of this country finds no comfort in it at all, because he has rebuffed the education minister, saying that the states can handle all that. So it is back onto the blame game: if we do not have the best teachers in the most disadvantaged schools, it is all the fault of the states.

The education minister and the Treasurer are going to have to sort this out. I fear that the Treasurer is going to prevail, because he controls the purse strings, but it is a very good idea that we do everything we can to ensure that the most disadvantaged in our community benefit from having the best teachers. If that involves some sort of merit based pay system, then I am all for it. There is no perfect system of merit based pay; that is generally acknowledged. If you base it, for example, on the marks that kids get at school, intuitively that seems a bit appealing, but then of course you can find a situation where a teacher teaches the test in order to get the kids’ marks up in order to get the merit based pay. Another proposal is for the principal to decide the merit based pay of various teachers within a particular school. Again, at first glance, that seems to be a pretty good idea. It does, however, raise issues of tensions within the school as some get merit based pay and others do not. It is not a perfect system either. Another possibility that has been mooted is that parents and students decide which teachers should get extra remuneration for their performance. You can see again that there would be some appeal to that but also some pitfalls.

The point I am making is that there is no perfect system of merit based pay, but it is an argument that we should have. It is a debate that we should have in this country, because otherwise we have a system of teaching where the only basis of getting extra pay is years of experience rather than actual performance or merit. I think that that is a debate whose time has come, but it is a debate which has been stifled on the government side by the Treasurer’s proclamation that there will be no federal support—no Commonwealth support at all—for a merit based pay system of teaching in this country. That is a great pity.

I will finish where I began in terms of support for the Investing in Our Schools Program, but I also want to point to the dramatic differences between the attitudes of the
coalition government and the Labor opposition toward education and completing year 12. The OECD released a major report last year, as it does every year, called *Education at a glance*. It is a very large document that compares the performance of various OECD member countries, but it had a special section, as these reports tend to do. The special section in the 2006 edition is about the importance of finishing high school. That OECD report said that the completion of high school is now the minimum education requirement for young people to participate in the workforce through their working lives. What the OECD is really telling us is that everyone is moving forward at different paces, but the problem is that a lot of countries that were behind us are moving forward at a much faster pace than Australia and the consequence will be that, while this government is sitting around playing the blame game in the federal parliament, other countries are going to whiz by us. There are already about eight countries that have high school completion rates above 90 per cent. Australia’s high school completion rate is around 70 per cent—maybe 75 per cent, depending on which measures you use—but the problem is it is falling. The Prime Minister thinks that is good. Let us understand this: the Prime Minister thinks it is good that young people drop out of school early because he says, ‘They’ll get a trade.’

I released some statistics from the ABS which confirmed that young people who go to university get paid much more through their lifetime than young people who do not finish year 12 and drop out early. Their lifetime prospects are so much better. This is the great divide between us and the coalition, which does not have its heart in investing in education. I acknowledge the value of this particular program, but only through the election of a Labor government will we truly have an education revolution in this country.

Mr BARTLETT (Macquarie) (10.40 am)—Before addressing the key features of the bill, I would like to remind the member for Rankin of one fact—that is, the reason that the high school retention rates were unreasonably high under Labor was that kids stayed at school because they had no chance of getting a job. When one million people were unemployed in the greatest recession since the Great Depression and unemploy-ment was over 10 per cent, kids stayed at school because they had no chance of getting a job. Apprenticeships under Labor fell to a 30-year low. The reason some young people now do not aspire to go to university and are happy to leave at the end of year 10 is that they can get an apprenticeship, they can get valuable skills training that will lead them to rewarding and fulfilling careers in the trades. Apprenticeship numbers are now some 2½ times greater than they were when we came into office in 1996. The member for Rankin only tells part of the story.

The Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 does three important things: it adds funding significantly to the very popular and very valuable Investing in Our Schools Program, it provides additional funding for some major capital works in non-government schools and it provides extra funding for some national programs in literacy, numeracy and special learning needs. The most significant component, however, is the extra $181 million for the Investing in Our Schools Program. That is a program for minor capital works in non-government schools and it provides extra funding for some national programs in literacy, numeracy and special learning needs. The most significant component, however, is the extra $181 million for the Investing in Our Schools Program. That is a program for minor capital works that lead to improving the quality of what is going on in schools across the country. A total of $1 billion has already been committed. Prior to the last election this government made the commitment that we would allocate $1 billion to funding these capital works. We have done that. Under this legisla-
tion, we are now adding an extra $181 million to this program.

Already over the last three years schools in my electorate have received a total of $5.6 million under this very worthwhile Investing in Our Schools Program. I would like to read into Hansard the schools that received funding in the last round of the program: Blackheath Public School; Blaxland Public School; Hazelbrook Public School; Katoomba North Public School; Megalong Public School; Mount Riverview Public School; Mount Victoria Public School; Springwood Public School; Wentworth Falls Public School; Wimalee Public School; Blue Mountains Steiner School; Blue Mountains Christian School; Blue Mountains Grammar School; Wycliffe Christian School; Our Lady of the Nativity, Lawson; St Columbus High School, Springwood; St Thomas Aquinas School, Springwood; Bilpin Public School; Cattai Public School; Colo Heights Public School; Freemans Reach Public School; Grose Vale Public School; Hobartville public; Kurmond Public School; Kurrajong East Public School; Kurrajong North Public School; Muraylya Public School; Pitt Town Public School; Richmond High School; Richmond North Public School; Wilberforce Public School; Windsor High; and Windsor Park Public School. All these are beneficiaries of this excellent Investing in Our Schools program.

In this recent round of funding, a number of schools in the new part of my electorate—the part of the electorate added under the last redistribution—will also benefit to the tune of $1.57 million. These schools are: Bathurst High School, Bathurst West Public School, Capertee Public School, Cullen Bullen Public School, Kelso Public School, Lithgow Public School, Meadow Flat Public School, O'Connell Public School, Oberon High School, Oberon Public School, Perthville Public School, Portland Central School, Rockley Public School, Laguna Public School, Trunkey Public School, Wallerawang Public School and Wattle Flat Public School. As well, the non-government schools to benefit are: La Salle Academy, Lithgow; McKillop College, Bathurst; St Joseph's Central School, Oberon; St Joseph's School, Portland; and the Assumption School, Bathurst West. In the new part of my electorate, $1.57 million has been provided under the Investing in Our Schools Program. This is a quality program that is delivering genuine improvements across a whole range of areas: air conditioning, new computer labs, shade cloth, sporting equipment and musical instruments. It is providing a whole range of improvements to our schools, both government and non-government.

It is worth pointing out the comparison between what this government is doing and what state governments are not doing for their schools. There was an alarming article today on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald. The members opposite might have seen it. It is captioned ‘school maintenance fiasco’ and entitled ‘Ten years of stinking toilets’. This is referring to New South Wales public schools—the miserable, abject failure of the New South Wales government to adequately fund the basic maintenance needs of its public schools. It is an absolute disgrace. The article says:

Public schools have been forced to put up with 10 years of stinking, blocked toilets and threadbare carpets and four years of termite infestation and raised asphalt in playgrounds, the survey by the Public Schools Principals Forum has found.

What is worse is that the state government tried to hide this:

The State Government is refusing to release a document which reveals how school maintenance programs were suspended at a time it was pouring $1.6 billion into the Olympic Games.

There is nothing wrong with the Olympic Games, but they had to be managed and the
state budget had to be managed properly—something the New South Wales government has obviously failed to do. The article also says:

In a document called the Asset Maintenance Plan, written in 1998, the Education Department estimated the cost of repairs needed in schools around the state and rated them in order of priority.

But it did nothing to fund things like leaking toilets and termite infestation. The article goes on to mention a school in the Blue Mountains in my electorate:

According to the survey of principals, Blaxland Primary School in the Blue Mountains has put up with leaking roofs since 2004. How in the world do we expect our students to get on at school—to be able to focus on learning and skill development—when the roofs are leaking, the toilets are leaking and stinking, and there are termite infestations and other unsafe aspects? These are things that should have been covered under the basic maintenance program of the state education department, but it failed miserably. Despite massive GST revenues, record windfalls from stamp duty in the property boom in 2002-2003 and steadily increasing funding from the Commonwealth government, we have had 10 years of stinking toilets from a state government that is also badly on the nose.

What do we hear from the Labor counterparts opposite? Deafening silence. Where is the criticism from federal Labor of the failure of their state Labor counterparts? Where is their condemnation of state Labor? When will they stand up for the students, the families and, indeed, the teachers in New South Wales schools? They stand condemned as well for their silence.

This legislation provides additional funding for these very worthwhile programs, but it also demonstrates three or four things that are worth referring to. This legislation demonstrates the Howard government’s commitment to school education. We have a proud record of solid, substantial increases in funding—increases of 160 per cent over the 10 years of this government. Funding for school education has risen from $3.5 billion 10 years ago to $9.3 billion this year—2.6 times what it was just 10 years ago, a massive increase in funding for schools across the country under this government.

We all know that the school years are crucial to young people in gaining knowledge, in building their skills, in developing their creative abilities and in learning the values that are so important for making them productive and positive members of our community. The Howard government’s strong commitment is demonstrated by this funding. This government is putting its money where its mouth is and doing it far more effectively and far more substantially than the state governments have been doing.

The second thing this legislation demonstrates is this government’s commitment to choice. We respect the right of parents to choose the type of school education that they consider appropriate for their children. Whether they choose the local public school, whether they choose an independent school or whether they choose a Catholic school, we on this side believe that parents have the right to make that choice and that that choice should be supported with appropriate levels of funding. We do fund appropriately according to need. The formula assists parents who choose to send their children to non-government schools according to their resources and affluence and their ability to meet the fees. The wealthier non-government schools receive funding at a level of less than 14 per cent of state government schools and the poorer schools receive funding up to 70 per cent of the funding level that public schools receive—from 14 per cent to 70 per
cent, a perfectly fair rate of funding. Parents who choose to send their children to non-government schools often make significant sacrifices to do so, and we believe that they deserve some level of support from government in those choices that they make.

This is unlike Labor, which for years have had a hit list of non-government schools from which they would remove funding. We are hearing suddenly from the new opposition that that is not going to happen and that they will promise to fund according to need. But there is no commitment to indexing that funding or to ensuring that that funding grows, so we will see a steady erosion of funding to some non-government schools driven by the politics of envy and the ideology of some of the teachers unions—an erosion by stealth. We saw from the other side, the last time they were in government, the new schools policy that prevented new non-government schools being established. If they ever get into government we will see—as we are seeing already—the Australian Education Union and the Teachers Federation once again dictating education policies to the Labor Party.

We see clearly in this legislation the commitment of this government to public schools. We hear a lot of nonsense from the other side about the so-called neglect of public schools by the Howard government. That could not be further from the truth. Since the Howard government has been in office we have increased direct funding for state public schools by 118 per cent. That is an increase from $1.5 billion a year to $3.4 billion—an increase of 118 per cent when the enrolments in public schools have only risen by 1.1 per cent.

We have substantially increased funding for state schools and done so more rapidly than the state governments have done for their own schools. Look at New South Wales for example. Last year, we increased funding for New South Wales government schools by 10.7 per cent. Did the New South Wales government match that? Did the New South Wales government come close to matching that? No. Their increase was 3.9 per cent, compared to our 10.7 per cent.

Yet we have the continued claim by teachers unions that somehow we are cutting funding for state schools. Last month, we had Pat Byrne, the Federal President of the Australian Education Union, in an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, saying that the Howard government is cutting funding for public schools. This is blatant, deliberate dishonesty. It is what we get time and time again from the teachers unions. How can they, in all seriousness, say that we have cut funding when we have increased funding by 118 per cent? This is deliberate dishonesty by the teachers unions. Sadly, it is deliberate dishonesty that is supported by the silence of the Labor opposition—their silent subservience to their union masters. This is appalling, and Labor’s quiet acceptance of this dishonesty, this deceit, does it no credit at all.

The fourth thing this legislation shows is this government’s commitment to quality in school education. It is not just that we are putting more money in—and we are putting substantially more money in—but it also shows a couple of those excellent initiatives that are being undertaken to lift standards to help ensure our schools are delivering the quality of education that their parents expect for their children.

These initiatives have included, for instance, national benchmarking for literacy and numeracy. Sadly, in 1996, national testing showed that 27 per cent of year 3 students and 29 per cent of year 5 students failed to reach minimum literacy and numeracy standards. So, as well as a whole range of initiatives to improve literacy and
numeracy standards, we have extended the benchmarking and the testing up to year 7. Indeed, this year benchmarking and testing will start in year 9.

We have introduced the transparent plain English report card, so parents know exactly how their children are progressing, free of some of the educational jargon that often confuses the issues. We have introduced measures for improved school accountability, so parents know how their local school is performing compared to other schools in their wider region.

We have introduced measures to lift the progress of boys. I was pleased to chair the report on boys’ education some years ago, and a number of those recommendations have been taken up to lift the educational performance of boys who had been falling behind—programs such as the Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools project.

We have a commitment to improving the quality of training—preservice and in-service training—for our teachers. It needs to be said—and let me say it very clearly—that the vast majority of the teachers in our state schools and in our non-government schools are committed, dedicated professionals who studied hard, who work hard and who desire only the best for the children in their care. But we are trying to support them in a way that perhaps their state education departments are not supporting them and in a way that is being frustrated by the teachers unions.

We have a commitment to vocational education and training—for instance, the introduction of school based apprenticeships. They have flourished under this government—except in New South Wales where, until the light dawned just before the run-up to the state election, school based New Apprenticeships were opposed by that state’s government. We have introduced school based apprenticeships to give kids in school a chance to get on-the-job training that will lead them into worthwhile careers immediately after school, to bridge that gap, importantly, between school and work.

There have been so many of these initiatives—yet, sadly, many of these initiatives and reforms were opposed by the teachers unions. They were opposed by the Australian Education Union and its New South Wales affiliate, the New South Wales Teachers Federation. Their opposition is at odds with the professionalism of the bulk of classroom teachers around this country. Their objections are at odds with the desires of parents and at odds, I would say, with public opinion. Yet the influence of the teachers unions is still holding sway with Labor governments at the state level and still dominating the thinking of the Labor opposition federally.

A very interesting report last month by the Centre for Independent Studies put it very simply: If public schools are to thrive and flourish into the future, the power nexus between teacher unions and state governments must be broken.

This is not me speaking; this is not the federal government’s education minister speaking—this is the Centre for Independent Studies. ‘If public schools are to thrive and flourish into the future, the power nexus between teacher unions and state governments must be broken’—the power nexus that has hobbled the New South Wales government and prevented it from doing what needs to be done to improve standards in state government schools. The article in today’s Sydney Morning Herald to which I referred is indicative of that. Even the power nexus between teacher unions and the federal Labor opposition needs to be broken.

My time has virtually gone, so I will conclude by saying that this legislation is just a further demonstration of the Howard gov-
ernment’s commitment to quality school education, to supporting the choice of parents, to supporting our public schools and our non-government and independent and Catholic schools with record levels of funding, with increases in funding far beyond what state governments have managed to do. It demonstrates our commitment not just to increasing funding levels but also to improving the quality of education in our schools, to providing the support that our committed teachers need and the support that our children need to maximise their skills and potential so they can become productive, positive members of our community. This bill delivers, and it is a sharp contrast to the rhetoric and the failure of the state Labor governments and the empty posturing from the federal Labor opposition.

Mr ANDREN (Calare) (10.59 am)—The Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 is very timely, coming as it does at a time when I am fielding more and more concerns from public schools in the Calare electorate about a perceived shift of the goalposts as far as this Investing in Our Schools Program is concerned. Let us put this $1 billion scheme into perspective. It is very welcome to school communities because it does fill an urgent need and a rapidly deepening hole in the provision of basic infrastructure and facilities in schools right across the country.

Last week I visited Yeoval Central School, between Orange and Dubbo, where a new agriculture shed and garden, fencing and stockyards, as well as paving and computers, have been provided under this program—and very welcome they are. These are facilities that that community could in no way have afforded inside the next decade, probably ever, without this program. Yeoval was one of the luckier schools: it received what it needed under its application. But not so a school like South Bathurst Public School. In 2006 this school received $5,000 to engage an architect to design building modifications to the main teaching block so that practical lessons such as craft and art could be undertaken. This had to be modified into a stand-alone structure that would require the maximum $150,000 or thereabouts on offer under the Investing in Our Schools Program. This school and many others are now dismayed to see the maximum amount available to schools reduced to $100,000. The guidelines on construction projects state:

Funding recipients are responsible for following state-specific building or construction requirements and for obtaining necessary approvals before applying.

That is what South Bathurst Public School had done, and it was waiting for the final round of submissions before applying for around $130,000 to complete the work, having received two smaller grants totalling around $22,000. It will either have to drastically modify the project, which it had followed the correct procedures to design and put in place, or look for some other work, which no doubt will be of benefit. But the fact is it proceeded along a path and believed it was fulfilling the guidelines and now finds that it has been pulled up short, at least on its expectations if not on the funding required.

The Carenne Special School in Bathurst is another example. It is a school for children with moderate to severe intellectual disability and, in the case of 15 students, significant physical disability. The school has developed a project with the expectation of Investing in Our Schools funding for a mini gymnasium to improve the physical therapy, gross motor and physical education programs so vital to the school’s 60 students. In round 2 of applications, the school applied for and was granted $137,000 to build the gymnasium. The school had planned to apply for the balance from the maximum allowable $150,000
to provide the necessary equipment. The guidelines for the program stipulated the need for separate applications to cover different parts of the program. However, with the maximum allowable grant reduced to $100,000, Carenne has run out of opportunities under this program. It has a brand-new gym, which it is certainly grateful for—it is a wonderful building; I saw it the other day on a visit to the school—but it has no equipment. It will have to try to raise the money from an already financially stretched school community, or maybe some white knight may travel into town—

**Mr Ticehurst**—What about the state government?

**Mr ANDREN**—Exactly. I am going to get onto the state government in a minute. The $137,000 for the gym was very welcome. They are ecstatic about it. It is a vital piece of infrastructure for the school, and it is to be hoped that the state government steps in to make up what is a rather modest shortfall.

Elsewhere, Manildra Public School feels cheated because it will no longer be able to find sufficient funds for a rebuilding of the computer infrastructure in the school. Mandurama Public School is another school that welcomes the funding it has received, but it had expected to be able to apply for further grants up to the original maximum of $150,000.

In introducing this scheme, the federal government quite rightly severely criticised the last decade of Labor government neglect of schools in New South Wales—and I would suggest that neglect goes back probably 20 years, as with most of our infrastructure around the country. It is one thing to hold the state government to account for its shortfall in the funding of these essential projects; it is one thing to promise this scheme to make a political point—the correct point—that there has been neglect in this area; but, having promised the scheme, it is a bit rich to wind it up by 2008 or thereabouts and cut back the maximum amount for which a school can apply when there is and has been an expectation that, properly staged, many of these projects could receive funding under this program, leaving aside the fact that such infrastructure perhaps should always have been funded by the state.

The government might say there was never an expectation that each and every school would receive $150,000. That is probably correct, but, rightly or wrongly, that was the perception created in the school communities, and there is a definite feeling that schools have been let down. They were let down in the first place by the state government, which has recklessly ignored school infrastructure needs over those many years, but they have also been let down by this federal scheme that promised and delivered plenty to some but has left others, who wanted to stage their improvements, well short of the funding they could reasonably have expected.

Right around the Calare electorate there are examples of improvements to school amenities that would not have been possible without these targeted grants from the Commonwealth. The so-called COLA, covered outside learning area, has popped up on quite a few school playgrounds, and there is hope that down the track the resources may be found by donation or otherwise to fill them in and make an enclosed gymnasium in places such as Meadow Flat, which has a pretty unforgiving winter. As welcome as that framework is, they see that they will have to look down the track for some other program that may deliver the cladding to provide a fully covered small gymnasium—a facility that these primary schools could perhaps never have dreamt of until this scheme came along. Soft-fall areas and sun shades
have been improvements of choice for other school communities. The Investing in Our Schools Program has been very welcome, but most communities feel it should just be the start of a recurrent program that helps schools catch up on years of neglect by governments of all persuasions—state and federal.

Today’s Sydney Morning Herald reveals that a survey of 300 schools has uncovered a 10-year backlog of maintenance problems that the New South Wales department of education has allegedly been ‘fighting to hide’. The Public Schools Principals Forum survey has found that many schools have been forced to put up with a decade of ‘stinking, blocked toilets’, threadbare carpets, termite infestation and uneven, unsafe playgrounds. The state minister admits it is ‘a backlog we haven’t managed to get on top of’. The federal government accuses the states, especially New South Wales, of failing to use their GST revenue to upgrade schools and hospitals. The New South Wales government blames the feds and other states for taking more than a fair share of GST. Meanwhile, these schools, the children and their communities continue to suffer poor conditions while others, public and private, enjoy facilities that a Cullen Bullen Public School or a Canowindra Public School—which I have seen recently, and their lack of facilities—could only dream of.

The New South Wales government has been culpable in ignoring the needs of many schools for a decade or more, while the Commonwealth has been allocating much needed education funding, including that in this bill, on a flawed principle that guarantees a widening of the gap between the haves and have-nots of education.

Take the socioeconomic status, or SES, formula used to determine non-government school grants. It is based on postcodes, meaning, for example, that any Sydney independent school could be funded according to the socioeconomic status of a country postcode in a low socioeconomic part of the state; however, a child at that school could come from an income base far in excess of the postcode average. Yet the school is funded according to the economic status of the whole postcode area. Similarly, this could apply to students from otherwise low socioeconomic metropolitan areas. I would suggest that such a test is inherently flawed.

So too is the Investing in Our Schools Program, by providing access to schools regardless of their neighbourhood or district’s relative economic status—even down to providing the wherewithal to prepare submissions. For example, a large public school in Orange might have a submission prepared by the professional parent body that those schools have—accountants and so on. A two-teacher school, with the limited facilities and expertise and time they have to prepare submissions, is more likely to stage these things and ask for smaller amounts, whereas the bigger school will go for the big bang and as much of that initial $150,000 as they can. And that is indeed what has happened in many of these areas, which further extends the discrepancies between the facilities that are provided under the program.

I noticed the opposition were talking about a fairer funding formula for education, or something along those lines. How about both the government and opposition adopting something like an education needs index? Such a measurement would be like a barcode system and would include a list of the most basic of school needs, such as playground, toilets, shelter, heating and cooling, computer resources et cetera. Unless and until all boxes were ticked for all schools on this basic index of requirements—and it has to be a transparent process that every parent and every school understands—there should
be no further Investing in Our Schools funding or indeed school grants available from federal or state sources until all schools catch up. If the red light glows as the bar code scanner is run across a school, its glaring need should be met as a priority before funds go to any school, public or independent, that has passed the test of need. While we are at it, why install air conditioning in schools without adding solar panels to power those units? How better to show kids we mean business on global warming—I wonder if we really do—than to offset the power we use with genuine clean, green, alternative power?

Last week, with the principal, Paul Stirling, I inspected the new Kelso High School, rebuilt after it was so tragically lost in a fire. It will have wonderful facilities. But how crazy is it that no provision has been made for harvesting stormwater from the acre or more of its rooftops to water its oval and gardens? It has apparently missed out on a submission under the federal community water grants scheme. Surely such harvesting and storage should be obligatory in all new schools and, indeed, all new public buildings funded either by the state or the federal governments. We can argue the toss: perhaps it should be the federal government, because it must be part of a national water initiative. Such programs must be part of the whole catchment management process, right down to the tank at the back of the house in Millthorpe, where I happen to live, or wherever it might be.

To date, under the Investing in Our Schools Program, 6,166 government and 1,603 non-government schools have benefited. This represents 89 per cent of government and 59 per cent of all non-government schools. The scheme was due to run until 2008, but the demand was such that funds for 2007-08 were used earlier than expected. It seems now that, despite the extra $181 million provided in this bill, the maximum amount available has been cut to $100,000 to meet, I presume, the budgeted amount over the life of the program.

I would suggest that, with a scheme that has been so successful and met such demand, any government or opposition would be very unwise to wind it up—like the dental program you brought to a halt in 1997. You cannot just shut a program down and ignore the fact that demand will continue for many years to come—indeed, in the case of dental services—to upgrade much of our ageing education infrastructure. Perhaps the index of need should be implemented so those schools in dire need, including those who believe they have been short-changed under this program, may at least catch up.

I note that the department will be providing support to targeted schools, including case managers for those that have not received grants to help with the application process. This is important because the grants process and submissions are a big task for smaller schools while larger, more resourced schools, some employing consultants who skim off part of the grants office fees—and that is a fairly questionable process, I would say, given the scarcity of this money—find it easier to access the program, as I illustrated earlier. While it is a given that many independent schools are as short on facilities as government schools, one must ask how some non-government schools have received Investing in Our Schools grants in excess of $1 million, notwithstanding the greater role of federal funding in the non-government schools system.

This bill also contains additional capital grants for non-government schools in line with the annual augmentation process adopted in 1996. It also provides almost $10 million for the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program. I will not comment on those. I complete these remarks...
by asking that the expectations of schools under the Investing in Our Schools Program, announced with such fanfare and greeted with such enthusiasm by school communities, be addressed with a review of funding applications to meet the projects set in train on the expectation of funding of up to $150,000. I also suggest that the non-government school funding formula is flawed and risks the widening of the resources gap within the non-government schools sector and between the non-government and state systems. A measure of index of school needs applied to each and every school would seem the most basic of measures to achieve a fair go for all our children.

Mr TICEHURST (Dobell) (11.17 am)—The purpose of the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 is to amend the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004, which provides funding to states and territories for government schools and funding for non-government schools for the 2005-08 funding quadrennium. I am always fighting for extra support for our kids in Dobell. Our children are the future of Australia. This bill therefore represents a major investment in the future of our society.

By increasing financial assistance to schools, the Australian government seeks high-quality outcomes for all students. The Howard government is committed to supporting parental choice in education and to ensuring that all schoolchildren have access to a quality learning environment. The Howard government has no interest in competition between different school sectors for the available government dollars.

The Labor Party believe that parents of students in independent and Catholic schools should receive no public funding. They think that all families who send their children to private schools are wealthy, but that is simply not the case. I know families in my electorate juggling three jobs to keep their children in the Catholic school system. The truth is that every time parents on the Central Coast decide to send their children to private schools they are effectively saving the Australian taxpayer around $10,000 annually.

The Howard government believes that every parent, having paid their taxes, deserves some level of public assistance to support the education of their child regardless of which school their child attends. The Australian government will provide a record estimated $33 billion in funding for Australian schools over the four years from 2005 to 2008. This is the largest ever commitment by an Australian government to schooling in Australia. Funding to Australian schools has increased by close to 160 per cent, from $3.5 billion in 1996 to $9.3 billion in 2006-07. That is an amazing commitment when you consider that education is the realm of state governments, and at this stage they are all Labor governments.

In 2006-07 the Australian government increased its funding to state government schools by an average of 11 per cent. It is disappointing that state and territory governments, which are responsible for adequately managing the schools they own, increased their funding by only 4.9 per cent. Should state and territory governments have matched the Howard government’s increased rate of funding, there would have been an extra $1.4 billion for Australian state government schools. Once again state government schools have been let down by state and territory Labor governments.

The additional funding provided in this bill demonstrates the Howard government’s commitment to ensuring that students receive
a high-quality education no matter what school they attend, government or non-government. The bill provides increased funding to the extremely successful $1 billion Investing in Our Schools Program. There has been an overwhelming response from school communities in my electorate for funding under this program introduced by the Howard government. Through this program, the Australian government is providing local communities with a voice to determine what they think is important for their school that is not being funded by the state governments. Almost 90 per cent of state government schools across Australia have received funding through the Howard government’s Investing in Our Schools Program. Due to the overwhelming demand by schools, the Prime Minister recently announced additional funding for the program. This bill will provide an additional $181 million to invest in our schools through this program. The additional funding will provide an extra $127 million for state government schools and an extra $54 million for non-government schools. When this fourth round is complete, total funding provided to Australian schools under the program will be almost $1.2 billion. The additional IOSP funding will be targeted towards schools that have received little or no funding to date under the program. Sixteen state government schools in my electorate of Dobell have the opportunity to apply for funding in round 4 due to receiving an IOSP funding total below the national average of $100,000 or having not yet applied.

This successful program is delivering on a range of often overlooked but still important educational items and infrastructure projects. These do not make it onto the priority list of state and territory education bureaucracies. This funding has given schools safer, healthier and more positive areas for learning as well as alternative education spaces that will significantly enhance the students’ quality of life. From visiting the many schools in my electorate, I have witnessed the fantastic projects school communities have been able to complete with the help of the IOSP funding. Last week I visited Erina Heights Public School to celebrate the completion of the school’s new carpeting in hallways, a P&C uniform shop and storage unit, and craft room refurbishment—projects which were funded by the successful program.

In addition to this program, funding is provided to state government and non-government schools through the capital grants program to improve school infrastructure. Under the capital grants program an estimated $1.7 billion is being provided by the Howard government over 2005 to 2008 to assist with the building, maintenance and updating of schools throughout Australia.

I recently visited Lakes Grammar Anglican School for the opening of stage 1 of the senior school for years 9 to 12. The Australian government contributed $435,000 towards the $7.5 million capital works project, which includes a design and technology room, science lab, five general classrooms, computer lab, library, PE store room, two multipurpose courts, car park and link road from the junior school. These outstanding facilities will help ensure all students are encouraged to realise their potential and attain their goals. This project is a good example of what can be achieved when the government works together with local school communities.

The bill will appropriate $11.7 million for capital funding for non-government schools for 2008 to maintain the existing funding level. The final measure in the bill is to provide $9.445 million for the national projects element of the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program for 2008. This is to ensure continued funding to the end of
the quadrennium. Literacy and numeracy are the most important skills a child needs to succeed in their education. These national projects emphasise the Howard government’s efforts in raising the literacy and numeracy of disadvantaged students.

Over my time as the federal member for Dobell, I have enjoyed my interactions with the principals, teachers and students from many fine local Catholic, independent and state schools. They are rich in variety and are all committed to working for a bright future for their students. I have seen with my own eyes the high standard of teaching at many schools in each of these sectors and the excellent partnerships between teachers, students and parents.

Last week I visited Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic School at Long Jetty and saw great strides in achievement in numeracy and literacy levels. In fact, they are achieving level 12 in kinder, and by the end of year 1 they are achieving level 18. This has been a fantastic turnaround in the last four years for this particular school. As a parent and grandparent I know how important these partnerships are to a quality education. I also know how important it is for parents to have the right to choose where they send their children to school. The Howard government strongly support the principle of choice. Importantly, whether parents choose to send their children to a state, Catholic or independent school, we want to be able to support them in making the choice that they believe to be best for their children.

Today I was amazed to read in the Sydney Morning Herald an article titled ‘Ten years of stinking toilets’. When the Minister for Defence, who is at the table, was Minister for Education, Science and Training—

Dr Nelson—Tuggerawong Public School!

Mr TICEHURST—we witnessed this exactly at Tuggerawong Public School. They were going to use the Investing in Our Schools Program to fix the toilets. However, we convinced them that that was the responsibility of the state government. The minister will recall that the toilets were in a shocking state when we visited them.

Dr Nelson—You could smell them from the road.

Mr TICEHURST—You could smell them from Wyong! Fortunately, there is partly a fix on that problem. They were able to spend their Investing in Our Schools Program money on a more useful project. It is a shame to see that, even after all these years, schools are still having this problem and the states are ignoring it. We have a state Labor candidate who was the principal of a school, Mr David Harris. I have heard him saying nothing whatsoever about the poor state of schools and what he proposes to do. All we have heard is Premier Morris Iemma talking about the last 18 months. It is an absolute disgrace.

This bill reflects the Howard government’s continued commitment to a strong and effective school system, maximising opportunities for young Australians. By assisting all schools with funding for important educational items, necessary building projects and improvements in literacy and numeracy standards, the result is improved educational outcomes for all Australian students. I commend this bill to the House.

Mrs HULL (Riverina) (11.27 am)—What a pleasure it is to rise in the House to celebrate the awarding of an enormous amount of money into my electorate of Riverina from this government—money that would not normally have gone to these very worthwhile and deserving projects in public and private schools. I am delighted to speak in support of the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007,
which will mean a further opportunity for schools in my electorate to implement projects to enhance the education of their students and certainly to relieve the burden on many parents. As has become very obvious over the years, many parents and friends associations and parents and citizens associations are raising extraordinary amounts of money to assist in their children’s education and to benefit communities at large.

Since the Investing in Our Schools Program started, the Riverina has received a sensational amount of just under $10 million, with state schools receiving $7.8 million and the many Catholic and independent schools in the electorate being allocated a total of $2.1 million. In this round of the Investing in Our Schools Program the Riverina community’s parents, teachers, headmasters and, most of all, students have been the recipients of extreme value.

This program that has been delivered across the Riverina has been vital in securing a number of smaller projects that schools desperately need but which the state government has certainly not seen as a priority. In 2006-07 the Australian government increased its funding of state government schools by an average of 11 per cent while at the same time state Labor governments increased their funding by just 4.9 per cent. Had they matched the federal government’s increased rate of funding there would be an extra $1.4 billion for Australian state government schools. This demonstrates a concerning trend of neglect of state government schools by state and territory Labor governments.

I know that there was much concern, when we were putting money into the public school system—and I congratulate the government for having done so—that the more money we put in, the more money the states will take out of the system. That is generally their form. However, it is worth while to see the look on the faces of the mums and dads who continually and consistently work in the best interests of their schools and their communities when there is an amount of money put into their school that they have not actually had to raise themselves.

Many of the successful projects in my electorate have included simple things such as shade structures and all-important air conditioning. We have seen masses of computers made available to our country students, classroom improvements and a huge increase in library resources. From December through to March, almost into April, the temperatures in the Riverina can reach up past 45 degrees on many days. Some of the schools that I have in my electorate still have no air conditioning or appropriate shaded areas. The children do not have access to pleasant environments in which to learn and play. In our significant drought, we have bare dirt and dusty playgrounds. We have no ability to apply water—if there were any—or to be environmentally efficient in the way in which we use water.

The projects that we were able to fund from the Investing in Our Schools Program included things such as playground equipment, sporting infrastructure and water infrastructure for our ovals so that our children can compete in sports and have a physical and cultural environment within their school. One of the little schools, Nangus Public School, in my electorate was just thrilled that they had received a grant of $33,000 for playground equipment because in the 80-year history of the school there had not been any climbing and fitness equipment. Now they cannot keep the kids off the equipment. It has been a fabulous addition to the school.

Their children’s wellbeing is very important to parents and many of them commit much time and energy to assisting with their
P&Cs, parents and citizens associations, or their P&Fs. They run the tuckshops and they prepare for school fetes and other fundraisers. They sew and cook and they spend time helping the classroom teacher with classroom maintenance and working bees across the school. We should ensure that we have the best facilities for children to learn in because this is important for their future. Small communities generally are so committed.

The drought has been a heavy burden on the people whom I represent, but they are still prepared to do what they can to ensure that their local school has vital equipment and maintenance applied to it. The schools in the bush in my electorate are often the heart of the town or the village that they are in and it is important to keep these partnerships between the government and our communities in order to build relationships and achieve the aims and objectives for the schools and their students. It is difficult, as I said, for smaller areas to raise an amount of money in these drought stricken times and that is why this government should be applauded for recognising and rewarding the P&Cs and P&Fs for their dedication to education in their communities. The smaller schools simply do not have a critical mass to draw on for fundraisers, and the continuing drought has a huge impact financially on many of the families in my electorate. They do all that they can. Sometimes they simply cannot spare the extra money to give to the school, but they certainly will always give of their time and labour.

The purpose of this bill is to provide increased funding for the Investing in Our Schools Program for government schools for 2007 and non-government schools for 2007-08 and to provide additional funding of $127 million for state government schools and an extra $54 million for our non-government schools. When the fourth round is complete, the total funding provided to Australian schools under the program will be almost $1.2 billion. Everyone was excited about the first $1 billion; it was so popular and it rolled out very quickly. This additional funding will be as welcome across my electorate as the previous Investing in Our Schools Program has been. It has received an overwhelming response from our school communities Australia-wide, with over 18,000 applications having been received over the first three rounds from the state government schools alone.

Recently I have been spending a lot of time in schools through the electorate of Riverina and we have celebrated as a community, as children, as teachers and as friends of the schools, the completion of many of these projects that have been very simple but so very effective. I have seen fantastic results. It is clear that these schools are very proud of their achievements and very proud of the ways in which their schools are operational and the ways in which they have been able to play a part in offering new facilities for both students and staff.

At Parkview Public School I recently attended a playground refurbishment. It was completed with $48,257 provided under the Investing in Our Schools Program. To see the enjoyment of the children was an absolute pleasure. Parkview is a wonderful school and I was very proud of the way they maintain their school and make it an extremely comfortable environment. Over the years the playground had eroded and become a dusty and sparsely grassed area. Health and safety issues were a concern for the students due to the fact that there was no real place to play and to enjoy outdoor activity. There is now a safer playground. The project included digging a trench around the edge of the playground to eliminate the effect caused by the roots of existing trees. The playground was levelled and loam was spread on the infants’ playground to cover the poor-quality soil. We
laid turf over the infants’ playground to replace the existing bare or poorly grassed areas. We removed the existing woodchip soft-fall material from beneath the playground equipment and provided the most amazing rubber based soft-fall material with play designs underneath all of that play equipment to ensure that the one broken arm evident in the school on that day was something from the past and would certainly not happen in the future.

I still have around nine schools in the Riverina which have either not applied for funding or not been successful in securing funding. I welcome this additional funding for the program, because it will be targeted at these schools to ensure that they will have an opportunity to participate in this very competitively based scheme. It gives them an opportunity to participate by putting in their application for a maximum of $100,000.

I say this to the Hon. Brendan Nelson, the former Minister for Education, Science and Training, who is sitting at the table, who started this magnificent program: thank you very much, Minister, for having seen the need and the desire of members of this House to play a very important role in ensuring that the school parents, friends and children in our communities have been able to achieve equity and balance in the way in which their school facilities have been prepared. We thank you for that. I also thank the current Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon. Julie Bishop, for taking this up with a vengeance. I say to this government: congratulations for something that has been so successful; the joy among the people of my electorate that I have witnessed has been undeniable. We continue to look forward to the rolling-out of further projects in the region covered by the electorate of Riverina.

Another school that I attended recently is Yanco Agricultural High School. It was a fabulous visit. It is a boarding school, and its young students had not previously had an air-conditioned canteen area. When I was there I was so taken by all of the students, everybody in their very heavy serge blazers and their uniforms with ties done up to the neck, sitting in the canteen for their joint meal. I wondered how they could have possibly managed to enjoy their meal and to prosper from it when they had had no air conditioning in this canteen area for all of those years. But they now have air conditioning as a result of the Investing in Our Schools Program, and they were thoroughly enjoying their meal that evening in air-conditioned comfort.

There are a number of schools in a similar situation. Recently I visited Forest Hill Public School and had a fabulous morning with P&C members, enjoying the morning’s activities. We congratulated each other and celebrated the greening of their playing field. They have not been able to use their oval for a number of years but now, through the Investing in Our Schools Program, they are able to enjoy their playground. They are even putting in place a softball diamond, and they will soon be having a skipathon to raise money under the Jump Rope for Heart initiative. That was a terrific morning. I commend the bill to the House.

Dr NELSON (Bradfield—Minister for Defence) (11.41 am)—I join the member for Riverina in strongly supporting this legislation, the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007. I also thank her for her acknowledgement of the current Minister for Education, Science and Training and of me, having formerly been in that capacity. I do very much recall the day that the idea came to me. I was driving past a school in my electorate, Roseville Public
School, and, as is often the case, there was a very large sign out the front of the school—‘Trivia Night on Friday night for the P&C’—and adjacent to it was a fundraising thermometer. For some time we in the federal government had been very angry about the way in which state governments had been neglecting and underfunding their own state schools—which is why of course they are called ‘state schools’. In fact, in the 2005-06 budget for the state of New South Wales, the New South Wales government actually cut its education capital works funding by $20 million and froze its maintenance budget. That compounded a long period of underfunding of its government schools.

It seemed to me that when parents were not absolutely flat out trying to look after their families, feed their children and meet their mortgages they were frequently required, through government school P&Cs, to be fundraising for a variety of very necessary and worthy things. The proposal which was developed, which has obviously been supported by and now implemented by the government, was that we would provide additional funding, not funding taken from any other Commonwealth government education program, to schools directly to parent bodies so that a school’s parent body would determine itself which projects were a priority for them while the principal of the school would need to sign off the proposal. In other words, we were bypassing the clipboard mentality of the states’ centralised education bureaucracies and going directly to parents.

The Investing in Our Schools Program has revealed a number of things. It has revealed not only that parents know exactly what is important to support the education of their children but also the exorbitant fees that are being charged at the state government level for the management of projects and building. One of the key things which need to be examined very closely is the extent to which the Australian taxpayer, at a state and federal level—for the money that goes into capital works for state schools—is being gouged for excessive fees. Parents have found that they are able to get projects funded much more efficiently and have the work completed much more on schedule and for a much more appropriate price than by going through centralised education bureaucracies. On that note, I strongly support the legislation and I look forward very much to hearing from the member for Bass.

Mr MICHAEL FERGUSON (Bass) (11.44 am)—I take great delight in speaking in support of the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007. What an extraordinary situation it is when the Labor Party fails to have speakers on this bill. I do not mind running down the corridors to deliver my contribution a little earlier than I was advised by the agreed speakers list—agreed, that is, between the whips—but I wonder why the Labor Party does not wish to speak on this bill. How embarrassing! Equally, what an extraordinary situation it is that speakers opposite would have stood to oppose an additional funding increase—very valuable funding—to deserving schools in every state and territory in our great country.

The amendment we are debating today will provide further funding in 2007 for state government schools under the highly regarded Investing in Our Schools Program. We have just heard from the Minister for Defence. It is really exciting to hear the Minister for Defence speak to this bill and it is quite an unusual situation. I think it is worth placing on record my appreciation for the Minister for Defence who, at the time of the 2004 election, was the Minister for Education, Science and Training—and a very good one. He began what needed to be the next wave of education reform in this country. I
will never forget driving on the roads in north-east Tasmania—

Dr Nelson—Scottsdale?

Mr MICHAEL FERGUSON—Yes, just past Scottsdale. I was listening to the radio broadcast of the Prime Minister’s election campaign launch speech, in which he proposed a range of initiatives to boost and further strengthen education and vocational training in this country. I will never forget the excitement of hearing the announcement of, at that time, 24 new technical colleges for Australia, one of which was going to be based in Northern Tasmania, to address a shortage in the number of people available to the workforce in the skilled trades. We also heard on the broadcast news at that time of the new commitment—not a political promise, but a bankrolled commitment—for an extra $1 billion for schools. Any school teachers, school principals or, indeed, parents of children in schools in Northern Tasmania who were watching that broadcast on television or listening to it on the radio would have shared my excitement at hearing of all the extra resources that were going to be made available.

It is important to add that this bill also appropriates additional funding for non-government schools for 2007 and 2008. The amendment provides for additional funding for non-government schools under the capital grants program for 2008 and funding for national projects under the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program for the same year. But I want to dwell on the Investing in Our Schools Program. I am really excited about this and I am genuinely pleased to see additional resources going to our schools.

As you would know, Mr Deputy Speaker Wilkie, I was a schoolteacher in secondary schools in Northern Tasmania. I will never forget having to teach in classrooms that were not heated. It was as ridiculous as this: I would go from my maths classroom to my science classroom to my IT lab carrying a 1,500-watt heater with me—along with my whiteboard markers, my chalk and my scientific calculator—which I had to put on in the classroom for me and the children. All the while, I wondered how long this ridiculous situation would last. I always took the view that it was not just my workplace environment that was inadequate and of an unacceptable standard but that, equally, it was the workplace of the students. While they may not have been in paid employment, during the hours of nine to three that was their workplace and they had a right and a reasonable expectation to have a decent standard of environment in which to learn and work.

The Investing in Our Schools Program has been a monumental success. Since the program began in this term of the Howard government, more than 6,000 state government schools have submitted close to 19,000 applications. In my electorate of Bass in Northern Tasmania alone, the interest in the take-up has been absolutely fantastic. But we do not need to exaggerate about these things; the facts bear them out. In round 1 alone, 17 government school projects were approved; in round 2, 18 projects; and in round 3, announced late last year, 26 projects were approved in Northern Tasmania.

Over the three rounds of Investing in Our Schools funding, 61 government schools in Northern Tasmania have received total funding approvals of $3.3 million. The program has also supported 10 non-government schools to the tune of half a million dollars, approved in a different method through the independent schools block grant authority. So 71 schools in Northern Tasmania are benefiting thousands—probably countless numbers—of students and parents and, indeed, the wider community. I think it is worth saying that these are, in the main, state
government schools which have been neglected by state governments. It certainly is the case and, while it may sound like an easy call or a cheap shot, the fact remains that we are talking about state government schools, which are well and truly within the jurisdiction and responsibility of the state governments.

Unfortunately we tend increasingly now to be living in an age in which, when state government policy failures eventuate, those self-same state governments begin to point the finger at other levels of government. They look up; they look towards Canberra. If the state governments were to ask Canberra to take over responsibility for their schools, that would be an interesting discussion and a debate that I would be very willing to enter into. But we do not live in that environment. We live in an environment where the state governments want to retain control of those schools—to manage them and to fund them—but they do not want to fund them appropriately. They do not want to resource them in the way that they know they should. Rather than dealing with the problem and getting their own state budget priorities right, state Labor governments—certainly in the case of Tasmania but also around the country—are pointing the finger rather than taking responsibility.

Time today does not permit me to detail all of the worthy projects of which I have been speaking, but I want to mention a few that have been funded through the program, because I have had the great fortune of being closely related to very many of them. In particular I am delighted with Mowbray Heights Primary School. It is a school that I have a close affinity with. I often call it ‘the gold nugget’. That little school has benefited from more than $45,000 in direct funding—no middleman needed here—to improve its outside facilities and make shade structure improvements. Most recently I had the pleasure of going to that school with the Minister for Education, Science and Training, Julie Bishop, and we were able to inspect an additional improvement there: the new playground.

Also the fund has provided support to Summerdale Primary School for air conditioning and heating, some of the basics of life. Trevallyn Primary School has received $50,000 for a heating upgrade. Waverley Primary School, which is another terrific school, up on the hill east of Launceston, received a shade structure upgrade for $50,000, in addition to improvements for its general quadrangle. It was a delight for me to be able to visit there and launch that. We were also able to see improvements that have been undertaken at Flinders Island District High School. There was support there of $50,000, which they have used for general classroom refurbishments, including a brand-new carpet. One of the children when I visited there—just a small child—said to me how nice it was to be able to sit on the floor in more comfort.

It was also very exciting last year to be part of the improvements that are going on at Invermay Primary School. It was a very exciting initiative which we saw at that school. The local church community joined together with the business community in totally renovating that small local primary school at Invermay. Invermay is not a well-off area in comparison to others, and it was absolutely astonishing and very humbling for me to be able to witness the involvement of local church people and the Christian community, who were able to raise something of the order of a quarter of a million dollars of financial and in-kind support from their own resources and through the business community and its networks there. Then over a two-day period there was an intense blitz and every aspect of the school was renovated and refurbished. I was able to be there and roughed
it with the rest of them. I made a fair fist of painting some of the classrooms. Invermay Primary School has also received funding, as part of the Commonwealth’s commitment to that school, for heating upgrades and general classroom improvements.

South George Town Primary School has received funding, along with Glen Dhu Primary School. Prospect High School has received a very much appreciated boost of $150,000, which is basically being used to improve the home arts area, which will have the additional purpose of providing the students with their catering needs. I was able to visit there with the then Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson. It was a great day and it was very well appreciated. I know that as recently as late last year the school community felt so grateful for that opportunity.

By the way, Mr Deputy Speaker, the schools do not believe that the Commonwealth carries responsibility for these issues, but they are mature enough to recognise the political environment we have today, where state governments are simply failing to invest in our schools, and they just appreciate the extra support that they are getting. It has also been wonderful to see schools in Scottsdale, St Leonards and Youngtown gaining the benefits of being a part of this program.

So, if the results are so positive, why is this amendment bill required? The answer to that is very simple: this program has been a victim of its own outstanding success. I think it is quite well known that, in the early days, the government intended to roll out this program over, I think, a four-year period, over either four or five funding rounds. Due to the astonishing uptake—the great enthusiasm with which schools took up this program—over time that has been changed and readjusted. We find ourselves today in a situation where that billion dollars—$1,000 million—has all been invested in our schools.

I feel so proud to be part of a government that has taken this policy initiative upon itself and in just two short years has been able to provide $1 billion in support to our schools. The money has all gone. Some schools had not yet had the opportunity to apply for this funding that they were so looking forward to, and now they find that the funding has all gone. You can imagine how they feel, Mr Deputy Speaker. We find ourselves again in a situation where the state government has failed to top up that fund or to make a contribution to it, and the Howard government has faithfully stepped in with the extra funding that is required to give schools that have not been funded to a significant degree, or schools that have not been funded at all, a new opportunity to apply, with a reasonable expectation that they will be able to provide improved facilities for their young people.

I can recall, when the last funding round for Tasmania was announced late last year, the shared disappointment I felt with those schools that had missed out. It was at that point that I was very anxious to deal with this problem. I spoke at that time to the Minister for Education, Science and Training, Julie Bishop, about the need to extend this program beyond its three rounds. I also wrote to the minister. I also sent a copy of that letter, in good faith, to the schools who I felt had missed out and provided them with a hard copy of the representations that I had made on the matter.

Today in this public forum I say thank you to the minister for education for the role that she has played and I say thank you to the cabinet and indeed to the Prime Minister for showing the leadership that we needed to extend the life of this program, to assist more schools to gain a piece of the action—not so
that they can have facilities which are out of this world or somehow a luxury; they are just getting their schools up to scratch. They are just providing a learning environment where young people can actually feel comfortable and not freeze.

My concern remains, though, that this fund will also run out and that there remains an enormous amount of need in many schools in Northern Tasmania which today have no real prospect of extra investment by Tasmania’s Lennon Labor government. It has refused all of my pleas to increase the capital works budget for schools. The Tasmanian government continues to place a very low priority on capital works—this is the built infrastructure of our schools. I strongly believe that we need to deliver on the needs and expectations of our school communities. That applies to all of us. I welcome the additional $181 million for this program, which consists of $127 million for state government schools and a smaller but fair pro rata amount of $54 million for non-government schools. I thank the government for that and I lay down the challenge today to my Labor colleagues who are in this place—somewhere; they do not really want to speak on this bill but I presume they are here somewhere—to pick up the phone to their Labor colleagues in the state governments around Australia to do one simple act: just match the increase. In their own schools in Tasmania and other states around Australia, just match what the Howard government is putting in.

Unfortunately, the flirtation between the Labor Party at the state level and the Australian Education Union has led to a very dishonest electoral campaign against the coalition government. It has been deliberately targeted to somehow create the impression in the community that our young people are missing out—it is because of the Howard government, they would have us believe. The facts are quite different. The reality is astonishingly different, because when one does the mathematics one finds that the Australian government’s 2006-07 budget increase to state government schools is 10.4 per cent. That is triple or four times inflation. The Tasmanian government’s present financial year budget increase for its own state government schools was a measly three per cent—3.2 per cent to be precise.

The mathematics of this are quite simple but they are nonetheless breathtaking. If the state government provided additional funding support to equal the Australian government’s increase—do not match the funds, just match the increase—it would mean an additional $46 million for Tasmanian schools. If it were to do that it would be commended, but until it does it stands condemned for its failure to act and its insistence on cheap, short-term politics—to point the finger at somebody else, to sheet the blame home to their political opponents, in this case, the Howard government. The government once again today stands on its fine record of supporting all of our schools, supporting parents in the choices they wish to make for their children and to provide facilities which provide the best opportunity for young people to learn and in the future to meet their potential in life. I stand today proud of this bill and what it represents. I call on all members to support it. I also challenge Labor members to clearly state their position on this matter rather than running away from debate. I thank the House.

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (12.04 pm)—I am delighted to be able to speak in the House of Representatives today on this very important bill. I support the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 very strongly. I commend it very much to all members of the House, because this is a bill which will bring into the schools around the
country some $181 million. Education is something that is very important to all Australians. It is particularly important to the mums, dads and grandparents of Ryan, because education really is so critical to the development of their children and their grandchildren. I am very pleased to speak on this very important bill.

I might draw to the attention of the House the fact that the Ryan electorate has the second highest concentration of educational institutions of all the 150 federal electoral divisions. That is something I am very pleased about. The Ryan electorate has 32 primary schools, eight secondary schools, including the Queensland Academy of Science, Mathematics and Technology, and of course, I would contend, Australia’s premier tertiary institution, the University of Queensland, of which I am very proud to be a graduate.

Education is one of the very significant priority issues for the Howard government. As a father of an eight-month-old son, I certainly now look at education with a different perspective, being someone who one day will be the parent of a young child at primary school, a child at secondary school and, indeed, I hope, perhaps one day, the father of a young man at university. So I am not only speaking as the federal member for Ryan but as a citizen and taxpayer of this country. This sort of bill is very close to my heart—and I know I speak for all parents in the Ryan electorate—because it delivers funding to key projects and key programs in the Ryan electorate.

I want to point out that the Ryan electorate has benefited to the tune of almost $4 million since this tremendous program, Investing in Our Schools, was brought into being. Almost $4 million has been provided across 43 projects, covering some 30 schools in the Ryan electorate. As the local federal member, it is something about which I am very proud. I also want to talk about the nature of school funding generally and the allocation of funds in Queensland, because I think it is important for Australians to know about it. Some $27 million will be allocated for state government schools and $54 million for non-government schools. When this fourth round is complete under the Investing in Our Schools Program, the total of funding for schools across the country will be $1.2 billion—such a huge amount of money really boggles the mind. The allocation represents a commitment by the Howard government to support those schools that rely on government funding while also respecting the right of parents to choose a non-government school for their children and their expectation that this should not preclude their children from receiving support from the government. Funding will also be targeted to ensure that those schools and those children who have not yet received the full benefit of this program will be prioritised. Government schools that have so far received less than $100,000 will be able to apply in this additional round, and non-government schools will only be allowed to apply for funding of up to $75,000.

It is important to note that state schools are currently under the same financial restraints as other schools and that all schools and all children receive as much of the slice of this funding pie as possible. Between 2005 and 2008, through the Investing in Our Schools Program, the government will provide the biggest investment ever in Australian schools by a federal government. Some $33 billion will be distributed across the schools of our country. Overall funding to Australian schools has increased by 160 per cent since the Howard government was elected in 1996—from $3.5 billion per year to $9.3 billion in 2006-07. All this talk we hear from the opposition that they are the
party of education, that they somehow have a monopoly on education, that they are somehow the exclusive repository of wisdom, that they know the best way forward for our kids and that they know how to look after the educational priorities of our schoolchildren is sheer nonsense. The record of the government speaks for itself. The funding speaks for itself. The Howard government can be very proud of its contribution to educational development at all levels in this country. We know full well how important education is to the development of a young person at primary school, at high school and at university or other institutions.

In 2006-07, the Howard government increased its funding to state schools by an average of 11 per cent while, at the same time, Labor governments only increased their funding by 4.9 per cent. I think that the federal Minister for Education, Science and Training certainly deserves lots of bouquets for pointing out that the federal government has been doing the heavy lifting in this area and the state governments should really hang their heads in shame. Let us not forget about the GST—and I always like to note that the Queensland Labor Premier was the first to sign on the dotted line for the GST—and the fact that every single dollar of the GST goes to state and territory governments. Not one single dollar stays in consolidated revenue. It is high time the states spent this huge amount of money on the schools, particularly in Queensland.

I think it is an indictment of the Queensland government’s record in this area when you look at a school like Mount Crosby at Karana Downs, where I had the pleasure a few weeks ago of taking the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon. Pat Farmer. They were absolutely livid that their kids were sweltering in classrooms and demountables that did not have air conditioning. I think it is astonishing in this day and age that a Queensland government has failed to provide funding for air conditioning to a school like Mount Crosby at Karana Downs. As I have said previously, it is remarkable that the national government has to find funds to make up for the sheer neglect and disregard of the state governments and provide simple things like shade structures and air conditioning in schools. They are negligent in providing the basics such as toilet facilities and showers at swimming complexes in schools.

At the end of the day, the national government should focus on the absolute fundamentals of national security, defence, foreign affairs and immigration—key areas where one would expect a national government to focus. Such is the sheer neglect and incompetence of state and territory governments that the Howard government has had to step in to fill the void. Whilst we will always look after our schools, it is also incumbent upon members of the government to point out in no uncertain terms that the state governments ought to hang their heads in shame. I will continue to point that out because when parents of students such as those at Karana Downs and parents of students at schools such as Kenmore and Centenary say to me that they need extra funds for little projects, that they are not getting support from the state government, that says something very much about the state government and their priorities.

To return to the Mount Crosby school: the principal, Sue Phillips, said to me that in her time at the school neither the Queensland Premier nor any Queensland education minister had visited Mount Crosby primary school. No Queensland Labor government official had ever visited the school. That was a revelation to me. I think it is high time the Queensland education minister went out to Karana Downs and to Mount Crosby school, saw for himself the terrible state of the de-
mountables—the terrible state of the classrooms there and the way the kids are packed in like sardines, sitting in sweltering heat—and provided the funds for much needed air conditioning.

As I said, the Ryan electorate has benefited to the tune of almost $4 million for 43 Ryan projects across 30 Ryan schools. I want to take the opportunity to speak in the parliament on some of those projects because it will reinforce even further the sentiments I have just touched on. Take, for example, Chapel Hill State School, which received $150,000 for shade structures, for its classrooms and for play equipment. I had the great pleasure of visiting that school to speak to the students and to provide Mr Ross Perry, the principal, with that federal funding, which was so much appreciated.

Let me give another example of a school in the Ryan electorate that has benefited to the tune of $150,000: the Indooroopilly State School, which received money for a playground upgrade. The principal, Mrs Hilary Backus, was delighted that the federal government was able to step in and fill the void. I find it astonishing—and wonder if Australians around the country realise—that the national government of the day is providing funds for things like shade structures, library extensions and air conditioning. Moggill State School was the beneficiary of $51,000 and the principal, Mrs Helen King, was delighted to receive this money, but one would think this sort of thing would be within the remit of state governments—that a national government would focus on defence, foreign affairs, customs and immigration but would not be required to step in and fill the void where state governments should have their priorities.

The Payne Road State School, which I also had the pleasure of visiting, received $146,000 for library and ICT extensions. I will go back to one of my favourite projects—air conditioning: Mr Fred Hardman, the principal of Pullenvale State School in the Ryan electorate, was delighted to receive a cheque from the federal government for $105,000. And I enjoyed my visit to Rainworth State School in Bardon because the principal there received $45,000 for musical instruments and other resources for the school’s orchestra.

Here again we have a federal government stepping in to assist a primary school with musical instruments for the orchestra. I find that astonishing, and I think most Australians would share the view that our priorities should be at the national level looking after key areas relating to the country, not in providing funds for musical instruments for a school orchestra. I should take the opportunity in the parliament to thank Rainworth school at Bardon for their very warm welcome when I visited. The warm welcome of the kids and the sheer talent of their musical performance really struck me.

I want to turn the House’s attention to the Ironside primary school in the Ryan electorate. The Ironside State School had refurbishments to its pool and change rooms after it received some $44,000 under the Investing in Our Schools Program. I had the pleasure of going to Ironside State School and saying a few words about the federal government’s strong support for the school in circumstances where the state government over many years had had little interest in providing support. They told me that the change rooms had suffered from sheer neglect and had become unusable to the extent that the pool had become pretty much out of bounds. The kids were not able to utilise the facility because of the unhygienic change rooms. From my recollection, those change rooms had been neglected for a couple of decades, and I certainly have no hesitation in firing
bullets off to both sides of politics in Queensland.

Whether you are a Labor state government or a coalition state government, the priority must be to do the right thing, to come up with ideas and bring in policies that make a difference to real issues and to the lives of Australians. Let us get past the nonsense of political buck-passing and political character assassination that seems to be creeping into Australian politics. Let us get down to the business of looking after the people of Australia and providing the necessary infrastructure to our schools. It is a disgrace that a school like Ironside State School was unable to access funds from Queensland state governments of both persuasions. Remember, though, that the Labor government has been in office since 1989 bar two years of coalition government led by Rob Borbidge. Queenslanders ought to remember that, aside from those two years, the Labor government has been in power in Queensland since 1989. It ought to get its act together and come to the table on things like health, education and roads—certainly on roads like Moggill Road in my electorate.

I want to turn my attention to Kenmore State High School, to which I took the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education, Science and Training a few weeks ago, to speak to the grade 12 students. I thank him for his kind visit, which was tremendously well received by the students of grade 12. In his own inimitable fashion, Pat Farmer won the hearts and minds of the students of grade 12 at Kenmore State High.

I was delighted to present to Kenmore State High School and Mr Wade Haynes, the principal, $150,000 in round 2 for air conditioning. Anybody who has been into the classrooms in a Queensland school will know that air conditioning is an absolute priority. I call again on the state Labor government, which is absolutely awash in GST, to start delivering on the ground, to start building the schools and the classrooms and to start installing air conditioning for the kids.

This financial year alone, the Queensland government has received some $8 billion in GST revenue from the federal government and, again, not one single dollar of those GST funds is retained by the federal government. So, with such a huge amount of cash in its coffers, the Queensland government should get on with delivering the key projects and programs for the children, not only in the Ryan electorate but throughout the state of Queensland.

In conclusion, I am delighted to speak on this bill. It delivers $181 million of additional funds to the billion-dollar-plus fund that the Howard government has already put on the table for the schools of Australia. I know that the parents of the electorate of Ryan will be delighted that they will be able to access these funds through their P&Cs and to prioritise them to where their schools can benefit most. Again, I commend all the wonderful parents and staff—the principals and the teachers—of the schools in Ryan for their dedicated service to education and for their commitment to the lives of young Australians.

Mr MELHAM (Banks) (12.24 pm)—I rise today to support the second reading amendment to the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 moved by the member for Perth. The second reading amendment is in the following terms:

Whilst not declining to give the bill a second reading, the House welcomes the additional funding for the Investing in our Schools program, it notes that when making the announcement the Minister was silent on the change of criteria for
Government schools halfway through the life of the program and condemns the Government for:

(1) leaving many Government schools ineligible to apply for additional funds by reducing the funding cap from $150,000 to $100,000; and
(2) failing to guarantee the future of the Investing in our Schools program beyond the current funding round.

The bill itself proposes an increase in funding for infrastructure grants in government and non-government schools, capital grants for non-government schools and strategic initiatives in the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs program. The purpose of the second reading amendment is to draw attention to the fact that the government has revised down the available funding for individual schools. Each school is now capped at $100,000. Those schools which decided to implement a staged strategy in applying for funding have been badly let down by this government.

The explanatory memorandum outlines the maximum amounts that may be paid for capital and capital infrastructure grants under the Investing in Our Schools Program. It is this section of the bill which concerns me. It is here that the amounts that individual schools are able to apply for are reduced. Of itself, this may not seem catastrophic when it is viewed as moving the numbers around marginally on a national level. However, the decision is catastrophic for individual schools. While the quantum increases over the triennium funding period—and I congratulate the government for that—the line item amount by school has decreased.

We can add this to the plethora of broken promises from this government. While the trail of broken promises has included those at a national security level—the war in Iraq, for example—this broken promise has a direct and immediate impact on my constituents. I would hazard a guess that it has caused some grief to the members on the other side as well.

Let me refer to the government’s own Investing in Our Schools website. This information was downloaded by my staff when the IOSP was introduced in 2005. I felt it important that I had access to specific information to answer questions from the school community. I will quote from the information that was on the website in 2005. In the section ‘Frequently asked questions’, there were two questions I wish to draw to the attention of the House. The first question asked, ‘How much can I apply for?’ The response was:

A total of $150,000 over the life of the programme. The school community should decide whether to apply for a number of small projects or one or two large ones within that total cap.

The second question asked, ‘Will my school miss out if I don’t apply in 2005?’ The response was:

No. Funding is available throughout the four years of the programme (2005-2008). Further application rounds will be announced annually.

I am advised that the minister at the time, Dr Nelson, had written to schools about the IOSP. In those letters he is reported, in the Sydney Morning Herald on 15 March 2007 at page 11, to have said:

It is anticipated that the maximum amount an individual school community will receive is $150,000 over the next four years.

I note that some government MPs are reported as not being very pleased with the decision to reduce funding available for individual schools—and good on them for raising it within their party room. I quote from the Age of 28 February 2007 at page 6:

Meanwhile, several Coalition MPs, including former education minister Brendan Nelson, raised party room concerns that cash provided for a popular schools funding program for small-scale capital works, such as new playgrounds and toilet-block upgrades had been cut.
There does appear to be some confusion in government ranks, though. Senator Fierravanti-Wells is reported to have said to the Illawarra ABC that the misunderstanding lies in the fact that the original program has ended:

The Senator says a new program then started with a different funding limit.

I am aware of a number of schools in my electorate that decided to make out their applications consistent with the original advice provided by the Department of Education, Science and Training. Those schools are now being penalised simply because they acted on the government and minister’s advice at the time. On 7 March this year I was contacted by the principal of Condell Park Primary School. This school is currently in the electorate of Blaxland but will be in the redistributed Banks electorate after the next election. In her letter and in subsequent phone conversations, the principal outlined several issues of concern, and I have her permission to raise them in the House. I wish to particularise these as I have no doubt that the experience of Condell Park Primary School is indicative of that of many other public schools.

The first issue is that which I have already raised: the guarantees given at the time that the quantum funds would be available for the three-year duration of the Investing in Our Schools Program. This school, along with many others, understood that, if it did not apply for the full $150,000 in the first year of the program, it could apply in subsequent years. The second issue was that the principal was new to the school and wanted to consult broadly with the school community to determine the particular needs of her school. This approach was determined on the basis that access to the full amount of $150,000 would be available in successive years. Being proactive, the school did actually make two submissions totalling $40,000 in the short term but obviously wanted time and local input to ensure that any potential funding was correctly targeted to the specific needs of the school and its students. Technically, Condell Park Primary School should still have the right to apply for $110,000. Under the new arrangements announced by the minister and the parliamentary secretary, this school may now only apply for $60,000. In reality, this is shortfall of $50,000.

For a school like Condell Park, this is a significant figure and one which is unlikely to be available through the usual fundraising channels. This school is located in a low socioeconomic area in south-west Sydney. The principal informed me:

The composition of the school’s community is interesting and diverse with the majority of families having a language other than English (78%) ... While parents support where they can or feel comfortable, there is no way they could ever raise $50,000 in addition to their current targets.

The intention of the school community had been to apply for funding which would allow the school to build a secure school fence or, alternatively, if that were not possible, to apply for further ICT funding. As the principal said in her original communication to me:

We know from the plethora of research available how vital good technology is especially to disadvantaged school communities such as ours. Cutting edge technology will not only engage disengaged students but also give students access to tools critical to success in our information-driven society.

Like many other school principals, Alex Mandell at Condell Park Primary School said that, had the school been aware that there was a limited amount of money available within a predetermined time frame, they would have applied earlier.

Another school has contacted me raising a similar case:
Our school applied for and was granted $75,000 for a security fence in the second round.

Our school community had intended to apply for a much needed electrical upgrade and under the original guidelines we were entitled to apply for a further $75,000. Under the new guidelines we can now apply for a further $25,000 which will not cover the cost of the upgrade.

In this case internal decisions were made by the school community on the basis of the original program guidelines provided by the government.

Both the school principals who contacted me directly have used the word ‘inequitable’ in describing their outrage at the government’s change of heart. The President of the Secondary Principals Council described it as a ‘breach of trust’ in an article on page 11 of the Sydney Morning Herald on 15 March. The President of the New South Wales Primary Principals Association explained in the same article that many schools had ‘staged their applications and had planned to complete their school improvements this year’. He further stated that ‘schools have been led down the garden path’.

This is a classic situation of an uncaring government—a government which does not hesitate to move the goalposts. Fifty thousand dollars may not be much for some schools. To many others it makes a critical difference to the manner in which our children are taught and the quality of the educational outcomes.

I have written to Minister Bishop raising my concerns on behalf of the schools in my electorate. In all fairness, that letter was only sent last week, so I cannot reasonably expect a reply by now. I do, however, look forward to the response when it arrives, as it undoubtedly will. I want to be able to explain to the schools in my electorate why they have been betrayed by this government. I need hardly point out to the House the irony of the title of this bill, given its intent. ‘Achievement’ will be severely limited through lack of ‘choice’ and lack of ‘opportunity’. I condemn the government for moving the goalposts on this program and look forward to the minister’s considered response. I commend the amendment moved by the member for Perth to the House.

This is a worthwhile program that the government has been involved in. I only ask in this instance: deliver on your original promises, because schools made choices based on the material, the commitments and the views they were given about how the program would operate over its life. It is not a situation where the government is short of funds. It is awash with money. There are a lot of other programs, I think, that could be cut or pared back if the government was looking for money. This is not one of those programs. My plea to the minister and to members opposite is that they continue to agitate for their government to deliver on its promises in this instance. I think this is one of the very worthwhile programs. It reminds me of a number of programs that Labor had in its time in government—not the big picture programs; these were small programs that fed into local communities, which were also able to build on them, but made substantial differences to those local communities because they helped empower them. They helped them complete projects that they otherwise would not have been able to undertake.

So this is not an issue about the government or the opposition. As far as I am concerned, this is a program that deserves to have the support of both sides of the House, and it has delivered to school communities in electorates on both sides of the House. Really, my plea is: reinstate the original guidelines for the length of this program; just deliver what you said you would deliver. We have not been given a proper explanation, in my view, of why the goalposts were
changed, and a lot of school communities have been left, in effect, hurt and disillusioned by this and grieving about the lack of opportunities that they now have compared to what they were offered originally.

Mr NEVILLE (Hinkler) (12.37 pm)—I rise to speak on the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007, a bill I wholly endorse. I cannot in any way give any credence to the amendment that has been put by the member for Perth. I would say to the member for Banks, the previous speaker, that if he had read the bill carefully he would see that we certainly have not betrayed anyone. These were things that were neglected, particularly in state schools around this country. This program, as I will outline in my speech, is being fully expended. Not only is it being fully expended but there is another $180 million on top. How in heaven's name is that betrayal?

The bill provides the funding amounts for capital infrastructure grants for government schools for 2007 and for non-government schools for the years 2007 and 2008. The grants are provided under the $1 billion Investing in Our Schools Program. This bill will allow the government to extend the program with an extra $181 million over the next 18 months. The bill is not cutting back on funding or changing the goalposts; it is putting more money into the system.

To date, 15,000 grants have been made to state schools around Australia. If 15,000 state schools in this country have to ask for funds to do essential works, there is a really serious problem in our state schools. That money is now up around $650 million for the state schools, while a further $210 million of the $300 million that has been allocated has gone to 2,000 projects in non-government schools.

Investing in Our Schools funding has been available to all Australian schools since 2005. In that year and in 2006, schools were able to apply for up to $150,000 to carry out relatively small infrastructure and equipment projects. The point I would make is that this is a great program. It is meant to take care of that area between what a P&C could reasonably do and what the state governments can do. P&Cs can raise perhaps $5,000 to $7,000, perhaps $10,000, and some of the ones in the bigger state schools in the capital cities might be able to raise $15,000 or $20,000; but by and large it would be up to about $10,000. Then there is state government funding—and I am not having a crack at the state governments in this respect; I do not think everything they have to do is easy. They have lists of priorities for every school, but some schools fall off the bottom of those lists every year, year after year after year. As the member for Ryan said, at the Ironside State School in a very nice suburb of Brisbane, St Lucia, they have been waiting a couple of decades to get the toilet block and changing room at the swimming pool fixed up. I would have thought that was a matter of hygiene and should have been done earlier. So we can pitch those grants in that middle ground, up to $150,000.

I think this program would have gone a lot further if the state governments had been doing their jobs. I know of one school where the principal has to almost totally renew the classroom furniture—in other words, all the desks; I am not sure about the chairs but certainly all the desks. I would have thought state governments had a fundamental responsibility to provide a desk, a chair, writing materials, a blackboard or a whiteboard, lighting and, at the very least, fans, shade for the kids, somewhere they can eat their lunch, and clean toilets. I would have thought those sorts of things were absolutely bottom-
drawer, fundamental things that have to be done. But they have not been.

While I was listening to the member for Banks, I went through the list of projects funded under Investing in Our Schools in my electorate. It is quite instructive. Fifty-one projects got up in round 1, 24 in round 2 and 120 in round 3, for just under $7 million. There is a nice little school in the central part of my electorate called Yandaran State School. They have applied for 15 different pieces of equipment, although, admittedly, some are not big. But they have to apply for money to get their fencing fixed and to get some basic furniture, some shade structures, some playground equipment, more furniture, school ground improvements—15 different items. I have to ask a fundamental question: if the kids' desks cannot be provided then what the hell is the state government doing? This program was not meant to take over the state government's role; it was meant to fill gaps—and it was meant to fill those gaps in consultation with the school principals and the P&Cs. Relatively speaking, some of these schools would have been in a parlous state if the Investing in Our Schools Program had not been put in place to fund these capital works projects.

I represent a provincial seat with two major population centres and dozens of smaller towns which are fortunate to have their own schools, and with country areas where schools are quite often the centre of the community. The Monogorilby State School comes to mind; some of you have probably never heard of it. It is in the extreme southwest of my electorate, surrounded by the Chinchilla Shire and the electorate of Maranoa on three sides. This tiny little pocket has one state school in it. Just across the border, there is a sawmill called Allies Creek sawmill. It is miles from anywhere—a bastion of the bush, you would call it. There are about 20 kids there.

This program pretty well rejuvenated that school with information technology equipment, computers, shadecloth and other equipment for the school. The place is not only a learning centre for these children of remote areas; it is also the centre of the whole community. This revival through the program not only assisted in the better quality education of those children, it also provided a whole impetus for the community as well. The school, the sawmill and the Monogorilby hall are all that remain of the old community. Not even the old post office is open anymore.

I take a lot of pleasure in this program and I take a lot of notice of the P&C committees that have helped their principals put these projects together. Every week dedicated members of these P&Cs—some of whom are grandparents, I might add, not just parents—are out fundraising so that their schools can provide the basics for the children. I am talking about sporting equipment, playgrounds, buses for trips and in some instances—though I am ambivalent about this particular item—classroom furniture and in other cases renovated buildings. We cannot underestimate the importance of providing support and financial assistance for these schools. That is why the Investing in Our Schools Program is one of the most popular programs that the Commonwealth government has in its locker. I can say that unequivocally: it is the most popular program that I have come across in recent years.

Undoubtedly another point in its favour is the fact that the funding is provided directly from the Commonwealth to individual schools. Wherever possible, though some states have different rules on this, the idea is to try to get it to the principal and the P&Cs so that it is not siphoned off into some other state government project or loaded down with the bureaucracy of the state works department wanting to fiddle with it. It just
goes directly to things that are needed in the school.

On that point, I am absolutely appalled that some state governments actually take a commission on this. They have not got anything to do with it. All they have to do is let the money come to these schools to make up for the shortfalls that they have allowed to occur in those schools. Yet some state governments—and I can name the Western Australian government—take 10 per cent. The Western Australian government takes 10 per cent of this money—for what good purpose? It is taking federal money out of the pockets of the kids and their schools, so to speak. It is taking federal money out of the pockets of the P&C, saying: ‘You could have done a bit more with this money but we want our 10 per cent commission. You guys can go out and raise a bit more.’ It is appalling, and it is about time it stopped.

I now want to return briefly to the theme I had before. So far in my electorate state schools have received $6.8 million under Investing in Our Schools and the non-government schools have received $4.6 million. This bill will allow the government to put a further $127 million into the state school bucket, so to speak, and $54 million into the non-government school bucket. As I said before, this is extending the program. It is not, as the member for Banks portrayed it, a betrayal but quite a substantial and generous top-up. By channelling these funds to state schools which have received smaller amounts—less than $100,000—we are making sure that every school gets a chance to get up to around that $100,000 if at all possible.

Some schools have not applied for it. Some schools are quite modest in their claims and have made them work. I went to a Catholic convent school at Gayndah and found that what they wanted for their kids was a multipurpose court so that tennis, basketball and netball could all be played in the confines of this multipurpose area. It was a fairly modest ask. That is why I also found it a bit disingenuous of the member for Banks to say that some of the principals have staged their funding over a number of periods. With the greatest respect, this was still in the sense that they had to be worthwhile projects, a competitive type of tender. Nowhere in the guidelines for this bill did we ever say that everyone was going to get everything they put up in every round. In fact some people did not and, if I might say so, I do not think that some projects were as worthy as they might have been and probably that is why those projects were dropped off.

We have copped some criticism because we have said that schools that have received $100,000 in the earlier rounds will not be eligible to receive more in the last round. Why is that? I will use my electorate as an example. I have got 20 schools there that have got between $106,000 and $143,000. They have done very nicely, those 20 schools. But I have got 37 other schools that have not had anything yet, so the extension of this program is very important to them and it is very important to those schools that have only made modest claims up until now. In the case of the private schools, largely by the hard work of the parents and the fees they pay, they are fairly well resourced and they will be limited to $75,000. If anything, there is a more generous test being applied to state schools than there is to private schools.

I recently wrote to schools in my electorate, informing them of the extra funding which would be made available this year, and the response I received was overwhelming. That tells me that in Queensland many of our state schools, particularly those located in state seats held by the coalition, are chronically underfunded and, in some instances, in a bad state of repair. This affects
not only the students but the morale of the staff, the parents and, as I explained before, the local community. I recall one country state school in my electorate—in fact I will name it: Mundubbera—which desperately wanted to install air conditioning for its students. We had given them a grant of around $100,000, from memory, but they needed Commonwealth funds not to put in the air conditioning that they applied for but because the basic electrical system in the school was of insufficient capacity to carry the air conditioning. The school will have to amend its plans and use part of the $100,000 Commonwealth funds to overhaul the whole electrical system. I return to my earlier premise: surely there are some responsibilities for state governments when it comes to this. Surely, things like a basic electrical system should be fundamental.

I heard of another instance where the P&C put it to one of the regional directors in Queensland—it is not one of mine; nevertheless the question was put—that they could not put their air conditioning into one school because, like this one I just named at Mundubbera, its power supply was not up to scratch. The comment was: ‘Well, get it out of your Commonwealth mates.’ I think that shows an appalling lack of consideration for the state schools that these state governments are charged with funding and keeping in good condition.

We talk about education and the Leader of the Opposition talks about the education revolution that he would like to undertake. He will want a much better vehicle than the current state governments, let me tell you. Since we have been in power, between 1996 and 2006-07, we have increased funding by 160 per cent. In other words, we have gone from $3.5 billion to $9.3 billion. Just a short-term comparison of funding breakdowns shows that for 2006-07 the Australian government boosted its funding to schools by an average of 11 per cent while the state governments increased their contributions by only 4.9 per cent. The states’ failure to match the Commonwealth’s commitment meant $1.4 billion was missing from the coffers of Australian state government schools. Again, that is an appalling indictment.

This bill also provides for an extra $11.7 million for non-government schools next year under the capital grants program. That is very important for non-government schools. This program is providing around $1.7 billion to schools between 2005 and 2008, and is in place to help with the cost of building, maintaining and refurbishing school infrastructure. This is an invaluable funding scheme for non-government schools, which so often rely upon the generosity of parents and the wider community to achieve their building projects.

I would like to salute those schools: St Luke’s, Bundaberg Christian College and Shalom College in Bundaberg, and Chanel College, St Stephen’s Lutheran College, Trinity College and the Baptist College in Gladstone. They are all very good schools, as are my state schools. Sometimes we are accused of being overgenerous to private schools at the expense of state schools. That is not the case. In fact, I can proudly say that the Tannum Sands State School, a relatively new state school in the suburb of Boyne Island-Tannum Sands, in Gladstone, is one of the best resourced schools I have seen in Australia. More Commonwealth money has gone into that than into any two private schools in my electorate put together. So let us have no more of this nonsense that the Commonwealth is indulging private schools. What we are looking for is equity and choice in education, and a fair go for kids. The Investing in Our Schools Program gives us that fair go, and it is about time the state govern-
ments became more responsible and did not act in a mealy-mouthed way, taking as much as 10 per cent off some of these grants. I commend this bill to the House and I oppose the amendment.

Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (12.57 pm)—I thank the member for Hinkler for his contribution. I am sorry he did not see fit to support the opposition’s amendment, but when he thinks about it he will perhaps change his view—maybe not on the floor of the chamber but outside he may say: ‘Warren, I think that was a good idea that the Labor Party put up as an amendment. I am sorry I could not support it but it was a good idea.’

I make the observation to the member for Hinkler that the member for Brisbane was sitting here listening to his contribution initially. He listened to the contribution of the member for Ryan. He was fairly acerbic in his comments because, as he pointed out to me, he had spent 18 years in the period when Joh was Premier travelling around schools in Queensland and looking at the very poor state they were in as a result of the negligence and neglect of the National Party government of the time.

Mr Neville—That’s not true!

Mr SNOWDON—I told you he would want to make a contribution—he has already had his go. Nevertheless, I understand the member for Hinkler, and I appreciate the fact that he feels strongly about education, as do I. It will not surprise him when I make some comments later on criticising his government’s performance. I want to go to a territory government in this case and talk about what is happening in the Northern Territory. I want to do that because I think it is important that we contextualise this discussion.

Before I go into that in any detail I acknowledge that the Investing in Our Schools Program has been very important for many schools in my electorate. In the last round, 36 projects were successful in 32 schools. I commend the government for ensuring that funding was approved for those schools in my electorate. The projects range from small ones for playground equipment to major purchases of ICT and computer equipment. The feedback that I have received from schools is that the application process and timing of funding arrangements have improved since the program was first introduced. I wrote to the schools in 2005 when there were significant delays in the announcement of successful projects. In 2006 my advice to the principals of schools in Lingiari was to have their project plans ready for any future funding rounds. Perhaps the schools took my advice, but the outcome for them has been very good.

However, I am concerned that the government has seen fit to cap the additional funds available under the program by reducing the amount from $150,000 to $100,000. The shadow minister, the member for Perth, mentioned this when he moved his amendment. I am also concerned about the government’s failure to guarantee the future of the Investing in Our Schools Program beyond the current funding round. These funds are important in improving programs and infrastructure in school communities across Australia. Despite the rhetoric we hear from the government, which claims that it is a state responsibility, it is important for the government to accept that it has a responsibility to assist in the education of all Australian students, rather than just emphasising in this place the importance of the independent or private school sector.

I now turn more generally to the issue of education in the Northern Territory, which perhaps mirrored the performance of Joh’s excessive governments in Queensland. From the time of self-government in 1978 until 2001, when the Labor Party was elected to government in the Northern Territory, the
government was of one political hue. Successive governments were conservative governments, Country Liberal Party governments. These governments are directly responsible for an appalling state of affairs in education in rural and remote parts of the Northern Territory, principally the education of Indigenous Territorians.

It is very hard for members of this place to understand the culpability of the Country Liberal Party in the Northern Territory—and a member of that party sits here as the member for Solomon. It is hard for them to understand the culpability of this political organisation in frustrating, handicapping and impeding the educational opportunities of people who live outside of metropolitan areas. They took deliberative policy decisions not to invest in the education of kids in the bush. It is true that up until 2001 not one Indigenous kid in the Northern Territory in his home community was able to attend year 11 or year 12 schooling. It was not until the Labor government was elected in 2001 that they were able to reallocating their resources and accept the responsibility that hitherto had been not accepted by the CLP for the education of all Territory kids, not just some. So successful were they that in 2003, primarily thanks to the efforts and the initiative of two very progressive teachers at Kalkaringi in the north-west of the Northern Territory, three students from that school became the first ever year 12 students in their remote home community to graduate with a Northern Territory certificate of education.

Mr Deputy Speaker, comprehend what I have just said: this was 2003. Understand that my electorate includes all of the Northern Territory, outside of Darwin and Palmerston, as well as Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands. Roughly 40 per cent of that population are Indigenous. The large proportion of those people live in remote parts of the community, in smaller towns—the largest of those towns being Wadeye, with something approximating 3,000 people; Maningrida, with 2,500 people; and Galiwinku, with 2,000. These are significant communities. But not even the students of these communities had access to high school.

We know that around 40 per cent of the Territory population are aged 14 or under. We have a very young population. But what we have as a result of the negligence and the deprivation that was suffered by Indigenous kids and their families in the Northern Territory for a generation—that period from 1978 to 2001—is at least a generation, possibly more, of young people who were denied an educational opportunity once they left primary school. I have estimated—I do not know what the true figure is—that somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 young Territorians still have a problem accessing educational opportunities.

I heard the member for Curtin, the Minister for Education, Science and Training, on The World Today responding to questions about Indigenous kids of the Northern Territory being able to access schools. The minister needs to comprehend the gravity of the situation and not just say, as she did on the ABC, that this is a question for the Northern Territory government—that they are prepared to work in partnership but it is the responsibility of the Northern Territory government. This problem lies directly at the feet of the conservative parties in this country who failed to address the basic human rights of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory by providing for them access to secondary education.

I have said already that in 2003, for the first ever year, 12 students in the remote communities graduated at Kalkaringi. In 2004, five students from Maningrida graduated with a Northern Territory Certificate of Education. In 2005, 25 remote students from
Kalkaringi, Maningrida, Yirrkala, Wadeye and Shepparton College on Elcho Island graduated. That figure is inclusive—25 only. This last year, 30 students, including kids from Ramingining and Millingimbi, graduated. This is evidence of the fact that an intensive effort is now being applied by the Northern Territory government to give young people these opportunities. But let us think about it; let us put it in context. Only 30 young people, in a population of 45,000 or 50,000, graduated. You don’t have to be Einstein. There is an appalling educational deficit amongst the individuals in these communities. As I have pointed out, already one generation, and possibly more, has been denied access to educational opportunities. We cannot allow it to continue.

The Northern Territory government has been diligent in putting resources towards the rollout of secondary education within its jurisdiction, including providing new secondary school facilities and upgrading existing school facilities. The government has built a number of new schools, although when you look at the figures for these new schools you see that there are not many of them. The condition of some of the schools that currently exist in the Northern Territory is absolutely appalling. A lot more needs to be done. My point is not that the Northern Territory is not making its best efforts, but that it needs a great deal more support from the federal government to achieve the required outcomes.

I visited a number of schools over the last couple of weeks. On one such visit I was accompanied by the shadow minister for Indigenous affairs. We visited an outstation community at Garrthalala, in north-eastern Arnhem Land. In this community there are two Indigenous teachers, Multhara Mununggurr and her granddaughter Lombinga Mununggurr, who are very dedicated. The teachers service seven communities. They have two groups of 20 students—one junior and one senior, with a group flying to Garrthalala on Tuesday morning and returning to their home communities on Thursday afternoon, after an intensive three-day workshop. They rotate the groups. This week it is juniors, next week it is seniors. It started in 2004—and, I say with appreciation, with some Commonwealth funding.

The program was to be run as a pilot for two years. It was extended in 2005 for three years. In 2004 it started with 18 kids from seven communities, who were chosen on the basis of their academic ability and their attendance at local schools. They went to the Northern Territory Open Education College and asked for a secondary curriculum. At the end of 2006, 13 of the 18 were still in the program. Eight completed the equivalent of year 11. Five were a couple of units short, but had genuine reasons for absence—ceremonial obligations and a whole range of other things—and the units will be completed by the middle of this year. The Northern Territory Open Education College presides over the assessments and gradings. In 2004 they had a 98 per cent attendance rate.

I want members to understand what is going on here. The current classroom used by these children is not provided by the Northern Territory. Nor is it provided by the Commonwealth government. It is provided by a service organisation from Geelong. They have one classroom. Where do these people sleep and eat? Is there a boarding facility? No, there is not a boarding facility—these young people have their swags. The kitchen facilities are effectively a sink and a couple of burners; that is about it. Under what circumstances are we expecting students to learn?

Miss Jackie Kelly—Under a Labor government.
Mr SNOWDON—You have not been listening. Had you heard what I said at the outset, you would known that for 24 years the conservative government in the Northern Territory deliberately took a decision not to put any money into these schools, and took 46 per cent of the money directed to Indigenous education’s strategic initiatives programs for its own administrative purposes. So the money was not even going to the kids. Subsequently the Labor government, recognising its responsibilities, has sought to allocate the resources that are appropriate to try to address these needs, but it does not have sufficient resources within its own control because of the deficit—

Miss Jackie Kelly—Oh!

Mr SNOWDON—We hear the groans. Let me say this to the member opposite: if your child or the children of anyone else in this place were asked to learn under those same circumstances, there would be a riot—but it passes in here with the blink of an eye because of the lack of comprehension and understanding and knowledge that exists within this place and within the wider community.

We have significant responsibilities in this place, and one of the most significant—for me, at any rate—is to ensure that every Australian child, no matter where they live, has reasonable access to educational opportunities. Those educational opportunities include not just primary school education; they include access to high school opportunities and vocational education and training opportunities. If we do not provide those opportunities, we are condemning those kids to a future of poverty and welfare dependency. Yet when we hear discussions in this place about the issue of welfare dependency, do we hear any recognition of the need to address the most fundamental issue of getting kids and communities out of welfare and into work, which is providing them with basic educational opportunities? It is to provide them with not only basic educational opportunities but an opportunity to get vocational education and training. What is the point of having young people go to a primary school, perhaps attain a reading age to a year 3 or 4 level and then get into a high school and not be able to pass the entrance exams that might exist for a VET course because they do not have the literacy and numeracy skills?

The Northern Territory government is fully cognisant of its responsibilities and is doing a great deal to try to address the situation. I noted that when the minister was on The World Today she talked about funding being made available from the Commonwealth for two schools. They are yet to be built, but potentially will be built, one hopes, on the Tiwi Islands and at Woolaning. What do we know about these two schools? We know that they are both independent schools. Whilst the Commonwealth is prepared to provide resources for the independent school sector in the Northern Territory for these schools in the bush, it is not prepared to stump up the money that is required to provide educational opportunities for people in the mainstream who go to educational institutions which are funded by the Northern Territory government.

A great deal needs to be done. I am thankful, as I said at the outset, for the money which has been made available through the program which we have been discussing this morning, but a great deal still needs to be done. If we are to achieve better outcomes then we need to work collaboratively on this. It is not an issue of partisan politics for me; it is an issue of fundamental and basic human rights and the dignity of human beings.

Miss JACKIE KELLY (Lindsay) (1.17 pm)—Following the member for Lingiari’s thorough condemnation of the Northern Ter-
ritory’s Labor government and its total lack of funding into schools, which is a basic state responsibility, I equally condemn the New South Wales state Labor government for its absolutely appalling neglect of the schools in that state. In the Sydney Morning Herald today there was mention of the release of a report by the principals of New South Wales public schools on 10 years of failed maintenance. Since the Olympic Games preparations, this state Labor government has taken money out of school maintenance to fund other things and has never put it back. This is becoming crystal clear to the voters of New South Wales in the lead-up to the election this Saturday.

From the federal level, since we have had the Investing in Our Schools Program in the electorate of Lindsay, dozens of schools in my area have got air conditioning. This is for children who have air conditioning at home and in cars and are used to air conditioned environments. I had some parents saying, ‘We didn’t have air conditioning in my day’, but for children to learn the amount that they have to learn today, air conditioning, especially in the heat of summer in Western Sydney, is critical. Being a Queenslander, Mr Deputy Speaker Scott, you will understand how schoolhouses were built back in your day. They were raised above a platform; air was allowed to flow. Today new schools are designed on the basis that they will have air conditioning. Yet the newest school in my electorate, at Surveyors Creek, was built and opened in my time as the member for Lindsay without air conditioning. Thanks to the federal government, Surveyors Creek now has air conditioning.

Other schools that have got air-conditioning under this wonderful program are the Cambridge Gardens Public School and Braddock Public School. There has been such a turnaround in education at Braddock Public School. It is an outstanding school that is doing extremely well. It has come from a level of, I think, 40 per cent of the children not age appropriately literate to the stage now where they have one child who is not age appropriate. They are doing some extraordinary work there in a very difficult environment and they are getting results. That is, again, due to our national literacy and numeracy programs where we are identifying these gaps in education. We are identifying where kids are not learning and we are doing something about it. This is something that the New South Wales government has resisted and resisted. They did not want to be a part of this. There are finally some very good results coming through, including at Cambridge Gardens Public School and Claremont Meadows.

Claremont Meadows had just opened when I first became the member for Lindsay. That was the penultimate public school built in my area. Since then, on every redistribution, my electorate has got smaller and smaller because there has been such a flux of housing coming into the area. The state government’s response to all of the housing coming into Western Sydney is not to build more schools as the housing goes in but to put demountables on existing schools. In that time, the private sector has opened school after school in my area and increased permanent classrooms and permanent building construction. The average cost of a private school in my area is around $1,500 a year. That is about $30 a week. After you have been paying for child care as a working mum, $30 a week for the private school down the road is a lot handier for you than traipsing the kids across town to the public school that is supposed to service your area. You would say, ‘For $30 a week I can send my kid here rather than go to the inconvenience of trying to trek from Claremont Meadows to Glenmore Park High School.’
That is an appalling failure by the New South Wales state government. Not only have they not maintained the existing state schools; they are not even building new ones. And when they do build new ones on the odd occasion, such as five years ago, they are not even air-conditioned—a brand new building. Morris Iemma says, ‘We’re going to give all schools a school hall.’ What do you mean? Schools don’t have a school hall? What kind of promise is that? The program that we have has provided a number of COLAs. Admittedly, there was only $150,000 over the last three or four years, but it has provided covered outdoor learning areas, which substitute for halls at these schools. It is pretty tacky when it is raining, but it is still a bit of shade from the sun, and they substitute as places at which these schools can assemble. Everyone knows school assemblies are critically important. It is the key place where you get lots of information and, by and large, at our public schools it occurs out in the weather. After 12 years—and he was there for every one of them—Morris Iemma pops out and says, ‘By the way, we’ll give schools a large enough classroom to accommodate the school.’

Air conditioning: Leonay Public School, Mulgoa Public School, Penrith High School, Penrith Public School, Penrith South Public School, Werrington Public School, York Public School and Nepean High School. So many schools have been air conditioned under this project. The other thing they have been doing is electrical upgrades. St Marys South Public School is spending the entire $150,000 on an electrical upgrade on the box outside the school just so they can have the power to run air conditioners without blowing up every computer in the school. This is a failure of the electrical infrastructure in New South Wales. Equally, in the older parts of my electorate the electrical grid has been allowed to run down in the same way that the maintenance in the schools has been allowed to run down.

In New South Wales we have seen the electricity grids, the water pipes and school maintenance—every scrap of maintenance in every area and in every department of state responsibility—being ferreted out and tunneled away. Money has been squirreled away for other purposes—goodness knows what—and we are left with a complete mess, and the federal government has to fix up the electrical grid so that a school can get air conditioning. For goodness sake! And the Labor Party have the hide to even look at amending this bill. They stick their heads up above the parapet like they have some right to have a say in this.

The government, through its good economic management, has delivered the wherewithal, the ability, to deliver programs like this. I would like to see the state government come up with it. We have already had two budgets in the red. Where are they going to find the money? Labor always runs deficits. It is just frustrating that you do so much work. It is like the household budget—occasionally you have to tell your children: ‘No, I can’t afford it. I’m sorry. But we will save up for it and it will come.’ With good economic management, things get done. Instead, we have this willy-nilly way of racing around. I would hate to think about the economic consequences of the New South Wales government’s bailing out of the cross-city tunnel fiasco. If that does not send the state broke, goodness knows what will.

The member for Lingiari talked about the right to a basic education and subsequently a vocational education. That is absolutely right—it is a state responsibility—but vocational education is something that this government has been pushing. The local member for Penrith, Karen Paluzzano—who is a Labor candidate in Saturday’s election—is put-
ting out flyers with claims about education. After 12 years of a Labor government, and there was a Labor member before that—this is what she has done for education in the Penrith area: a $3 million upgrade to Glenbrook Primary School, a new COLA for Lapstone Public School, a new toilet block for Blaxland East Public School and increased funding for community preschools. Whoop-de-doo! The federal government gave $1.8 million to the Glenbrook Public School.

In addition to that, in 1996 when we came into government, the electorate of Lindsay was getting basic recurrent grants of $1.4 million to run the schools. Today it is $45,340,000—a massive increase in recurrent funding to schools in our area. And what do you see? The state government squirreling it out to the bottom. They have not increased the operational funding for these schools in 10 years. They are still insisting that a school like Nepean High School has an operational budget of about $100,000—it has not increased—and with that they have to paint the school, recarpet the school and do everything for the school, including having excursions, buying books and running scholarships. It is an impossible situation. I congratulate Nepean High School for the wonderful work that they are doing. Four years ago, 40 per cent of the kids at Nepean High did not come back after year 10. They finished year 10 and did not return for further training. I was at a recent no-dole pledge, a signing ceremony, at Nepean High. Eighty-five per cent of Nepean High’s year 10 school leavers last year returned to the school; and, of the 15 per cent that did not, I think all of those went to further education or apprenticeships.

Speaking of apprenticeships, this government has increased the number of apprentices in my electorate. In 1996 there were 740 apprentices who could get a place and go on to vocational training. The member for Lingiari was going on about vocational training: ‘Let’s get great education at primary and high school and then get vocational education.’ Under the Labor government 760 people from my electorate had the opportunity for that. Today, 1,640 people have the opportunity to take up a trade—an increase of 222 per cent. There was a 222 per cent increase in the number of people going on to vocational education and training, and the member for Lingiari thinks Labor is great at looking after tradespeople. Give me a break!

We have seen the opening of a technical college in Western Sydney which will deliver technical training to children in years 11 and 12, and I expect to see more of those colleges opening across Western Sydney over time. You see Morris Iemma running around everywhere in this campaign. Do you know what Morris Iemma is running on in this campaign? After-hours GP clinics and trade schools! Both of those things are delivered by the federal government. It took two rounds of negotiations for the after-hours GP clinic to be delivered in the Nepean Hospital. The Morris Iemma government was not cooperative at all when we were trying to get that GP clinic in there. I was at my wit’s end and looking at private sector options in order to get that clinic opened. The difficulty was incredible. And now he runs around campaigning for Karyn Paluzzano and Diane Beamer saying, ‘Oh, after-hours GP clinics. Oh, they are charging us rent in Nepean Hospital to deliver the services.’

The other issue is trade schools. How did Morris Iemma suddenly wake up to trade schools? This government is progressive; everything we have done since 1996 has been about returning status to the trades and making tradesmen the educated people they should be. We have seen a turnaround in this university-or-bust mentality. We are seeing people take up trades with alacrity and go on
to have wonderful, successful and lucrative careers. Being the very last government to sign on for any of our incentives to increase trades training, the New South Wales government now wants to sit there and say at the coming election: ‘Oh, but aren’t we great for trades. We’re putting out trade schools.’ Save me, please!

That government has such utter disrespect for the trades. A recent election was held by one of our group training organisations which carries a lot of the apprentices for tradesmen. If you do not necessarily want to have an apprentice yourself we have group training companies that will do that for you. In order to comply with the national requirements the company had to at least offer their workers the option of moving to an AWA. So the Australian Electoral Commission held a ballot for the Neeka Group Trading Co. in New South Wales. That organisation employs approximately 330 apprentices in the field of electrics in New South Wales and the ACT. In that election campaign the ETU actually mailed out to the apprentices electrical trades propaganda against our AWAs. I hasten to add that the vote was overwhelmingly carried for the apprentices to move to the AWA because they would be so much better off on it. But the ETU had a go, as did the CEPU, the PSU, the CFMEU and the ACTU. I am being inundated with literature from these unions in their attack on me in the New South Wales state election campaign.

In any event the union mailed out information to the apprentices. It turns out that their mailing list bears an uncanny resemblance to the mailing list of the Department of Education and Training. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training is handing over to the ETU the private details of people as to what courses they are doing through various TAFEs and trade colleges. Is that a state government acting responsibly? Has the state government even bothered to look at this? Is the state government going to inquire into this and say, ‘Hey, hang on a minute, this is totally unacceptable behaviour—the ability to download that list ought to be investigated and the public servant responsible exposed’? That is the ‘respect’ the New South Wales government have for the trades. They claim they are ‘heading in the right direction’. I do not see how. They are on the way down, in the red. I do not see how you could possibly say that the New South Wales economy is heading in the right direction. Certainly the schools are not. The electrical grid is a nightmare because it cannot even support air conditioning to local schools. The water system is an absolute disaster. I do not know how that can be heading in the right direction; I cannot see any solution happening there.

It is classic member for Lingiari stuff. He gets up here and pontificates and then says, ‘We’re heading in the right direction.’ You’re looking down at your shoes! It is about getting on with the job and fixing New South Wales. We are the biggest state. We have the biggest economy. We have the most people. We were the leaders in Australia. We carry Australia. We’re it. People come from Perth or Melbourne and they say, ‘Ooh! Sydney!’ In Sydney we are not like that. It’s: ‘We’re it. We don’t have to look anywhere else. It’s all here. We’re pretty good. We’ve always been great.’ But at the moment we are not—we are being beaten by Western Australia and by Queensland. We are even seeing growth in Victoria. For goodness sake, on some of the most recent figures, Tasmania is beating us. We are ‘heading in the right direction’? Give me a break!

It is so frustrating when, with wonderful policies such as those put forward in this bill, you are trying to really make a difference and to push forward great assets to your community, to your schools and to your
young people, when you are investing in the education of those young people and when you are pushing them on to vocational education and training and delivering it in an environment in which they get employment, and you are hindered at every turn by the unions, with their backing and puppeteering of the Labor Party at the state and federal levels.

My local state member was asked: ‘You’re such a great supporter of public schools; why do your kids go to a private school?’ It is a question that embarrasses, even at the federal level, those on the other side, who will be voting on this bill later today. Their kids all go to private schools. When asked, ‘Why do your kids go to a private school?’ they answer, ‘It’s a matter of faith.’ If it is a matter of faith that a politician on a hundred grand a year can send her kid to a private school, why is it that a family, with mum at home and three kids, on $40,000 can’t send their kids to school as ‘a matter of faith’?

This is it. The Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill delivers funding into the private sector to keep it affordable for schools of faith or choice or difference. We are not all painted red. We all want something different in life, and it really helps if your school environment and your friends’ school environments reflect the values that you have at home. It is easier to raise your children if the values that you are espousing are held at school. I was at the recent opening of further buildings by this government and witnessed the tremendous work by the Muslim community at the Australian Islamic College of Sydney, and that could not have brought home to me more clearly the very different home life and values that those kids have. (Time expired)

Mr HATTON (Blaxland) (1.37 pm)—There are at least two own goals here today. The biggest own goal is the legislation before us, the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007. The Investing in Our Schools Program is a brilliant concept. I will give a tick where a tick deserves to be given and, when the Treasurer announced and outlined this program in the 2004 budget, I listened to him thinking it was pure genius. It is pure genius to go into an area where you have no control whatsoever, no legislative input and no administrative concern—government and non-government schools throughout Australia—and to use the parents and citizens organisations, or parents and friends organisations, to provide up to $150,000 worth of equipment and projects to these schools over a four-year period. This was promised by the former Minister for Education, Science and Training Brendan Nelson. To do that, I thought, was sheer political genius—to be able to cut through and deliver such a potent program. But when the government says, part way through the program, ‘The $150,000 over four years will not go to 2008 but is going to be knocked off in 2007’ and, ‘If you have not applied for and got the $150,000, although we said you could have it, your new ceiling is going to be $100,000,’ that is an own goal.

The second own goal was the member for Lindsay’s. She said: ‘I’ve got a school that needs three-phase power, Chester Hill Public School, and it won’t get it because it hasn’t yet applied for the major part of the program to supply it with three-phase power so it can run all of the school’s computers.’ That has nothing whatsoever to do with the state of the electricity system in New South Wales.

Miss Jackie Kelly—It does!

Mr HATTON—It is a question of whether you have single-phase power or three-phase power.
Miss Jackie Kelly—It sure does. Talk to some electricians!

Mr Hatton—I am sorry, Member for Lindsay, but three-phase power is needed where there is a big demand on the system. In industrial capacity areas it is normal to have three-phase power. If you are in a major commercial outlet, you go for three-phase power. If you are drawing a great deal from the grid, you need three-phase power because it is, effectively, industrial strength. It has nothing to do with the grid itself, it is how you are accessing and using the power.

At Chester Hill Public School they will not get three-phase power. They will not be able to run their air-conditioning systems.

Miss Jackie Kelly—No!

Mr Hatton—They have a problem. They cannot effectively run them unless they have the capacity to deliver industrial strength power. That is an own goal—not understanding the difference between single-phase power and three-phase power. The bigger own goal in this is that the government has a brilliant program that cuts through but, firstly it knocks it off early and, secondly, it betrays the absolute trust that every principal in every public school and every private school throughout Australia has in a Commonwealth government that promised a program over four years providing schools with up to $150,000. Halfway through the program, the government says, ‘Sorry, we’re going to knock off one-third of the money.’

Gordon Gekko, in the 1980s film Wall Street, had a simple motto: ‘greed is good’. Any school principal who followed Gordon Gekko’s fundamental principle and who said: ‘There might be a problem here, so I’ll put in for the total $150,000 right now; I’ll go for the lot in rounds 1 and 2; I’ll go for the money and be able to produce the box as a result,’ you would have to say was far-sighted. Those principals would have to run in and grab the money before the rest of the principals got any. They were assured by Brendan Nelson, when he was minister, that there would be up to $150,000 for every government school in Australia and up to $75,000 for every non-government school.

This is crazy stuff. This is a government that has gone to la la land. Why would a government, unless it were really stupid, cut a potent program that cut across every corner of Australia—marginal, non-marginal, Labor, Liberal, National Party, Independent; you name it? The program cut through an area where the government had no native responsibility but where it was able to do something for people that is palpable, that is real, that they can see, that is concrete. The government can provide air conditioning in schools, it can upgrade computer technology in a school, it can provide shade covering—and it can provide maximum political effect for itself with a relatively small amount of expenditure.

It should be a no-brainer that the government continue with this program, but what have the government done? They have said, ‘We can’t do it.’ In February Minister Bishop announced: ‘The government is going to provide another $181 million’—that is what this bill gives us—and $127 million of that is extra money to enable this program to go through in 2007, with a smaller amount for the private schools. I’m glad to announce that, but a lot of schools in the past have not applied for the full amount of money—they have only applied for a certain amount—so we are going to change the cap so that you can only apply for $100,000; you can’t apply for $150,000.’ They changed the rules. But Minister Bishop said, ‘No, of course we’re not changing the rules.’

It was never intended that it would be the case that that would happen. They have an-
nounced that it is going to stop earlier. They said:

To give all state government schools the opportunity to access the new funding—

and let me tell you that they have all had the opportunity to access it right from the start—
schools that have already received funding at or above $100,000 will not be eligible to apply in 2007.

What did Minister Nelson say? He said something different. But Minister Bishop said:

It is a competitive grants process based on need, and in rounds 1, 2 and 3 schools could apply for up to a limit of $150,000. It was never intended, nor was there funding for, all schools to receive $150,000 ...

We have not only got an own goal here; we have got a con job. It means that, if the current minister is correct, there never was any intention in the first place of coughing up the total amount of money. If that is the case, the government has told a lie to every school principal in Australia. That is not a very wise thing to do. What did the former minister say? During the 2004 election campaign he said:

It is anticipated that the maximum amount an individual school community will receive is $150,000 over the next four years ...

That is pretty clear. The department also issued advice at the time saying that schools could apply for several projects up to the $150,000 limit. It has come as a surprise to all of those schools to realise now that, although the limit was there, the reality is that whatever you intended to do is not going to happen.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will not be surprised—and I was not surprised—that I have received a number of calls from school principals in my electorate. I have spoken to those principals this morning and in the last week. When the principal of Condell Park Primary School rang me to tell me that this was on the government website, I said: ‘That can’t be real. They couldn’t be so stupid that they would give with one hand and take away with the other.’ She said, ‘Well, it’s true.’ So I went and had a look at it. It is absolutely true. It was Alex Mandell of Condell Park primary that I was talking to. I said, ‘What is the impact for you at Condell Park primary?’ The impact there is that those things that they have already done will go ahead—that is fine. They already have them and they are in the bag. But they will not be able to do all of the rest of what they wanted to do. That is significant.

At Condell Park primary, which is currently in my electorate but which will become part of the electorate of Banks, they wanted to do a technology upgrade. The first grant was for $40,000 and that is all they have taken so far. They had the expectation that they could apply for $110,000. They can now apply for $60,000. The principal at Condell Park Public School is not a happy camper.

Who else is affected by this? Audrey McCallum, the principal of Bankstown West, is affected. They are lucky. So far they have had $50,000 from the first round and then $82,000 from the second round, so they have a total of $132,000. The expectation was that they could front up for another $18,000 for play equipment. They can no longer do that. What did they get? They got a COLA—a covered outdoor learning area—and shade cloth over the play area. They got a new hall courtesy of the state government. They have things that need to be done in the school and they are on a list as one out of seven in the area to get a security fence to improve conditions in the school. It is just around the corner from my mum’s. I know the school well. This is a school that needs help. The help that it has it appreciates—the principal, the
parents and the kids do. Why would you break a fundamental promise and a fundamental contractual agreement unless you are just plain stupid? It is really crazy stuff.

We also have Chester Hill Public School. I presented a flag to the principal, Phil Van de Wyck, and the school, and then we had a tour of the school. It is a large property. They have been able to do a great deal so far. But I discussed this situation and the fact that it had changed and I had spoken to the other principals. The principal said: ‘We’ve got a problem. We need three-phase power for the school. We have air-conditioners but we have been told that we cannot run them because they draw too much power.’ So here is a school that has air-conditioning equipment but will never be able to use it unless they can raise the money. The expectation that they would be able to get it was because of the rest of this funding—up to $150,000 that Minister Nelson promised. That is another own goal by the government.

Mr Hunt—Isn’t schools funding supposed to be the responsibility of the state government?

Mr HATTON—No, this is a federal government program, Parliamentary Secretary. It is a federal government program—

Mr Hunt interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—The parliamentary secretary is reminded not to interject and get into trouble.

Mr HATTON—and every member of the government who has spoken has, as they do on virtually all legislation, just tried to throw it back to the states. You are in government federally. This is a federal government and you should take responsibility for that.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The honourable member will direct his remarks through the chair and ignore the interjections.

Mr HATTON—I am not referring to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but to the member for Flinders. This government should govern. If they do something that is brilliant—and they get a tick from me on it—why wouldn’t they go ahead, run with it and go forward? They say: ‘We need to save the money; there was never any intention,’ despite what Minister Nelson said. They really need to say there was never going to be enough money to do it.

I also spoke to Jenni Wilkins, the principal of Birrong Girls High School. I asked her what the impact was for her in relation to this. What they have been able to do already is upgrade the toilets in the school and also upgrade the home economics area to a hospitality grade kitchen. That is significant for that school and it has provided a great facility. The girls will be able to do a great deal more. They are also looking to improve the hall stage lighting. What else did they want to do? They decided that they would do things in small steps.

This is not a Gordon Gekko principal. This is not a Gordon Gekko school. This is not someone who decided to go in and grab the lot, as virtually all of the school principals did. If you make a compact, if the hand is out there and you shake, if they say that it is up to $150,000 over a four-year program, you do not expect to have to count your fingers at the end of it to see how many are gone. Who have you shaken hands with—the devil or the mafia? No, this is the federal government of Australia, intervening in an area to provide a significant new program.

But what has happened to Birrong? Here is the email I got:

Dear Michael

On behalf of the community of Birrong Girls High School I wish to register our disappointment at the Federal government’s recent changes to the Investing in Our Schools Programme. We are one
of those schools adversely affected by the changes to the Programme. We have a measured and strategic approach to applying for and spend-
ing the programme’s funds that involves commu-
nity consultation ... so far we have received $91,758 for three very successful projects.

This year we had planned to make a submission for an additional $50,000 to $60,000 to convert an old science demonstration room into a much needed new technology learning space.

Our regret is that we believed that each school was entitled to a total of $150,000 over three years and that we didn’t grab the cash early in the process. We were surprised that the goal posts were shifted in the middle of the game!

We hope that you pursue this issue with the Min-
ister for the Department of Education, Science and Training on our behalf.

And, as promised, I am. What a bunch of dummies this government is, to take a pro-
gram that was so singularly politically potent and that did so much good Australia-wide and to say, ‘We can’t do it.’

I have been around for a while. I have a bit of a memory with regard to these things, and that extends to the fact that, if you run a program for a period of time, you can work out ways to fund it. It does not all have to be done from within a program. The former minister said that the Investing in Our Schools Program had up to $150,000—not up to $100,000; up to $150,000—for every government school in Australia and up to $75,000 for every non-government school. What are all of the people who are relying on that expectation effectively told by the new minister? ‘Well, it’s a hundred grand, not 150, and we never intended to give you all the money anyway.’

This is a falsehood. Somewhere in the process a decision has been made that they will cut it because they have to put money into other areas. Mr Deputy Speaker, I re-
member—as you will and as every person in the gallery will—that in the six months be-
fore the 2004 election the Howard govern-
ment spent $21 billion of our money buying their way into every interest group they could find to buy their way back for the next election. That is a lot of money. Mr Deputy Speaker, I have news for you; I have news for the parliamentary secretary; I have news for everyone, including the former Deputy Prime Minister, who is in the gallery—Tim, good to see you. This time around it is not $21 billion; this time around it is double or nothing: $40 billion has already been flagged. This is the Prime Minister’s new approach when things get really desperate: ‘We’ll play double or nothing.’

It is not just my money. It is not just yours. Have a look at every individual per-
son in the gallery, which is filling up for question time. That is $40 billion of our money—everybody in this room; at the table or in their seats—for the federal coalition to buy its way back. In that situation wouldn’t you think that a program as successful, and indeed as politically smart, as Investing in Our Schools could get part of the $40 bil-
lion? Wouldn’t you think that they might just think this was a really dumb thing to do? It was a compact, a shake of the hand, with every individual principal in Australia in every school. It was Minister Nelson and not this minister. Wouldn’t you think that that shake of the hand would be rewarded with trust, that it would not be rewarded with hav-
ing to count your fingers after you have shaken that hand? Wouldn’t you think that every principal in Australia could trust this government?

This government has just kicked an enor-
uous own goal with regard to Investing in Our Schools. I do not want to see it back come the end of the year, but I think every school in Australia wants to be assured that the stupidity of knocking off this amount of money is undone. I am sure the Prime Minis-
ter and the minister for education will be
contacted by the principals council. Indeed, every principal in Australia should say, ‘You shouldn’t knock off the extra $50,000.’ This is a crazy own goal. (Time expired)

Mr RICHARDSON (Kingston) (1.57 pm)—I rise today in support of the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007. I do so because of the incredible impact that programs like the federal government’s Investing in Our Schools Program are having in my electorate of Kingston. Federal Labor opposition members lose sight of the simple fact that this Howard government funding process was a competitive one, where the maximum funds would go to the neediest schools. Secondly, it has been made available only because of the Howard government’s excellent economic management.

This bill seeks to maintain the Australian government’s commitment to Australian education and to providing schools with the tools and infrastructure they require to provide a quality education to our children. One of the programs extended in this bill is the Investing in Our Schools Program. I cannot speak highly enough of this program. The program was introduced because of the failure of the state governments to live up to their education responsibilities, especially when it came to the provision of infrastructure projects in schools. As usual, the federal government stepped in to pick up the slack.

In my electorate the program has been embraced with open arms. There has been a great deal of appreciation from students, teachers and parent governing bodies alike. I would like to bring to the attention of the House the story of Flaxmill Primary School. They took the opportunity to apply for funding to install reverse-cycle air conditioning in their classrooms. When I first found out about this project, I was appalled at the fact that in this day and age the South Australian Labor government, which should be flush with funds after their GST windfall, were expecting students to learn and teachers to teach in classrooms that were not air conditioned in summer or heated in winter.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 2 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 97. The debate may be resumed at a later hour and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.

MINISTERIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Mr HOWARD (Bennelong—Prime Minister) (2.00 pm)—On 18 March 2007 I announced a number of changes to the ministry. The swearing in took place this morning. For the information of honourable members, I table an updated list of the full ministry.

*The document read as follows—*
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<th>TITLE</th>
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<td>Minister for Ageing</td>
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<td>The Hon Teresa Gambaro MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Human Services</td>
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Each box represents a portfolio. Cabinet Ministers are shown in bold type. As a general rule, there is one department in each portfolio. Except for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the title of each department reflects that of the portfolio minister. There is also a Department of Veterans’ Affairs in the Defence portfolio. Two Parliamentary Secretaries have been appointed as Assistant Ministers.
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Broadband

Mr Rudd (2.00 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Does the Prime Minister agree with the findings from the government’s own Broadband Advisory Group that: ...

next generation broadband could produce economic benefits of $12-30 billion per annum to Australia.

Prime Minister, given that high-speed broadband is needed to lift Australia’s productivity and economic growth beyond the mining boom, why has the government failed after so many years to deliver an effective national broadband network?

Mr Howard—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. There is no argument that broadband is an important element of Australia’s economic infrastructure. As to the suggestion that the government has not pursued the right strategy in relation to broadband, can I remind the House and, in particular, the Leader of the Opposition that Australia has the second fastest take-up rate of broadband in the OECD. Close to 90 per cent of Australian households and small businesses can already access fast multimegabit broadband speeds of between two megabits per second and eight megabits per second and we will continue to pursue policies that increase that.

The Leader of the Opposition has announced something in relation to this earlier today. I understand that this is essentially the same proposal as outlined by the member for Brand when he led the opposition, but what has been revealed today is that Labor intends to raid the Future Fund in order to pay for this. One of the great economic challenges Australia faces is the ageing of her population. On first blush, this appears to be an economically irresponsible way of funding a program and it also appears to be short-sighted. It has no regard for the future and no regard for the fact that this country faces none is greater than the ageing of her population. It is an undeniable fact that the demographic trends of this country are going to mean that in 30 or 40 years time there will be fewer people in the workforce supporting a larger number of retired people. In those circumstances, raiding the Future Fund is recklessly indifferent to the welfare of future generations of Australians.

Economy

Mr Keenan (2.03 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Would the Treasurer inform the House of the importance of paying off government debt and planning Australia’s long-term response to the ageing of the population? Are there any threats to this plan?

Mr Costello—I thank the honourable member for Stirling for his question. As members of this House know, when this government was elected the Commonwealth government owed $96 billion worth of debt. Try as it might the Australian Labor Party had no plan whatsoever to free Australia from that crushing burden of debt. It sold off Qantas, it sold off the Commonwealth Bank and spent every last dollar but it still could not balance its budget and it borrowed in addition.

This government through tireless hard work has now cleared Australia of $96 billion worth of debt. We have given an oppor-
tunity to future generations that will not have to pay the Labor Party debt. They will not have to pay back the capital and they will not have to service the interest. This government has gone further. We have established the Future Fund to try and begin to prepare Australia for the great economic challenge of the future—the ageing of the population. That Future Fund is well on its way to meeting the Commonwealth liability, currently $101 billion in respect of superannuation.

All of this is under threat in what I regard as the most irresponsible economic announcement of the last 11 years made today by Labor. The Labor Party has announced that, if it gets elected, it is going to raid the Future Fund, steal from the future and make sure that Australia, when it comes to face the ageing of the population, is not provisioned properly, so that in a shabby little deal this Leader of the Opposition—who never had the wit to establish a Future Fund—can try and buy some votes. This is shameful economic vandalism. Let me make this point: to steal from the Future Fund as the Leader of the Opposition wants to do, he will have to change legislation and he will have to defy the guardians. Let me tell you this: once that Future Fund is open, it is open for all purposes. The only losers will be future generations of Australians.

The IMF in its most recent statement on Australia said that the establishment of the Future Fund means that Australia is well placed to face the challenge of the ageing population. The raiding of the Future Fund means that Australia will not be placed in a way which can face the ageing of the population.

In case you had any doubt as to how bad this fund was, up until now the Labor Party has promised that the Future Fund would always be a locked box. In fact, the Labor Party has complained that this box is not locked enough. The member for Lilley, in a doorstop interview on 15 August 2005, said this:

... we have no guarantee this will be a Future Fund which is a locked box. It will be another pork-barrelling institution. We’ve seen from the past that these funds have been raided for base National Party ... interests ...

... ... ...

If you’re going to have a Future Fund it has to be a locked box.

Mr Speaker, let me tell you what it is going to be raided for. It is going to be raided for the base political instincts of the Labor Party; that is what it is going to be raided for. We had an announcement today that this Leader of the Opposition is going to raid the Future Fund for $2 billion in the first instalment. Once the legislation is changed so the fund can be raided, it can be raided for all purposes—and the hunger of the Labor Party for its base political instincts will not stop at $2 billion.

The member for Lilley has suffered a humiliating defeat today. After complaining that he wanted the Future Fund to be more of a locked box, his leader has gone on a smash-and-grab raid, smashed the glass, taken the key, opened the fund and announced a plan to spend the money. This is absolutely irresponsible. Labor never had the wit to pay off debt, Labor never had the wit to fund superannuation, Labor never had an idea about establishing a future fund and now Labor wants to steal from the future of Australians. If people want to know why they can’t have Labor entrusted with money, this proves it. You cannot trust the Labor Party with money.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER (2.09 pm)—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon the Hon. Tim Fischer, a former member and Deputy Prime Minister, and this
is his first question time of this century. On behalf of the House, I extend to him a very warm welcome.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Future Fund

Mr TANNER (2.09 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. It follows on from the Treasurer’s claim in his previous answer that the Telstra shares held in the Future Fund are protected from political interference.

Mr Costello interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Treasurer is not being asked it.

Mr Costello interjecting—

Mr TANNER—Is it really? We’ll find out about that, won’t we?

The SPEAKER—Order!

Mr Costello interjecting—

Mr TANNER—If you would just be quiet for a minute we’ll find out about it.

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Melbourne will start his question again.

Mr Costello interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Treasurer! The member for Melbourne will start his question again.

Mr TANNER—Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer him to the Treasurer’s claim that Telstra shares held in the Future Fund are protected from political interference. Can the Prime Minister confirm that section 8 of part 3 of schedule 1 of his own Future Fund legislation empowers the government to direct the Future Fund regarding its handling of Telstra shares, including to deal with these shares non-commercially, in contrast to the provisions that apply with respect to the balance of the Future Fund? If the government is so concerned to ensure that the Future Fund holding of Telstra shares is protected from political interference, why did you insert this provision in the legislation? If Australia’s future is not about broadband, what is it about?

Mr HOWARD—Overwhelmingly Australia’s future is about giving future generations a fair go. How can anybody who sits opposite claim that they worry about future generations of Australians if they are prepared to load an additional burden onto the backs of future generations? We are an ageing population. We cannot avoid that reality. No amount of quotation of legislation will alter the fact that what Labor intends to do is to conduct a smash-and-grab raid on the Future Fund. Money and assets that have been quarantined to provide for future liabilities are going to be accessed to pay for a current policy. What that in plain, simple Australian English says is you are going to rob future generations to further nourish the current generation. I do not think that is fair.

We hear a lot from the Australian Labor Party about fairness. I think we ought to be fair to our children and grandchildren and give them a capacity to meet the rising obligation of an ageing population. This is a problem all around the world. Fortunately, Australia is not as poorly served in this regard as other countries. But we do have an ageing population and, unless we lay aside savings and unless we lock them up and unless we cross our hearts and promise not to touch them, we are going to burden our children and our grandchildren with increasing obligations.

Labor have fallen at the first hurdle of economic responsibility. They had an opportunity—and we have heard all of this trumpeting from the Leader of the Opposition, and indeed from the member for Melbourne, about how economically responsible they are going to be—but what Labor have done is
they have fallen at the first hurdle. They could not resist it. They have reverted to type. They have gone back to their old habits.

We quarantined this money. We set aside a fund built out of the budget surpluses that Labor opposed us accumulating. We have all of these surpluses that went into the Future Fund and the proceeds of the sale of Telstra, and the member for Melbourne has got the nerve to talk about the sale of Telstra! He opposed the sale of Telstra. The Labor Party opposed every step of the way the sale of Telstra, and now they have got the nerve to ask us questions about Telstra. There is a very simple issue of intergenerational equity involved in this. Which side of politics is in favour of giving our children and grandchildren a fair go into the future? It is the Liberal and National parties side. Which side of politics is in favour of spending for today and not caring at all about the future generations of this country?

Ms Owens interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order!

Ms Owens interjecting—

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

Mr HOWARD—This is the first instalment of Labor’s pattern of betrayal of the interests of future generations of Australians.

Workplace Relations

Mr BARRESI (2.14 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. Would the Prime Minister inform the House how strong protections against wildcat industrial action have assisted in strengthening the Australian economy? Is he aware of proposals to wind back these protections? How might this harm Australian workers and their wages?

Mr HOWARD—The member for Deakin raises a very important issue and it goes directly to one of the significant achievements of this government, and that is to have presided over a dramatic fall in the number of industrial disputes in this country. It is worth reminding the House that data released by the ABS last week highlights that in 2006 the industrial disputation rate fell to 14.9 working days lost per 1,000 employees. This is the lowest annual rate of disputation since figures were first compiled in 1913—that is, the year before the outbreak of World War I. By contrast, when Labor was last in office there was an average rate of 193 working days lost.

It is the current policy of the Australian Labor Party to do a number of things that threaten this wonderful achievement of industrial peace. It comes from a party that has always said it was better at achieving industrial peace although the record says we have done much more and have been more successful. What Labor intends to do in order to shatter this record of industrial peace is, firstly, remove the protections against secondary boycotts that are enshrined in the Trade Practices Act; secondly, scrap the ‘secret ballot before strikes’ provisions of the Work Choices legislation; and, finally, abolish the building and construction legislation, and the commission, which has undeniably cleaned up the building industry in Australia. Over the last year, there is no industry that has seen a more spectacular fall in the number of days lost through strikes than the building and construction industry. Talk to any employer in that industry—and indeed, talk to any union official in that industry—and they will acknowledge that this is a direct result of the government’s legislation. Yet Labor wants to do away with that and, presumably, bring back the anarchy that was particularly a feature of major construction sites in Perth and Melbourne.

There is a further dimension to this, and that is that the New South Wales Greens—who have not only declared a preference deal
with Labor for the upcoming New South Wales election but are also busily negotiating a preference deal with the Australian Labor Party for the upcoming federal election—have announced that they want to take this exercise a step further. Yesterday they said they wanted to abolish industrial torts in New South Wales. In other words, they want to take away the common-law right of a company that was damaged by union action—a common-law right that was enshrined in the famous and meritorious Dollar Sweets case, in which my distinguished colleague the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party and Treasurer was involved. That industrial tort power, the inherent common-law right to sue if you are damaged, was upheld in the Dollar Sweets case, and they want to abolish that.

And if the Greens proposals were adopted at a federal level, who knows? When Labor negotiates preference deals with the Greens, the interests of the people are always second. We know what happened in 2004. We know that the present leader's predecessor sold out those timber workers in Tasmania to try and get some Greens preferences in seats like Grayndler, Kingsford Smith and all those other inner seats in the cities. So what I predict is that part of the preference deal will be to go even further than they have gone. I ask the simple question: in light of the magnificent era of industrial harmony that has been ushered in under the government of the last 11 years, why on earth would you take action to demolish that? Why would you abolish the secondary boycott provisions of the Trade Practices Act? Why would you want to scrap the secret ballot? Why would you want to bring back anarchy in the building and construction industry? Why would you want to get in bed with the Greens and, in the process, sell out not only the interests of workers but also the interests of industrial harmony in this country?

**DISTINGUISHED VISITORS**

The SPEAKER (2.19 pm)—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon members of a parliamentary delegation from the Republic of Indonesia. On behalf of the House, I extend to them a very warm welcome.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

**QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE**

**Broadband**

Mr TANNER (2.20 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Paying attention? Good.

Government members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Members on my right! The member for Melbourne has the call.

Mr TANNER—They are touchy today! Is the Prime Minister aware that News Ltd chair Rupert Murdoch has described Australia's broadband infrastructure as a disgrace, that PBL chair James Packer has described it as embarrassing and that Fairfax CEO David Kirk has described Australia's broadband as 'fraudband'? Prime Minister, why is it that the leaders of Australia's three major media companies can see what you cannot?

Mr HOWARD—I am aware of the views of Mr Murdoch and Mr Walker, and I notice that Mr Walker is now being pleaded in aid of the Australian Labor Party. A couple of weeks ago there was something infamous about having a—I wonder if anyone in the Labor Party had a telephone conversation with Mr Walker to ascertain his view—

Mr Tanner—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order with regard to the naming of individuals. The individual I named from Fairfax was David Kirk, not Ron Walker.

The SPEAKER—The member for Melbourne will resume his seat. That is not a
point of order. The Prime Minister is in order and the Prime Minister will be heard.

Mr HOWARD—Mr Speaker, I am aware of the views of Mr Kirk and Mr Walker and Mr Murdoch and Mr Packer. They have all expressed views on broadband. I certainly share the view that broadband is a very important part of Australia’s infrastructure future. But the issue in debate—I notice the member for Melbourne has moved off the Future Fund—and our quarrel with the Labor Party on this is that the Labor Party intend to raid the Future Fund. That is what they are going to do. They said this fund was not sufficiently locked up. I remind the member for Melbourne that, if Telstra shares are sold by the Future Fund, the money goes into the fund and therefore it is subject to the same restrictions and should be treated in the same way as all the other resources that are in the fund. But there is a very simple and fundamental issue involved here: the Future Fund is designed to relieve future generations from a greater financial burden than would otherwise be the case. That is what it is designed to do.

Mr Tanner—Broadband is irrelevant?

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Melbourne has asked his question.

Mr HOWARD—We have enormous Commonwealth superannuation liabilities accruing, and we have put this money aside, no thanks to the Labor Party, in order to look after those liabilities. What the Labor Party intends to do is to rob the savings set aside for our children and grandchildren in order to fund a current policy proposal. I have no doubt, and the Treasurer has no doubt, that this is the first of many. This is the first instalment. I understand that at the news conference today the third question asked by journalists was: how many more policy proposals are going to be funded by raiding the Future Fund?

I say to the Labor Party: I am interested in the views of Mr Murdoch, Mr Packer, Mr Kirk and Mr Walker. I sometimes agree with them and I sometimes do not. But in the end I am more interested in the wellbeing of my children and grandchildren—and those who sit opposite are more interested in the wellbeing of their children and grandchildren—than in the views of other people, much and all as I respect the contribution that Mr Murdoch has made to this country and other countries and the contribution that James Packer and his late father have made. But in the end my obligation is to future generations, not to individuals in the current generation.

Aviation

Mr HARTSUYKER (2.24 pm)—My question is addressed to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services. Would the Deputy Prime Minister inform the House how government policy is encouraging investment and creating jobs? How is increased aviation competition benefiting the travelling public and Australia’s tourism industry?

Mr VAILE—I thank the member for Cowper for his question and recognise the very keen interest that the member for Cowper has in the tourism industry and particularly the inbound tourism industry in Australia and our capacity in policy settings to ensure that that continues to grow, not to mention our pursuit of competition in the aviation sector, which has delivered far greater passenger movements through the port of Coffs Harbour, represented by the member for Cowper.

Today was quite a significant day in terms of establishing greater competition in the international aviation sector out of Australia. Last year, the former Minister for Transport and Regional Services announced that we were going to allocate air traffic rights to
Virgin airlines to fly the Pacific route from the east coast of Australia to the west coast of the United States. They took that commitment knowing that they were going to have to make a significant investment in equipment. Today I witnessed the signing of the contract between Virgin Blue and the Boeing Company to purchase six new Boeing 777 aircraft, worth $2.2 billion. This is a significant indication of the confidence that a majority Australian owned company—Virgin Blue—has in the Australian economy and in the tourism industry here to take on the challenge of providing greater competition across the Pacific route.

Virgin have indicated they will also lease a seventh aircraft and have options for an additional six beyond those six that they signed a contract for today. This means that as soon as those aircraft are available they will be put into service and there will be extra capacity available across the Pacific route. There will be extra competition for the three airlines that are already flying the Pacific route between Australia and the United States.

It is interesting to note also that the company’s indications are that their moving into the international aviation sector will generate in excess of 1,100 new jobs in the Australian economy, which is incredibly important. The investment is important, the competition is important, but the jobs are very, very important. Of course, they will be created in Australia. In servicing this very important aviation sector, providing more competition, greater opportunity and more competitive prices for tourists to travel into Australia, there will be obviously be a flow-on effect, but it also means that there will be 1,100 new jobs in the Australian economy.

In answer to the member’s question: a policy setting that we put in place last year, when we took the decision that there should be an opportunity for another Australian flag carrier on this route rather than a foreign carrier—that commitment that we gave to the Australian aviation industry—was paid back in spades today by a $2.2 billion commitment by Virgin to investing in equipment that is going to take up this opportunity. This is a clear example of government policy creating and establishing and providing succour to greater competition but also creating the opportunity for more Australian jobs and keeping the Australian economy strong.

**Broadband**

Mr ALBANESE (2.28 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Can the Prime Minister confirm that, three years after he announced the $50 million metropolitan broadband black spots program, only $200,000 has been spent on broadband but $1.3 million has been spent on the bureaucrats administering the program? Can the Prime Minister confirm that the remaining $48 million left in this program has now been rebadged as the government’s recently announced Broadband Guarantee? Prime Minister, what is the point of announcing all these programs if none of the money is actually spent?

Mr HOWARD—I cannot, without getting advice, answer that question. I will get advice and give the answer as soon as I can.

**Economy**

Dr SOUTHCOTT (2.29 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. What is the government’s policy on wages and how to improve living standards? Are there any other policies?

Mr McMullan—I have a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is out of order for a question to ask for a description of government policy.
The SPEAKER—I have listened carefully to the question. I think the question is actually in order.

Mr COSTELLO—I can tell the House pretty simply where the Liberal and National parties stand: we want more people in work and we want them in work at higher wages consistent with low inflation and a growing Australian economy. Here is the evidence. Since this government was elected, there have been two million new jobs created in Australia. Since this government was elected real wages in Australia—that is, over and above inflation—have grown 19.8 per cent. But it was not always that way in Australia. When the Labor Party was in office not only did people lose their jobs but people lost wages. Now remember this fact: under the coalition, real wages have gone up 19.8 per cent; under the previous Labor government, when Labor was in office, real wages did not go up at all—real wages declined by 1.8 per cent. The shadow Treasurer, the honourable member for Swan, was asked about this recently—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr Tanner interjecting—

Mr COSTELLO—For Lilley, sorry. Thank you for correcting me, Member for Melbourne. You would not want this bullet to go off on anyone other than him, would you?

Mr Tanner—You are on your game today.

Mr COSTELLO—Just as the rifle is coming down the front bench, you will help me sight it, will you? Thank you very much. And keep asking questions on the Future Fund. That helps us sight that pretty well, too. When the honourable member for Lilley was interviewed by Fran Kelly on 8 March 2007, she said this:

... Treasurer Peter Costello made the point yesterday that under the current government real wages have increased 20 per cent in this country. He compares it to under Labor they went down 1.8 per cent ...

Answer:

... Look, there was wage restraint under a Labor government to make this economy internationally competitive ...

So there you have it. Under Labor declining wages was a good thing. It was a deliberate policy. That was their policy to make Australia internationally competitive. We had another idea about making Australia internationally competitive. How is this for an idea: balance the budget, repay $96 billion of debt, have an independent monetary policy, reform the waterfront, engage in industrial relations reform and set up a Future Fund? Then maybe the workers can get high wages and not have to suffer under real wage declines.

The recent tactic from the Leader of the Opposition has been to say his policy is coalition policy. He supports balanced budgets now, he supports paying off debt and he supports an independent monetary policy. Whatever the coalition is for, the Leader of the Opposition would now have you believe that he endorses it. But the first hurdle: can he stand up and can he protect the Future Fund? Mr Speaker, he should not turn his back at this point and engage in conversation with the member for Lilley, as if he is not interested, because the Leader of the Opposition ought to get interested in some economic policy. I call on him to turn around and to listen to some economic policy. Ah, Mr Speaker, let us pretend to have a conversation about the Future Fund now! Then we will turn and pretend to have a conversation about education policy! The people of Australia need to know this: the Leader of the Opposition studiously turns his back in the parliament on a daily basis. Hooray! The Leader of the Opposition has just turned around to face the music. The people of Australia ought to know this: the Leader of the
Opposition, if he wants to become Prime Minister, has got to face challenges front on and not with his back.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

The Speaker—Order! The Treasurer will resume his seat.

Mr Brendan O’Connor interjecting—

The Speaker—Order! The member for Gorton will remove himself under standing order 94(a).

The member for Gorton then left the chamber.

Mr Gavan O’Connor interjecting—

The Speaker—And so will the member for Corio. The member for Corio will remove himself under standing order 94(a).

The member for Corio then left the chamber.

The Speaker—The level of interjections is far too high.

Mr Costello—This is the biggest thing you can do when you are facing the future for Australia. When you know our greatest economic challenge of the future is going to be the ageing of the population, you ought to face up to it and you ought to do something about it. You ought to free future generations from the obligations of today. Give the young people a chance. Start providing for them. Do not raid the Future Fund and steal from the future of Australia.

Broadband

Dr Emerson (2.36 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Is the Prime Minister aware of recent research commissioned by the Victorian government that found that 135,000 Victorian homes and nine per cent of the state’s businesses do not even have access to fixed line broadband? Why has the Prime Minister failed to deliver an effective broadband network to Australia’s hardworking small business community?

Mr Howard—I am aware of a lot of research, and I am not disputing that there may have been research commissioned by the Victorian government, but the facts, as I am advised in relation to broadband, are that Australia does have the second fastest take-up rate in the OECD and that close to 90 per cent of Australian households and small businesses can already access fast, multimegabyte broadband speeds.

An honourable member—Megabit.

Mr Howard—Yes, megabit. That is not really the big point at issue today. There is probably a view on both sides of politics that more continues to be required in relation to broadband, but it is how you provide it that matters and how you pay for it. What has been opened up today is an enormous gap between the commitment of the coalition to Australia’s future and the desire of the Labor Party to spend the savings of future generations—

Mr Wilkie interjecting—

The Speaker—The member for Swan is warned!

Mr Howard—to finance the consumption of the current generation. There is something called intergenerational equity. I have just been in Japan, where it is predicted that by the year 2050 42 per cent of the population will be over the age of 65 and that there will be a situation where the burden of those in the workforce caring for those who are out of the workforce will be on a ratio of 1.2 to one. That is dramatically worse than the situation in this country. Ours is a lesser problem, but it is still a problem. The reason why we paid off debt and the reason why I very strongly supported the proposal of the Treasurer and the finance minister to have a Future Fund was that I wanted to set aside money that would not be touched by any government to meet the liabilities of the budget in decades into the future because I
did not want to put the sort of burden on the backs of future generations of Australians that would otherwise be the case if we did not make that provision.

The debate here is about the future; it is not about the present. The future is very important. There are many people in older generations who worry about how their children are going to cope with an increasingly ageing population. It is the biggest single economic challenge that this country has. The way you care for it is to set aside money out of today's surpluses to provide for tomorrow's liabilities. In plain language, Australians call it putting money aside for a rainy day—and we have not had too many of those recently; we pray there will be a lot more. The greatest obligation we have collectively in today's generation, a very rich and fortunate generation, is to harvest some of that richness and some of that good fortune and lay it aside for the future.

I thought we had the support of the Labor Party on this. I thought they believed in caring for the future. But what they have done today is to sell out the interests of future generations. This is the tip of the iceberg. Once you have started with the Future Fund in relation to broadband, once you have tasted it, you will find it irresistible. You will be seduced into doing it for something else. This is the old Labor back in business: they raid the savings for future generations in order to pay for current consumption. We are against that. We want to make prudent provision for future generations. That is why we established the Future Fund.

**Iraq**

Mr SOMLYAY (2.41 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Would the minister explain the importance of Australia's commitment in Iraq and its significant contribution to defeating terrorism? Would the minister explain the consequences of alternative policies?

Mr DOWNER—Firstly, can I thank the honourable member for Fairfax for his question and for his interest. After four years, I think we can look back with pride and say that we made a contribution to bringing down a vicious dictator—a man who tortured and murdered his people, who used chemical weapons against his own people; a man who invaded neighbouring countries, who started a war with Iran in which a million people were killed. We are proud that we contributed to destroying that regime. Secondly, we are proud that we made a contribution to the start of a new democracy. The people of Iraq have voted three times. The last time, 12 million of those people went out and voted for a democratically elected parliament which has elected a government.

On this side of the House, we are champions of democracy. We believe in democracy and we believe in it with a great deal of passion. We are very proud that we have made a contribution. We accept that the situation in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad and Al Anbar province, and the four provinces in and around Baghdad, is very difficult. People are being attacked by terrorists, by al-Qaeda in Iraq. The suicide bombings are mainly conducted by those people. There have been battles between death squads and militias in and around Baghdad as well, and this has been a very great threat to democracy in Iraq. And there have been attempts, particularly by al-Qaeda in Iraq, to foment civil war.

It is the view of this government that these people must be defeated. The Baghdad security plan is unfolding and we will have to wait and see how successful that will be. We are not making any false claims. At this stage, there are some early and encouraging signs. We are hopeful about the future. We are not certain, but we happen to think it is a
good idea to support the Baghdad security plan. The Labor Party think it should be opposed. They oppose the Baghdad security plan. They said it was wrong. It was not wrong. It is worth trying to defeat the terrorists in and around Baghdad. I must say I have a great deal of admiration for those who have the courage to take up the fight to those terrorists, and I do not have any admiration for people who think the solution is to run away.

I will give the House an example. Some terrorists abducted two children in a car. They drove this car full of bombs into a crowded area. They left the children in the car because the children gave them the opportunity to get the car through security—security people did not think a car with children would be a problem. The terrorists ran away from the car, they detonated the bombs and they killed the children in an attempt to kill other people as well. These are not the sorts of people that we on this side of the House would ever want to give in to. We would never want to see people as depraved as that victorious.

What about the opposition? It seems to me that the opposition says it has an exit strategy. Its exit strategy can be summed up in one word and that word is ‘surrender’. That is the opposition’s exit strategy. Our exit strategy is conditions based. When the Iraqi security forces can sustain their democracy, that is the time to leave. If they cannot, and you leave then, it is time to surrender. It is as simple as that.

Let me make the point that when in this country we debate the issue of Iraq people need to answer this question: do we want democracy to succeed in Iraq or do we not? On this side of the House we do want it to succeed. Will the Labor Party ever stand up and say it wants democracy to succeed in Iraq? I have not heard it yet. Do we want the insurgents and the terrorists to win in Iraq—

Mr Fitzgibbon—They’ll be having a good look for you, Alex.

The SPEAKER—The member for Hunter!

Mr Downer—or do we want the Iraqi army and the coalition—Australians and Americans—to win? I would have thought the answer to that question was that we wanted the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police and coalition forces to win. On this side of the House we want them to win.

Mr Fitzgibbon—The defence minister said there is no victory in Iraq.

The SPEAKER—The member for Hunter is warned!

Mr Downer—we do not want the insurgents and the terrorists to win; we are against that. We are against those people. Funnily enough, we want our side to win. People are rightly appalled at the killing that has been taking place in Iraq. We are all appalled at that. But do we want it to get worse or do we want it to get better? Do we want to see a decline in the killing or do we want to see it get worse? Those who argue for a precipitate withdrawal from Iraq are arguing in effect for an environment where many more people will be killed, where Darfur will look, as I have said before, like a Sunday afternoon picnic. That is what will happen with a so-called exit strategy which is premature and which leaves the country in a state of chaos.

At the end of the day, on this side of the House we know this is a tough issue to argue; we accept that. But we also know that to allow terrorists to win, to allow the insurgents to win, would be not just a catastrophe for the Iraqis and the Middle East, as former Prime Minister of Spain Aznar said overnight, but a disaster for security in our own
region because of the inspiration such a defeat would give to terrorists in South-East Asia. It is as simple as that. I think that as a country and as part of the international community we have to have the courage to win this war, not just to say our exit strategy is surrender.

Iraq

Mr Rudd (2.48 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister and is also on Iraq. It refers to the question I asked him yesterday on contingency plans for the phased withdrawal of Australian troops. Can the Prime Minister confirm the statement made by the foreign minister on the ABC this morning, when asked about contingency plans for Iraq, that ‘all militaries make contingency plans’? Prime Minister, what is Australia’s contingency plan for the phased withdrawal of troops from Iraq?

Mr Howard—I can inform the Leader of the Opposition that none of our contingencies is surrender. I can certainly inform him of that. The answer I gave to the question yesterday, as I indicated, was in relation to the American position. So far as Australia is concerned, the government has not made any requests of the ADF to have a contingency plan to withdraw because it is our policy to maintain the current commitment, but I am quite certain that the ADF would have the operational capacity to handle any contingency.

Workplace Relations

Mr McArthur (2.50 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. Would the minister inform the House of the current level of workplace disputation in Australia? Is the minister aware of any threats to this historically low level of disputation, and what is the government’s response?

Mr Hockey—I thank the member for Corangamite for the question and note that in 1996 the unemployment rate in his electorate was 8.6 per cent. It is now 4.7 per cent, which is a good news story. That sort of result comes from a partnership that has been forged between Australian workers, Australian business and the Australian government. We are prepared to make the hard decisions in relation to government policy which help to create an environment in which business can employ more people. That is why we undertake reforms such as taxation reform, which the Labor Party opposed; industrial relations reform, which the Labor Party opposed; independent monetary policy, which the Labor Party opposed; paying off $96 billion of government debt, which the Labor Party opposed; getting the budget into surplus, which the Labor Party opposed; and Welfare to Work, which the Labor Party opposed. One reason the Labor Party oppose our tough economic decisions is that they take a popular approach and another is that they are in the pocket of the union movement.

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics data on industrial disputes, as the Prime Minister stated, indicate that in 2006 the level of strike action in Australia was at its lowest level since 1913. In fact, industrial disputes under the Labor Party in government were 13 times higher than today and the ABS now, in some states, has strike action at such a low level that it will not identify where there are strikes because it might identify the companies.

That is what old Labor is about: giving unfettered access to the workplace to the union bosses. We have seen a classic example of that in Queensland. I saw these quite horrific ads in the Courier Mail about SJ Electric. One says:

Attention all electrical workers: SJ Electric is attacking your wages and working conditions. Electrical workers on the Bundamba water treatment plant site are being paid substandard wages.
I thought: ‘Hang on! They are saying that the water treatment plant workers are being paid substandard wages by SJ Electric.’ There was another ad by the union movement—the same union movement that has put aside $30 million for the next federal election—and here in my hand is a full-page ad from the Courier Mail. Unbelievable—using the sparkies’ money to run these political campaigns! I said to myself: ‘What is the true story? They are saying that the workers are worse off at SJ Electrics than they would be in a deal constructed by the ETU.’

So we had a look at a few of the ETU negotiated union collective agreements. We found that, in comparison with SJ Electric, the average increase in wages under the SJ Electric greenfields agreement was $110 a week over the union collective agreement. So in fact the workers were far better off—more than $110 a week better off—under the SJ Electric greenfields agreement than they were under a union negotiated collective agreement. And yet I thought: ‘The ETU wouldn’t lie in these ads! The union bosses wouldn’t tell a fib! They wouldn’t try and mislead the people of Queensland in relation to wages, surely!’

The point is this: as Greg Combet said, in 2006—and, gee, you are going to hear these words a lot between now and the end of the year:

I recall we used to run the country and it would not be a bad thing if we did again.

The Labor Party is about the interests of the union bosses. The coalition is about the interests of the workers. We want the workers to have jobs. We want the workers to have careers. And we want the workers to have better pay.

**Ministerial Responsibility**

Ms GILLARD (2.55 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Ageing. I refer the minister to his statement this morning in relation to the investigation into Senator Santoro:

We have absolutely no reason to believe that there’s anything untoward ...

Given that the minister was only sworn in a couple of hours ago, how come he has already made up his mind?

Mr PYNE—I thank the honourable member for her question to me on my inaugural question time as Minister for Ageing. I can answer that by saying that, because I knew that I was being appointed on Sunday, I obviously took the time to do a bit of briefing, a bit of work, before this morning’s swearing in—as you would expect any new minister to do. And what I said is true.

Ms Gillard interjecting—

Ms Macklin interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The deputy leader has asked her question.

Mr PYNE—We have no reason to believe or suspect that there is anything untoward in the last round of aged-care approvals. However we are conducting a review which has entailed interviewing the officials concerned—

Ms Macklin—What is the point? You’ve already made up your mind.

Mr PYNE—having the documents sent from Brisbane to be reviewed again—

Ms Macklin—You’ve already made up your mind.

The SPEAKER—The member for Jagajaga is warned!

Mr PYNE—and, if they turn up any information that will be of any interest to the Prime Minister, you can be certain I will tell him about it. I am surprised to get this question because the member for Lilley, the member for Griffith and the member for Rankin might remember that, when I was chairman of the Joint Standing Committee on
Electoral Matters inquiry into electoral rorts in Queensland, I conducted a pretty close scrutiny of their activities. So you can be confident that, if there is anything at all wrong, I will get to the bottom of it.

**Dental Health**

**Mr BARTLETT** (2.57 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Would the minister update the House on Commonwealth support for oral health around Australia and in New South Wales? Is the minister aware of any alternative policies, and what is the government’s response?

**Mr ABBOTT**—It is an honour to follow the new Minister for Ageing. The Leader of the Opposition will have to be a lot better at scripting muck-raking questions if he is going to trip up this good new minister.

I do thank the member for Macquarie for his question and I can inform him that this government supports oral health in a number of ways: first of all, through PBS subsidy of prescriptions written by dentists; secondly, through modest—and I do stress ‘modest’—Medicare support for dental treatment under team care plans prepared by GPs; thirdly, through increasing dental training places from 221 commencements in 1995 to 312 commencements in 2005, to a planned 561 commencements in 2010. But, most importantly, the government supports oral health through subsidising the 90 per cent of dental services that take place in the private sector to the tune of about $400 million a year.

I certainly regret, as all members of this House do, that there are an estimated 650,000 people on public dental waiting lists. But the blame lies fairly and squarely at the feet of the state Labor governments, which have consistently failed to deliver timely public dental treatment. Members opposite from the great state of New South Wales should be ashamed that there are 210,000 people on New South Wales public dental waiting lists because the Carr-Iemma government has consistently short-changed dental services in that state.

At the Westmead dental hospital, patients with no teeth of their own and with no false teeth are supposed to be treated within three months. That is bad enough, but thanks to the neglect of the Carr-Iemma government those poor people with no teeth whatsoever are now waiting nearly 2½ years for public dental treatment. Patients in severe pain are supposed to be treated within five days. That is bad enough, but thanks to the mismanagement of the Carr-Iemma government those patients now have to wait in severe pain for up to three weeks before they get public dental treatment.

It is very clear where the blame should lie: the blame should lie with the consistent underfunding and the consistent short-changing of the Carr-Iemma government, which spends 25 per cent less on public dentistry per head than the next stingiest state in Australia.

**Mr Crean interjecting**—

**The SPEAKER**—The member for Hotham is warned!

**Mr ABBOTT**—I have to say that New South Wales is not the only state where Labor governments run public dentistry badly. I regret to inform the House that in the mid-1990s, after the Leader of the Opposition thought he had been the real Premier of Queensland for about five years, public dental waiting lists in Queensland were more than three years, despite the Keating dental scheme. Queenslanders have 50 per cent worse dental decay than other Australians because when this bloke opposite reckoned he was the real Premier of Queensland he refused to fluoridate the water supplies of Queensland.
Mr Speaker, I ask you: is this miserable result due to the fact that he is not a socialist or is it due to the fact that he was a Christian socialist? I put this question, Mr Speaker, through you: if this bloke opposite is such a genius—if he is the genius he thinks he is—why couldn’t he run health services in Queensland? The real question for the people of Australia is: why would you trust Labor to run the country when you cannot trust them to run the states? People are concluding pretty fast that you will not trust this guy with Medicare. You will not let him do to Medicare what he did to the health services of Queensland.

Ministerial Responsibility

Ms GILLARD (3.02 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Ageing and refers to his last answer. Will the minister now table the terms of reference for the review into Senator Santoro that he spoke about?

Mr PYNE—I thank the Deputy Leader of the Opposition for her question. I can assure her and the House that the Department of Health and Ageing and I are conducting the review in an entirely appropriate fashion.

Fiji

Mrs MAY (3.03 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Would the minister update the House on Australia’s role in coordinating the international response to the current government in Fiji?

Mr DOWNER—I thank the honourable member for her question and say that the government was deeply concerned and disappointed, as I have said before, by the coup that took place in Fiji. We have on many occasions condemned the action of the Fiji military. Last Friday, 16 March, the foreign affairs ministers of all 16 Pacific Island Forum countries met in Vanuatu to discuss a report which was produced by an eminent persons group, also established by forum foreign affairs ministers at the meeting in Sydney in December. This report by the eminent persons group not only condemned the Fiji military for an illegal and unconstitutional act but also put forward a road map for the restoration of democracy. I am glad to say that ministers at this meeting in Vanuatu affirmed that the interim government should commit to a firm timetable for a national election within the next 18 to 24 months, if not sooner. Only a rapid return to democracy and the rule of law will restore political credibility and also, importantly, the investor confidence that Fiji requires.

I made the point at the meeting that, if the Fiji military agree to a credible road map for the restoration of democracy, Australia can help. For example, the military say that there needs to be a census in Fiji. A census actually is overdue, and we could certainly help bring forward that census and help with some of the work to ensure that it not only is a credible census but can happen in a relatively short period of time. The military say there need to be new electoral rolls. On the back of the census, that would not be a complex job. They also say there needs to be a reapportioning of electoral boundaries. There needs to be an independent electoral commission that does that. I do not think we would expect the commander of the military to draw the electoral boundaries for some reason or other; I think it should be done by an independent electoral commission. We can help with all those things.

Australia will help with the restoration of democracy in Fiji. The eminent persons group is now charged with once more engaging with the Fiji military and seeing, on the back of the offers that countries like Australia and New Zealand will make to assist with the restoration of democracy, how quickly that can be done.

CHAMBER
It is important it is done quickly because Fiji is on the slide economically. This coup has done enormous damage to Fiji’s economy. It was already reasonably fragile, but Fiji is now in great difficulty. Its GDP is declining. It needs democracy restored and it needs it restored soon. It is important that the military leadership in Fiji listen to the voices of the Pacific, which unanimously want a rapid restoration of democracy.

Ministerial Responsibility

Ms GILLARD (3.06 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I can see he is happy about that. I refer the Prime Minister to his confirmation that in December last year his office instructed Senator Santoro to omit the phrase ‘share trading’ from his register of interests. Did Senator Santoro or the Prime Minister’s office initiate the discussion about the description of Senator Santoro’s share activity?

Mr HOWARD—I thought I indicated yesterday—but, if I did not, I do so today—that the contact was initiated by my office. It was initiated by Mr Tony Nutt, then serving as principal private secretary, now my chief of staff. It was initiated because, on examination of the assets on the register of pecuniary interests put there by the senator, it was clear, given the relatively small number of share investments referred to in the return, that they did not amount to trading and that therefore trading was a misdescription. That is the reason why Mr Nutt made the inquiry. In fact, I am surprised that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition is querying this. I would have thought that evidence that this transpired indicated that a very careful watch was being kept, which is absolutely contrary—

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Order!

Mr HOWARD—Anyway, let me continue with the narrative. Mr Nutt got in touch with the senator’s office and said: ‘Look, I’ve had a look at the senator’s return, and it’s obvious from the number of investments listed that that doesn’t amount to trading. It is a misdescription and you shouldn’t give the description of “trading” to something that manifestly does not amount to trading.’ And he also, so I am told, said to his equivalent in the senator’s office, to whom he spoke, ‘You’d better check with the minister as to whether the return accurately depicts the situation, and if it does then it seems to me’—and I think this was a reasonable conclusion drawn by Mr Nutt, doing his job—‘that the description “trading” is inaccurate because of the limited number of investments and that another description would be more appropriate.’ I think Mr Nutt was doing his job. When he looked at the return—and this does rather illustrate the point—as it then was, it did not show the 72 trades.

I know that the dark, sinister mind of the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in these matters will be saying that somehow or other we knew. The truth, let me say it again for the record, is we did not know about those 72 investments until a few days ago. I think what Mr Nutt did back in December was entirely appropriate. And I think the fact that he sought and obtained through the then minister’s chief of staff or relevant adviser an assurance that the register accurately depicted the situation is far from being evidence of some cover-up, conspiracy or failure by my office—quite the reverse.

Education

Mr RICHARDSON (3.10 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Education, Science and Training. Does the Australian government support incentives and rewards for teachers? Is the minister satisfied that the existing system is fair to Australia’s best teachers? Are there any alterna-
tive policies, and what is the government’s response to them?

Ms JULIE BISHOP—I thank the member for Kingston for his question and acknowledge the huge support that he gives to all schools in his electorate. The Howard government believe that a high-quality teaching workforce equals higher standards in our schools. We believe that teachers should be rewarded and recognised for their performance and their professionalism. One significant way in which the Australian government is rewarding and recognising teachers is through the National Awards for Quality Schooling. For the fifth year these awards have been presented in Parliament House, and today I announced over $1 million in funding, for teachers and principals and schools, to recognise excellence in teaching and performance. I know the member for Kingston will be delighted that a school in his electorate, Seaford 6-12, were awarded the inaugural Medal of Distinction for the work that they are doing in raising standards in their school. I want to congratulate Seaford 6-12 on that outstanding performance.

What needs to happen, though, is for the state governments to complement this recognition of teacher performance. Currently, as is self-evident, state governments employ the majority of teachers in this country through state government schools. The current system is not ensuring that we can attract the best and brightest into the teaching profession and retain them. Currently there are rigid pay structures and inflexibility in the system that is working against people being attracted to teaching and people staying in the teaching profession. So we believe state governments should follow the lead of independent schools and introduce an element of performance pay in the terms and conditions of teachers’ salaries. This flexibility and the recognition of performance would ensure the ability to attract bright young people into teaching and indeed retain older teachers, who I am afraid are leaving the profession because of a lack of incentive in the system.

I was asked about alternative policies. The Australian government will continue to press the state governments to introduce performance pay; we will continue to show leadership in that regard. I notice that the Labor Party have said that they support, in principle, performance pay. But what we know about the Labor Party is that they will say one thing publicly, to curry favour with the public, but then say another thing behind the scenes. They will not be able to deliver performance pay for teachers because the education unions are against it and the Labor Party are beholden to the education unions in this country. We had an example yesterday when the Leader of the Opposition said that the Latham schools hit list was over. That had been a Labor policy for decades—to take money away from Catholic and independent schools. So the Leader of the Opposition comes out and says, ‘We’ve got rid of the hit list.’ Yet what do we read in the Age newspaper? The old union hacks that make up the Labor Party are still committed to the politics of envy and driving a wedge between government and non-government schools. The fact is that the Labor Party have no credibility on education reform because they cannot and will not stand up to the education unions.

Education

Mr STEPHEN SMITH (3.15 pm)—My question is also to the Minister for Education, Science and Training. I refer to the minister’s proposal for so-called performance based pay for teachers listed by the minister for consideration at the April meeting of Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers. What additional Commonwealth funds will the government provide to support the minister’s proposal?
Ms JULIE BISHOP—The Australian government has put on the agenda for the next education ministers meeting an item for performance pay. We will be discussing with the education ministers how they can incorporate an element of performance pay in their arrangements with teachers and to follow the lead of the independent schools.

The Australian government currently provides $33 billion to schools across Australia. What is proposed over the next funding agreement is that there will be an additional $9 billion, so the Australian government’s commitment will be some $42 billion. Nine billion dollars is a lot of money to use to encourage state governments to introduce performance pay for teachers so that we can attract and retain the best and brightest in the teaching profession.

Asylum Seekers

Mr ENTSCH (3.16 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. Would the minister inform the House of the circumstances of the Sri Lankans who recently attempted to illegally enter Australia and the means by which they attempted to do so? Is the minister aware of any alternative policies? What is the government’s response?

Mr ANDREWS—I thank the member for Leichhardt for his question and I can inform him that 83 Sri Lankans were caught by the Royal Australian Navy in international waters attempting to illegally reach Christmas Island. The engine of the vessel upon which they were travelling had been sabotaged twice. On the first occasion the Navy was able to repair the damage but on the second occasion they were not able to do so. Some of the members of the group had spent time in Malaysia and Indonesia before boarding a people smuggler’s vessel for the voyage to Australia. I am advised that there is no evidence that by those who spent time in Malaysia any attempt was made to access the international protection system. A number attempted to do so in Indonesia and, of those that did, most did not await the outcome of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees assessment.

So let us get this absolutely clear. This was a package deal. These people paid the people smugglers up to $US10,000 to be transported from Sri Lanka to Australia. These are international criminal networks that operate on a high-profit basis and show no concern or care for the people they smuggle or the lives they endanger. The trade of people smuggling is odious, it is dangerous, it is repugnant and it is illegal, and it should be seen that way. The Australian government has done, and will continue to do, all in its power to prevent and deter the perpetrators of people-smuggling activity. We are determined to protect the borders of Australia and to maintain the integrity of the immigration system.

I am asked by the member for Leichhardt whether there are any alternative policies. There is an alternative policy: essentially to run up the white flag. The opposition spokesman on immigration, the member for Watson, has demonstrated that nothing has changed so far as the Australian Labor Party is concerned. He said, firstly, that the Sri Lankans should have been processed on Christmas Island and, secondly, that if any of the Sri Lankans are given refugee status then they should be let into Australia automatically. That would be no more than a promotional tool for the people smugglers to use in their marketing programs. This is a business, an odious business but nonetheless a sophisticated and profitable business for those who are engaged in people smuggling. Left to Labor, the Labor Party would give a green light to people smuggling. We know that the people smugglers will seek to continue their activities. The Australian people can be as-
sured that this government will do everything it can to discourage them and close them down. On the other hand, under Labor the success of people smuggling is assured.

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

DOCUENTS

Mr McGauran (Gippsland—Deputy Leader of the House) (3.20 pm)—Documents are tabled as listed in the schedule circulated to honourable members. Details of the documents will be recorded in the Votes and Proceedings and I move:

That the House take note of the following documents:

National Health and Medical Research Council—Strategic plans for 2007-09.


Debate (on motion by Mr Albanese) adjourned.

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Broadband

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

The Government’s failure to deliver highspeed broadband services for Australian businesses and consumers

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

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

Mr Tanner (Melbourne) (3.21 pm)—There can be no bigger, no greater emblem of just how tired and out of ideas, how bereft of initiative the Howard government has become in its now 12th year in office in this country than the appalling state of broadband infrastructure and services that Australian businesses and consumers have to tolerate. While the rest of the world is streaking ahead and moving into ever faster speeds, ever more accessible and ever cheaper systems, we in Australia are still crawling along in the kilobits lane. Not too many other countries now talk about kilobits, but we are still in the kilobits lane when it comes to broadband.

There are many Australians, and not just people living in very remote isolated areas, who cannot get broadband at all. They simply do not have the capacity to access the service, let alone access a fast, reliable broadband service of the kind that in many other developed countries is increasingly taken for granted as a routine part of the services that all businesses and all families require to go about their daily lives and their businesses. Many people and many businesses literally have to fight to get access to broadband, and when they do—if they do—they are often paying prices that are way beyond the kinds of prices that are taken for granted in many other developed countries around the world, particularly in northern America and Europe.

Elsewhere, in many countries now, broadband is a service that is broadly like the telephone or electricity. It is effectively universally available, it is relatively inexpensive and it is taken for granted as being a standard service that governments either provide or ensure is provided. And it is provided at serious speeds and at modest and falling prices. The rest of the developed world is on the information superhighway; we are still cranking up the old T-model Ford on the goat track. We are still cranking it up in the kilobits lane, trying to get some degree of connection that at least gives people some links to the wider outside world.
Over 11 years and more the Howard government has had one idea in telecommunications. As in *Yes, Minister*, the government is like the minister with one idea. Guess what that idea was? It was: sell Telstra. That is the one idea the conservatives have had. All they have managed to do with respect to broadband over that time is roll out endless pork-barrel programs and endless mountains of taxpayers' money that in many cases are just fuelling marginal seat campaigns and not delivering serious broadband for the Australian consumer and the Australian business.

Broadband Connect is the latest version of that and we have now got large numbers of regional businesses complaining that they have had the plug pulled from underneath them in that program. We have had the Auditor-General analyse the infamous Networking the Nation program—hundreds of millions of dollars. The conclusion? We cannot say whether any public benefit has been delivered because there were no benchmarks, no targets and no capacity to determine whether this was to the benefit of the public.

We are now left in the situation where we have broadband gridlock in this country. Because of the obsession with selling Telstra, the government has ended up with a gridlock. Telstra refuses to invest unless the government gives it a regulatory regime which entrenches its monopoly power, and the government is unable to move on either front. The end result is gridlock; the end result is that many Australians simply cannot get broadband services.

On a very generous benchmark, Australia is 17th in the developed world in access to broadband and 25th in the developed world in internet bandwidth. The Prime Minister claimed today that we have the second fastest rate of take-up at the moment. He very carefully avoided saying where we are on the ladder of internet bandwidth or broadband access. We have a fast rate of take-up because we are coming from a very low base and because the measure he is using is so generous—it is a kilobits measure—that it is easy for us to look good. The reality of course is very different.

This matters a lot. It matters in the big picture sense for the future of Australia and our economy and it matters in the small picture sense for individual small businesses and for Australian families. Our performance in productivity in this country in recent years has been very ordinary. Our productivity relative to that of the United States reached a peak of about 86 per cent in the late 1990s, largely on the back of the reforms of the Hawke and Keating governments. We have slipped back from 86 per cent to 79 per cent. Serious commentators like the ANZ Bank senior economist Saul Eslake suspect that a significant component of that deterioration is due to the lack of broadband. Typically, American businesses, large and small, have much better access to much higher speed broadband than Australia. The gap in productivity between us and the United States is widening because of our inferior broadband access.

Broadband is the road and rail system of the 21st century. It is crucial not just to businesses that are in the high-tech world, the computer world or the internet; it is crucial to all businesses. It is becoming a standard tool of business activity like the telephone and the typewriter. It is crucial to all kinds of businesses. I found this out some years ago when I visited, of all things, a small gourmet sausage factory in Perth that was threatened with going out of business because it could not get broadband and deal electronically with its customers on the eastern seaboard. That was a serious threat to its existence. I have been in small country towns in Northern Tasmania meeting with small businesses like optometrists, auto-electricians and real estate agents—hardly right in the high-tech
who are all complaining about the lack of broadband access in their community.

Recently I was in the electorate of Bowman and encountered the fact that small businesses in an industrial park were refused broadband access by Telstra and were told that the exchange was full—‘Sorry, no more broadband. Can’t get it.’ They had to wind up a political campaign with their local state MP and their Labor candidate for Bowman, Jason Young, in order to get Telstra to back down. That, in this day and age, is the equivalent of businesses having to run a small political campaign in their local area to get the electricity put on. It is absolutely ludicrous, but that is the situation that prevails in Australia today.

This is also of crucial importance to our children and to the future of our education system. When my oldest daughter is with me every second weekend she is doing homework from her government school and it is assumed that she will have access to the internet to do that homework. Almost by definition, the question of how fast speeds are of fundamental importance to her ability to do that. These things are now widespread, uniform and universal requirements, and yet we are still stuck cranking up the old T-model Ford on the goat track.

That is why Labor are going to act. We are going to build for Australia’s future. We are going to invest up to $4.7 billion that is held in existing telecommunications investments. What we are proposing to do is to take two existing telecommunications investments owned by the Commonwealth in the Communications Fund and some of the shares in Telstra. We are going to dedicate that to investing in building a new network with speeds of a minimum of 12 megabits per second, much higher in many cases, and with coverage of 98 per cent of the Australian population in a rollout that occurs within five years. We will do this through a partnership with the private sector on a broadly fifty-fifty basis to insert the commercial disciplines, the market disciplines, to be allied with the wider public interest and to give open access to all telecommunications service providers to ensure genuine competition. This will provide the genuine productivity jolt that the Australian economy requires. It will give small businesses access to the 21st century tools for doing business and it will bring Australia into the modern telecommunications era.

Part of this decision on behalf of our party involves making a hard choice, a hard decision, to accept defeat on the question of Telstra public ownership. That for me—as with many people in the Labor Party who have campaigned long and hard, unlike the gutless wimps in the National Party, to keep Telstra in public ownership—is a hard choice. I do not back away from that. It is something that is a very difficult thing for us to do but we are committed to the future. We are committed to building for the future, not trying to refight the battles of the past. We have fought that battle; we have lost. Telstra is now only 17 per cent publicly owned and there is every chance that by the time of the election it will be substantially less publicly owned than it is now.

Rather than moving those shares over after November 2008 and removing the ban on the Future Fund selling down, rather than having those shares moved over to passive investments in Coles, Woolworths, Qantas or BHP, we are going to have them in an active investment. This will deliver high-speed broadband accessible and available to virtually all Australians to build the economy for the future and to deliver more economic growth, higher productivity and higher tax revenue to sustain us into the future. These are all things that are critical to the interests
of our children and the long-term interests of the nation.

We do not support public ownership of Telstra out of theology. We supported public ownership of Telstra for two key reasons. The first was to ensure that we did not have Telstra’s monopoly power—it is still nearly two-thirds of the entire sector and has controlled until now the dominant infrastructure—in private hands. The second was to support public ownership of Telstra to ensure that services in regional Australia were maintained, that there was a good, decent standard of service in the bush, to enable all Australians to get basic telecommunications services of a high standard. They are crucial issues for us but the key thing to understand is that with this proposal to build a new network, the resolution of those issues increasingly is going to be within this new network, not within ownership of Telstra.

We pursue the issues; we pursue the merits of the case, the objectives of the Labor Party, and where they take us now is that—having lost the debate, lost the fight about public ownership of Telstra—we are committed to ensuring that we are going to invest these public resources to deliver on these issues for people in the future. So some of the remaining Telstra shares will be invested in a joint venture to create a new network that will shift the Australian economy into the 21st century.

The government claimed in question time today and at other times that we are raiding the Future Fund, the bear in the honey pot—all of the florid rhetoric of the B-grade actor otherwise known as the Treasurer, tripping over his own rhetoric. Apparently, this is now the most economically irresponsible position the Labor Party have taken. It seems that Work Choices is no longer a big issue for the government and our opposition to Work Choices has now moved into second place. The proposal to take a pretty small proportion of shares that we said should never be in the Future Fund and that we always opposed being there to finance the building of a broadband network for the future of this country apparently is now the most economically irresponsible thing, according to the government, that Labor have ever stood for.

The true story is that we never supported the sale of Telstra and we never supported those shares going into the Future Fund. The government has a provision in its own legislation which enables it to deal with these shares in a separate way from the way that it is required to manage the rest of the Future Fund. The rest of the Future Fund supposedly is at arm’s length; the fund makes the decisions about how to invest, when to sell and what to buy. But in the case of Telstra shares there is a specific clause in the legislation that is designed to give the government the power to do literally whatever it likes, including to direct the fund to deal with those shares in a non-commercial way. If the government reckons that what we are doing is wrong, why did it insert that provision in the legislation? Why did it do that? If it is serious about protecting Telstra shares held in the Future Fund from political interference, as it describes it, why did it put that provision there?

There is no question that Labor making the call that the battle about public ownership of Telstra is over is a hard decision for us. We are committed to making the hard decisions that are necessary for this country’s future. Where that requires us to move on from a battle that we have fought and lost, so be it, because the future of this country, our economy and our children is now going to be very substantially influenced by our ability to provide the 21st century telecommunications network that will enable all businesses, large and small, to compete on equal terms
with the rest of the world and enable our children to get the kind of education that they need and deserve.

The Prime Minister and the Howard government have run their race. They represent the past; they represent amongst other things an enduring legacy of incompetence and neglect when it comes to broadband and telecommunications infrastructure and services in this country. The Prime Minister just does not get it. He is still adapting to the crystal set. He is still recovering from the introduction of the mobile phone and the fax machine and he really has not discovered email, so he has no idea what broadband really means, how crucial it is to the productivity of Australian small businesses, to the education opportunities of Australian children and to Australian families. They are fiddling; they are neglecting the future of our country. We will invest because they have run their race. (Time expired)

Mr McGauran (Gippsland—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (3.36 pm)—This is an enormously important matters of public importance debate. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the government’s policies and any alternatives that the opposition might proffer as to broadband services throughout Australia. The common ground for all members of this parliament is that there is a need for equitable access to broadband infrastructure across Australia and that it is critical to Australia’s economic, social and cultural prosperity. But there the commonality of interests ends, because it is the allegation, or charge, of the opposition that—if I may paraphrase it for them—firstly, the government has neglected the rollout of broadband and, secondly, the opposition’s proposal would overcome that problem and correct that failing. On both contentions the government fiercely disagrees.

I am glad the opposition is coming to the issue of broadband. The simple fact is the government has been onto it for many years, so much so that we have already spent close to a billion dollars on Broadband Connect and extensions and rollouts. The government is making a targeted investment where it is most needed, through the $1.1 billion Connect Australia package. As part of the Connect Australia package, the government will shortly announce the winning bidders for upfront funding of $600 million to build new large-scale broadband infrastructure in regional areas. So our policies and our funding are continuing on, and while it would be mean spirited of me to suggest that opposition members are Johnny-come-latelys, others who are more objective and distant from the debate may well characterise them as that. Nonetheless, I welcome their conversion to the importance of broadband and welcome the fact that they have finally brought the matter, after the coalition’s some 11 years in government, into the parliamentary debating chamber.

Mr Albanese interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Barresi)—Order! The member for Melbourne was heard in silence and so will the minister.

Mr McGauran—On top of that massive investment in broadband, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Coonan, recently announced a further $162½ million for the Australian Broadband Guarantee, a guarantee that every Australian can access an affordable broadband service regardless of where they live. The government will also invest for their future through the $2 billion Communications Fund, with a substantial income stream coming online from the fund by mid-2008. The government will continue to provide leadership with regard to shaping Australia’s
broadband future. It will foster investment confidence through a stable yet responsive regulatory environment, through targeted investment to areas of market failure and by ensuring there are incentives to invest in next generation broadband infrastructure.

We have a comprehensive, integrated and targeted policy and approach to broadband—and it is working. It is working extremely well. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in September last year Australia had 3.9 million broadband subscribers. Around a third of all Australian homes have broadband. The residential take-up of broadband increased by 63 per cent in regional areas and by 41 per cent in metropolitan areas in the year to September 2006. A major factor in broadband take-up is price. Australia is internationally competitive on broadband pricing. A 2006 United Kingdom report ranked Australian residential broadband plans as cheaper than those of South Korea and the United States—often held up as world benchmarks with regard to, firstly, the availability of broadband and, secondly, its affordability.

Speed is essential to broadband if it is to achieve our hopes and ambitions for it. Almost 90 per cent of Australian households are connected to exchanges providing speeds of between two megabits per second and eight megabits per second, which provides bandwidth to download movies, conduct videoconferencing, play games, teleconference and undertake everyday internet and email use. Nearly 50 per cent of the population can access even higher speeds of between 12 and 20 megabits per second from ADSL2+ broadband pay TV cable networks. Fixed wireless networks provide speeds of up to two megabits per second to almost 6½ million premises in Australia, including around 800,000 that cannot access ADSL broadband. There are now four third-generation mobile phone networks operating in Australia, all of which offer broadband services. Since March 2005 the number of broadband subscribers on 1½ megabits per second speed connections or greater has doubled, to 1.1 million. Small businesses, which we heard something about in question time, are taking advantage of the faster speeds. Almost one in five online small businesses use connections of two megabits per second or greater.

So the government’s investment is paying off, and it has been especially targeted to the regional, remote and isolated parts of Australia. This is not a government, let alone a government policy, only for urban Australia, unlike the Labor Party’s newly announced proposal—I will not dignify or glorify it with the title of ‘policy’—which is substantially lacking in a number of areas. But we will have time in the very near future to carefully—and constructively, I hasten to add—examine this piece of paper that has been launched with some aplomb today.

We have invested in providing subsidised broadband to regional areas since 2005. There is especially, as I have mentioned, that $162½ million to support the Australian Broadband Guarantee, which is the latest instalment. That guarantee will fill in the remaining black spots in metropolitan, outer metropolitan and regional and remote Australia—in fact wherever these black spots occur. If required, further funding will flow from investment of the government’s $2 billion infrastructure fund. The next stage of the broadband story in Australia is to provide scaleable and sustainable next-generation investment in rural and regional Australia. That is why the $600 million is available to allow the rollout of a new open access network.
has a couple of faults. Firstly, there is its funding, in that $2.7 billion towards the cost of this government owned broadband network will come from the Future Fund—set aside by the coalition government for future generations, given our ageing population. Interestingly, the Labor Party will now sell the remaining Telstra shares. They are now going to accept the privatisation of Telstra. On every other government reform—in every aspect of fiscal discipline and of course in relation to industrial relations and tax reform—the Labor Party have opposed us. They always oppose us on every aspect. Everything we have ever put up in 11 years they have opposed but as soon as it has passed through the parliament they have adopted it, despite their opposition, and—more than that—promoted it as part of their economic management proposals or strategies for the future.

Honestly, I do not know how some of them can look at themselves in the mirror. For instance, as recently as 20 November last year, a bit over three months ago, the member for Melbourne, who led this debate and has supported the latest proposal for broadband from the Labor Party, said:

A Beazley Labor Government will not sell any more Government-owned Telstra shares, retaining the current stake in the company and providing certainty to shareholders.

Oh my heavens! Only three months ago he was again ruling out the selling of any more Telstra shares. He now performs the ultimate backflip, saying in the parliament just now that it is with a heavy heart that he does this but that it is economically responsible to do it. It was economically responsible to do it all those months ago when you opposed us in the lower and upper houses of this parliament—and now, of course, it is in their political interest to support the privatisation of Telstra. But I will tell you one thing: this will not come as a surprise to the Australian people. They have always believed—with the Labor Party’s record on the privatisation of Qantas, the Commonwealth Bank, CSL, insurance companies and anything else that was not nailed down—that they would eventually privatise Telstra.

Indeed, our own polling shows this. I will let you in on a little secret now that you have agreed to the full privatisation of Telstra. We have gone to every election—1998, 2001 and 2004—with the policy of the privatisation of Telstra even though, generally speaking, it was not popular, particularly in the areas that I and my colleagues in the National Party represent. But we stood our ground, argued the merits of it and explained it—and, for our support of the privatisation, we extracted a great deal for regional and rural Australia’s telecommunications infrastructure. But, despite Labor Party opposition to the privatisation of Telstra by the coalition, people always believed it would do the same on coming to office. And it was not a vote switcher, it was not a vote loser, because people always knew the Labor Party would eventually reveal its true colours as a privatiser par excellence, particularly having regard to its history.

So, within six months of the forthcoming election, the Labor Party have announced not only will they accept the privatisation of Telstra but also they would hasten the sale of the remaining shares held by the Future Fund—raid the Future Fund—to get their hands on the money. Nothing could be calculated to be more irresponsible or more of a betrayal of the interests of Australia and Australians now and into the future than to diminish the Future Fund. It was set aside and is growing to provide for the unfunded liabilities and future commitments of an ageing population when the taxpayer base simply will not be able to meet the health, welfare and social requirements of an aged population. The Labor Party are going to have to explain to
Australians why, for short-term political gain, they are jeopardising the long-term future of all Australians.

On top of raiding the Future Fund of $2.7 billion, the Labor Party is going to abolish the $2 billion Regional Telecommunications Fund which has been set aside to make sure the most disadvantaged Australians can get reliable services in the future. By abolishing the telecommunications fund the Labor Party is signalling unambiguously and very strongly that it is going to fund broadband to a certain extent in metropolitan Australia. It is not going to use the telecommunications fund to target areas of need in regional and remote Australia. The Labor Party is abandoning regional Australia for urban Australia. Abolishing the $2 billion telecommunications fund, which was specifically established to support the infrastructure needs of rural Australia, is a complete sell-out. There can be no claim by the Labor Party of any interest in, let alone representation of, rural and regional Australia if it is going to abolish the $2 billion telecommunications fund.

This paper by the Labor Party, far from being a policy, has a number of other defects. Why would I, the representative in the lower house of the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, know this so quickly? Because I have seen this paper before, in large part. It was released by the member for Brand, in his role as the Leader of the Opposition, only two years ago. It was released by Senator Conroy in his Press Club address today that it is in large part copied—or plagiarised, if the member for Brand wants to retain the intellectual property rights for it. It was announced two years ago and no-one took it seriously then. It got next to no coverage publicly and it did not excite any interest from the private sector. Within days of its announcement, Telstra disowned it and said they would not participate, and everybody else in the industry said it was not an achievable plan.

So Labor’s solution is to rehash an established paper, throw money at it—money drawn from the Future Fund, with all the social and economic issues surrounding that—and abolish the telecommunications fund, which abandons country people. Labor’s proposal is not going to go anywhere, and it certainly will not go anywhere near regional and remote Australia. Labor cannot be trusted with the needs of regional and remote Australia, they cannot be trusted with this country’s telecommunications infrastructure and they cannot be trusted with Australia’s economy.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler) (3.51 pm)—This government is out of ideas, out of touch and out of time. Here again today we have the Labor Party setting the policy agenda—an agenda to secure our prosperity beyond the mining boom, an agenda looking forward to the future—against a government that is simply stuck in the past. To secure Australia’s long-term prosperity we must boost our productivity and international competitiveness. We need to implement policies for the long-term national interest, and part of that has to be investment in nation-building infrastructure, because Labor believes that Australia’s future productivity, competitiveness and wealth creation relies on world-class infrastructure.

We know that spending on infrastructure is an investment; it is not a cost. Today we have had a very significant policy announcement: that Labor would build a new national broadband network in partnership with the private sector that would deliver a minimum speed of 12 megabits per second for 98 per cent of Australians—over 40 times faster than most current internet speeds—and that we would ensure that the remaining two per cent of Australians, in regional and re-
mote areas, have improved services. We have undertaken to have a competitive assessment of proposals to roll out an open access fibre-to-the-node broadband network and put in place regulatory reforms to facilitate that rollout. And we will use existing government investments in communications to provide a public equity investment in a joint equity venture of up to $4.7 billion in the new broadband network. This would include drawing on the $2 billion Communications Fund and the Future Fund’s 17 per cent share in Telstra.

The government essentially had two criticisms of the proposals in question time, and there were more from the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, who was put up as the spokesperson in this debate. The first criticism, from the Prime Minister, essentially exposed the government’s position when it comes to infrastructure and investment. The Prime Minister saw spending on broadband infrastructure as consumption. Labor sees it as investment, a $4.7 billion investment in our future. The second criticism, which came primarily from the Treasurer, was that somehow we were raiding the Future Fund. Well, if the future is not about broadband, what is it about? Broadband is essential for our future.

A third criticism, which came from the agriculture minister, was that somehow Labor is now supporting the privatisation of Telstra. Let us be very clear about what has happened here. Because the National Party refused to stand up over the privatisation of Telstra, which was opposed at each and every turn by the Australian Labor Party, the privatisation has gone through. It is a reality. But we are determined to ensure that those funds are used in the interests of building the future of our telecommunications, setting up this joint equity venture that will make sure that services are delivered and that Australia moves forward into this century.

We are in a crisis. The World Economic Forum ranks Australia 25th in the world for available internet bandwidth. Rupert Murdoch has said this about Australia’s broadband infrastructure:

I think it is a disgrace. I think we should be spending—the Government with Telstra should be spending—$10 billion or $12 billion on it (so it gets to) every town in Australia.

James Packer has described it as ‘embarrassing’. David Kirk has described it as ‘fraud-band’. But the Prime Minister simply cannot see it, because for 11 years the Howard government has treated Australia’s communications infrastructure as a short-term political issue, not a long-term policy investment. In recent years, we have seen a number of announcements by the Howard government. We had the Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities in 2002, the Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme in 2003, the National Broadband Strategy in 2004, the National Broadband Strategy Implementation Group in 2004—program after program announced by the government. But still we are falling behind the world. We are giving the world a competitive advantage against us that we simply cannot afford, particularly due to our geographical location.

One of the great things about the development of telecommunications infrastructure is that it has an ability to override that geographical disadvantage that Australia has suffered from in the past so that we can take advantage of the fact that here we have a number of natural advantages, due to our environment and due to our people, most of all. The government simply fail to see that. Let us have a look at what happens when they do establish programs. During the 2004 federal election they announced the metropolitan broadband black spots program, a $50 million bandaid designed to give the impression of government policy action.
There is always some announcement at election time, but have a look at what has happened. At Senate estimates we exposed the fact that the program had disbursed only $200,000. Put this in perspective: for a $50 million program, only $200,000 has actually been spent. And it cost $1.4 million to administer. They spend more on the bureaucrats—seven times more—than on delivering the broadband infrastructure. I asked the Prime Minister about this in question time. Remember what he said: ‘I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.’ We’re waiting, Prime Minister. They know that that is the case and they do not have answers.

The minister for agriculture also said, ‘They’re going to spend the Communications Fund.’ Let us have a look at what National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce had to say about this $2 billion Communications Fund. He said he was ‘happy’ to have it described as ‘a slush fund’. That is what it is. We will actually put that fund to proper use.

Broadband is not just faster internet or toys for IT geeks; broadband is an enabling infrastructure. It enables productivity gains, creates new markets, fosters new businesses and creates new jobs. The federal government’s own Broadband Advisory Group found:

…next generation broadband could produce economic benefits of $12-30 billion per annum to Australia.

So we know that it is absolutely necessary. A statewide broadband network in New South Wales would boost the state’s economy by $1.4 billion a year, increase employment by thousands of jobs after 10 years and raise exports by $400 million over its first decade. Broadband impacts on everyday lives: the ability of young people to get a proper education, the ability of small businesses to operate and compete with big business, the ability to deliver health and essential services and the ability to communicate at home and with the world.

It is not surprising that they are behind the game on this because, when it comes to infrastructure across the board, the Business Council of Australia has identified a $90 billion shortfall in infrastructure—not just communications but in our ports, in our energy infrastructure, in our roads and rail systems, and in our water infrastructure. Yet public investment in national infrastructure is falling. Public investment decreased from 2.5 per cent to 1.8 per cent of GDP between June 1987 and June 2006. In 2004 Australia ranked 20th out of 25 OECD countries in investment in public infrastructure as a proportion of GDP. The government is incapable of stepping into the future and governing for the needs of this century. Labor is showing today once again that we are up to the task, that we are setting the agenda and that we are prepared to take on these issues. It is time that this government got out of the way.

(Time expired)

Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (4.01 pm)—I am very pleased to be able to speak on this MPI today, because the availability of broadband and speed of the service is something I have taken a keen interest in in my electorate of Stirling. When I was elected there were some broadband black spots. They were isolated and they seemed to occur at random intervals. But after several visits by the minister for communications, who came and directly discussed the problem with constituents in Stirling, and due to the Howard government’s commitment to providing broadband services, I am very pleased to report to the House that those black spots are being eradicated.

This is really what surprises me about this motion today. The Howard government has already made a firm commitment to provide all Australians—that is, all Australians re-
Regardless of where they live—with access to broadband services. I think that bears repeating: the government has committed that all Australians, regardless of where they live, will have access to broadband services. This includes the remotest parts of the nation and it includes isolated areas that obviously pose particular challenges when it comes to providing telecommunications infrastructure. This commitment has been backed already by the $1 billion worth of expenditure. Indeed, on 7 March, a mere two weeks ago, the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts announced a further $162½ million for the Australian Broadband Guarantee. This is on top of the $878 million Broadband Connect program and the $50 million Metro Broadband Connect program.

The government’s performance on broadband take-up rates and speed is already extremely strong. Australia has over 3.9 million broadband subscribers and around one-third of all Australian homes have broadband. Australia is above the OECD average when it comes to broadband take-up. Indeed, we are ranked 17th for overall take-up. If you have a look at where some of the comparable countries in the OECD are ranked, Germany is 18th, France is 16th, the UK is 10th and the US is 12th. But Australia’s take-up rate for broadband grew at a faster rate than any OECD country except Denmark in the 12 months to 30 June last year. Residential take-up of broadband increased by 63 per cent in regional areas and 41 per cent in metropolitan areas in the year to September 2006. A major factor driving this take-up is price. Australia has very internationally competitive broadband pricing. In 2006, a UK report ranked Australia’s residential broadband plans as cheaper than those of South Korea and the United States.

I want to turn to speeds, because we have heard a lot about relative broadband speeds in the debate today. I would like to inform the House that almost 90 per cent of Australian households are connected to exchanges that provide speeds of between two megabits per second and eight megabits per second, which is more than enough bandwidth to download movies, conduct videoconferencing, play online games and teleconference. Of course, it is more than enough for everyday internet and email use. Nearly 50 per cent of the population can access even higher speeds of between 12 to 20 megabits per second from ADSL2 broadband and from pay TV cable networks. And yet the Labor Party has announced their grand plan today to provide speeds of 12 megabits per second broadband! Fifty per cent of the Australian population can already access speeds that are equal to or higher than that.

Fixed wireless networks in Australia provide speeds of up to two megabits per second to almost 6.5 million premises in Australia, including around 800,000 that cannot access ADSL broadband. There are now four third-generation mobile phone networks operating in Australia, all of which offer broadband services. Since March 2007 the number of broadband subscribers on 1.5-megabit speed connections or greater has doubled to 1.1 million. Small businesses are taking advantage of the faster speeds. Almost one in five online small businesses use connections of two megabits or greater.

Australia is different from some of our competitors in the fact that we operate in a unique environment of having a huge continental landmass which is sparsely populated. But when South Korea, a country that would fit into Australia many times over, decided that they needed to build the equivalent fibre-to-the-node network that Labor is talking about today it cost them $US40 billion. Yet the Labor government has today announced a plan that they say will cost only $A4.7 billion. The government has already shown unique ingenuity in dealing with new tech-
nologies as they arrive in Australia and adapting them to our very difficult requirements. Of course, it is vitally important that this happens, because we have a $1 trillion economy and we fully recognise that broadband is going to be an important part of productivity growth in the future.

Broadband is indeed going to play an important role in securing our economic future. That is why the minister announced a broadband blueprint in December last year. This blueprint provides a national framework for the future of broadband in Australia, and it comes at a reasonable cost in conjunction with private sector investment. By contrast, let us look at Labor’s plan. They plan to raid the future. They plan to steal from future generations to fund what may well be obsolete technology in the future. We need to remember that Labor’s policy two years ago was to spend $5 billion building a dial-up network. This is the point: the private sector is best placed to adapt to new technologies and is best placed to roll out these new technologies as they evolve. What the government should do is provide the appropriate framework and support where necessary for that to happen.

Labor announced its plan today—this so-called fibre-to-the-node network. They believe it will cover 98 per cent of Australia. It is not a real plan, because we have yet to see any detail. There is absolutely no detail on how this network will be rolled out to 98 per cent of the Australian population. We have no idea what level of private investment will be involved, what regulatory arrangements are being contemplated, whether there will be appropriate access arrangements or how this public-private partnership might work. These are just some of the questions that have not been answered. The plan provides no idea how Telstra’s cooperation will be obtained or how any other competing carrier will be able to submit a viable fibre-to-the-node proposal. It begs the question: will a Labor government use heavy-handed legislation to compulsorily acquire parts of the Telstra network that they believe might be essential for establishing this fibre-to-the-node network?

Labor has fixed on fibre to the node as the only way of delivering high-speed broadband to all areas of Australia. But, of course, and as I know from my own experience in Stirling, there are many other technologies such as high-speed wireless networks, which may provide more efficient or viable services. The best example of this is to refer back to Labor’s policy of two years ago when they proposed to spend $5 billion to build a dial-up network that we all know now is completely obsolete technology. Labor have not given any consideration to the effect of its proposal on existing broadband providers in regional Australia or on the broadband infrastructure to be rolled out as part of the government’s Broadband Connect program. We know what Labor are really going to do: they will rob the bush to provide a level of service in the city that people outside of the metropolitan areas will not be able to get access to. This confirms Labor’s legendary contempt for rural Australia.

Before I close, I would like to turn to the funding policies that Labor have for this network. Last year, the Howard government achieved the historic full privatisation of Telstra after a decade of making the arguments publicly about the benefits that a full sale would provide for Australian consumers. After we went out and made the arguments, and Labor opposed us at every turn, in a very short space of time Labor have managed to come up with plans to spend that money. The sale of Telstra along with strong budget surpluses have allowed us to eliminate the $96 billion of debt that we inherited from Labor and to create a super fund to provide for the government’s superannuation liabilities. La-
bor plans to totally destroy that good work. As a younger member of this House, I find it offensive that the coalition have worked hard to provision for outstanding liabilities that will accumulate with Australia’s ageing population, yet Labor want to cavalierly raid this money to provide for their political—

(Time expired)

Mr EDWARDS (Cowan) (4.11 pm)—It is laughable to listen to the Prime Minister, the Treasurer, government ministers and other government speakers stand up in this place and complain about ALP policy being about getting into the Future Fund. We just heard the input from the member opposite, who used the words ‘steal from future generations’. What a lot of absolute nonsense. I say that because we know that this government, and we have seen it over the last decade, has consistently spent money on securing its own short-term political future at the expense of long-term investment in infrastructure and long-term investment in the future of this nation.

For this government to turn around and say today that we are selling out on future generations is an absolute joke. You will only secure the future for future generations if you start spending on infrastructure today. This government have consistently thrown away opportunity—10 years of opportunity—on short-term political fixes geared to secure their own political future at the expense of Australia and young Australians. And we get this hypocrite of a Prime Minister come into this House and try to lecture the Australian Labor Party on securing the future of this nation. For this government to turn around and say today that we are selling out on future generations is an absolute joke. You will only secure the future for future generations if you start spending on infrastructure today. This government have consistently thrown away opportunity—10 years of opportunity—on short-term political fixes geared to secure their own political future at the expense of Australia and young Australians. And we get this hypocrite of a Prime Minister come into this House and try to lecture the Australian Labor Party on securing the future of this nation.

When I spoke in 2005 on the matter of public importance regarding another partial sale of Telstra that the government had gone into, I said:

The proceeds of the partial sale have been squandered. They have been squandered on buying votes in the bush and through the bulbous pockets of the government’s spendthrifts, who have wasted countless opportunities for proper and prudent investment in our infrastructure, our services and our future. The proceeds have been squandered by the biggest pork-barrelling government in the history of Australia—squandered and wasted, not invested. The government has not invested in infrastructure, in growth, in their loyal clientele, in the future of our nation ... or ... in Telstra.

Is it any wonder that the greatest number of complaints we get in my northern suburbs office are about broadbanding issues? Is it any wonder that ordinary small business people—mums and dads—are complaining that this government has let the people of Australia down consistently over 10 years? Is it any wonder now that they are not going to accept the word of this tired old Prime Minister who accuses us of stealing from the
future? The Rudd Labor opposition is about investing in the future, investing in infrastructure, investing in our young people and securing their future. (Time expired)

Mr NEVILLE (Hinkler) (4.16 pm)—Broadband is a key component of our national infrastructure. We need it essentially as we need roads and railways, ports and airports. The government has invested in providing subsidised broadband to regional areas since 2005 and has just announced a further $162 million for the Australian Broadband Guarantee which will fill the remaining black spots. If necessary, further funding to patch these black spots will come from investment of the government’s $2 billion infrastructure fund, which in round figures should give at least $120 million a year on an ongoing basis. That is what makes Labor’s plan to eliminate that fund so heinous.

The next step in rolling out better broadband is the promotion of next generation investment in rural and regional areas, which is why we have put on the table $600 million to establish an open access network. An open access network implies competition, and competition is essential because better broadband is of no use to people if they cannot afford it. We have heard a lot today about Korea and the United States. Their broadband is a lot dearer than ours will be, which is why a combination of competition, strategic government support and strict regulation is the key to delivering this technology.

The government is already getting on with the job. Since 2004, $878 million has been spent on Broadband Connect and approximately $109 million has been spent on Hi-BIS. This has resulted in more than 200,000 new consumers in regional areas being connected to broadband, more than a million extra premises having access to metro-comparable broadband services and an extra 1,500 exchanges being ADSL enabled. To underscore the government’s achievement, the President of the National Farmers Federation, David Crombie, late last year had this to say:

As part of the government’s broadband connect initiative focused on under-served areas this $600 million component has the capacity to significantly improve the services, and enhance the availability, of efficient and timely broadband outcomes for rural Australia.

The minister will shortly announce the successful bidder or bidders for up-front funding from the $600 million program to help build new large-scale broadband infrastructure which will deliver competitive wholesale prices in regional areas into the future.

So let us look at the Labor policy, which is really just a rehash of the one Kim Beazley cooked up around two years ago. To get to that, Labor will abolish the $2 billion Communication Fund which, as I said, is capable of giving us about $120 million a year into the future and which exists to make sure the most disadvantaged Australians have access to decent telecommunications services into the future. The new Labor policy will be ‘Bush be damned!’ They will spend the Communication Fund plus—wait for it—$2.7 billion of the Future Fund on broadband for the cities and forget about the backbone of the national economy: our hardworking farmers, businesspeople, miners and others who live outside the metropolitan areas.

I would like to know how Labor’s fibre-to-the-node network is going to reach 98 per cent of Australians and still deliver competition. It is interesting, too, that they picked 98 per cent. I went to the briefing on the coalition’s current programs, and at the end of the $600 million program, which will be rolled out in the near future, we will be at 98 per cent. So where is the wizardry here?
The other interesting thing is that just two years ago Labor wanted us to pay $5 billion for dial-up internet. That is how far up with the technology they were. There was forward-thinking policy of great rigour—I don’t think! If $5 billion is the magic figure and they are going to have $4.7 billion to do what they want to do, there is a very strong inference in the scenario that Labor is putting to us that they are going to put the whole thing into the capital cities.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Barresi)—Order! The time for this discussion has now expired.

COMMITTEES

Public Works Committee

Report

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (4.21 pm)—On behalf of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works I present the 70th annual report of the committee.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mrs MOYLAN—by leave—In accordance with section 16 of the Public Works Committee Act 1969, I present the committee’s 70th annual report. This report gives an overview of the work undertaken by the committee during the 2006 calendar year. In addition to its 69th annual report, the committee tabled 19 reports on public works, with a total estimated value exceeding $969 million. Throughout the year, the committee conducted 36 meetings, 17 of which were public hearings.

Issues of note arising from the committee’s deliberations in 2006 included: changes to the Public Works Committee Act, the introduction of a revised Manual of procedures for departments and agencies, the committee’s high workload, the timeliness with which public works are referred to the committee and the quality of evidence supplied by referring departments and agencies.

One of the most significant issues for the committee this year was the changes to the Public Works Committee Act. The committee welcomed an increase to the threshold value for works which must be referred, from $6 million to $15 million. The new threshold is more realistic, reflecting increasing costs associated with major projects that have occurred since the figure of $6 million was determined as the threshold in 1985.

Public-private partnerships remain an area of concern for the committee, with the absence of a legislative framework for the referral and scrutiny of works delivered through the public-private partnership process. The change in the act expanding the definition of a ‘public work’ to include works funded through a PPP or similar arrangement will hopefully go some way to addressing the issue. The committee considered its second PPP work with Project Single Living Environment and Accommodation Precinct—otherwise known as LEAP—phase 1, and can foresee an increase in the referral of PPP projects in the future. Subsequent to the changes to the act, the committee revised its Manual of procedures for departments and agencies.

The year 2006 was another busy year for the committee, which tabled 19 reports, or roughly one report every parliamentary sitting week. The changes to the act occurred late in 2006 and did not have a great effect on the committee’s workload. Whilst the committee welcomes the change to the threshold, it does not anticipate a significant drop in the number of future referrals. For example, of the 19 works considered by the committee in 2006, only three would fall under the $15 million threshold.

At times throughout 2006, the committee was the recipient of criticism, with sugges-
tions that the committee was delaying the consideration of projects. I have to say, in defence of my committee—which I consider to be a very efficient, hardworking committee—that this was not so. Indeed, at times when such criticism was made of the committee, the work had not even been referred to this parliament. And the committee really feels it should remind agencies that section 17 of the act specifically states that:

The Committee shall, as expeditiously as is practicable:

(a) consider each public work that is referred to it in accordance with this Act; and

(b) make a report to both Houses of the Parliament ...

The committee cannot commit to a public hearing date until a work has been referred to this parliament. It is, therefore, the responsibility of referring agencies to ensure that they have allowed sufficient time in their project schedules for the full and proper execution of the committee inquiry process.

In last year’s annual report, the committee commented that there was ‘a high degree of variance in the quality of evidence submitted’ to the committee. During 2006, the committee noted some improvement in the overall quality of evidence presented and, on many occasions, congratulated the referring agencies on the high level of evidence provided to the committee. However, in several inquiries the absence of transparency in both oral and written evidence was of concern. The committee again reminds agencies that clear and concise evidence eliminates any unnecessary clarification and questioning subject to the hearings, which then goes on to minimise the time required for the completion of the committee’s report and its presentation to this parliament.

To be able to manage such an intense workload, the committee relies very heavily on the secretariat to the Public Works Committee and I wish to express, on behalf of all members of the committee, our gratitude for their continued hard work and support throughout 2006. I would also like to thank my committee members, who have put in a fantastic effort to be able to manage that workload; the Hansard and Broadcasting staff who assist us in our hearings, often away from this place; and those officers in the Department of Finance and Administration who play an integral role in facilitating references and expediency motions. I also thank the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance and Administration, who assisted the committee to ensure that the necessary changes to the act did go through, and now helps to more properly facilitate the work of the committee. I commend the report to the House.

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Gorton) (4.28 pm)—by leave—I rise to comment upon the 70th annual report of the Public Works Committee. I will start where the member for Pearce ended, by thanking the secretariat, Hansard, and indeed all involved in assisting the committee with its work. As the member for Pearce, the chair of the committee indicated, the work of the committee is quite fulsome. It is an ongoing committee. It may not have the profile of some other committees in the parliament, but in terms of its workload, in terms of scrutinising significant sums of Commonwealth expenditure, it does a very good job and it works in a very consensual way in order to fulfil the requirements of the act.

I want to touch on some of the comments made by the chair in her speech. I agree with her that there was a need—and I supported the proposed amendment—to lift the threshold from $6 million to $15 million. As the years went by we were, effectively, having problems with the amount of work being referred to the committee. As the real value
of works being submitted to us was falling, the number of projects was increasing. As a result, we were spending more time on smaller projects when a great deal more time should have been spent on large expenditure items—large projects with a value in the tens, and in some cases hundreds, of millions of dollars.

As you would well know, Mr Deputy Speaker Jenkins, the increase in the threshold was pretty much a reflection of the increase in inflation since the time the $6 million threshold was first introduced. It was not an attempt by the committee to obviate the responsibilities, nor was it in any way looking to reduce the capacity of the committee to scrutinise. It was an attempt to improve the effectiveness of the committee. I think it is already showing signs of doing that. That is a very good thing in terms of government accountability and the importance of committee scrutiny.

It is important to comment on the committee’s efforts to improve the act so that we can properly scrutinise public-private partnerships. As the chair indicated, it is still an area of concern to the committee that there is an absence of a legislative framework. Whilst there have been some amendments seeking to address the issue, there may be a need to consider the way in which these partnerships operate. They are quite complex. It makes it more difficult for a parliamentary committee to consider the value of work given the construction of the partnerships of these ventures. We may have to review the way in which we proceed in future if it transpires, as I think it might, that more questions are left open as a result of our scrutiny of some of these projects. Given that this is a report on the year’s work, I foreshadow that it may well be something that the committee, and indeed the parliament, will have to address in future.

As the chair said, there have been some significant changes. I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that they did not deprive the committee of its workload. It is a committee that is still having to put in every week. There is a lot of travel involved, which makes it very difficult for members and senators. Members of the committee have to put in a lot of time, and that will continue to be the case. The amendments that have been made will ensure that there will be greater scrutiny of the larger amounts of money expended by the Commonwealth that are under the purview of this committee.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—I am sure the Speaker would allow the present occupant of the chair a little indulgence to pass on the thanks of committee members to the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, especially for their forbearance of the quirks and whims of certain committee members. To the members of the committee staff who are witnessing these events, we also thank you for your efforts in total.

NON-PROLIFERATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2006

Referred to Main Committee

Mr BARTLETT (Macquarie) (4.33 pm)—by leave—I move:

That the bill be referred to the Main Committee for further consideration.

Question agreed to.

CONDOLENCES

Hon. Sir Robert Cotton KCMG, AO
Hon. Sir Denis James Killen AC, KCMG

Report from Main Committee

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—I have to report that the order of the day relating to the Prime Minster’s motion of
condolence in connection with the deaths of former senator the Hon. Sir Robert Cotton and former member the Hon. Sir James Kil- len has been debated in the Main Committee and is returned to the House. I present a certified copy of the motion. I understand it is the wish of the House to consider the matter forthwith. The question is that the motion moved by the Prime Minister be agreed to. I ask all honourable members to signify their approval by rising in their places.

Question agreed to, honourable members standing in their places.

**AUSTRALIAN ENERGY MARKET AMENDMENT (GAS LEGISLATION) BILL 2006**

Report from Main Committee

Bill returned from Main Committee without amendment; certified copy of the bill presented.

Ordered that the bill be considered immediately.

Bill agreed to.

**Third Reading**

Mr ANDREWS (Menzies—Minister for Immigration and Citizenship) (4.36 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.

**TOURISM AUSTRALIA AMENDMENT BILL 2007**

Report from Main Committee

Bill returned from Main Committee without amendment; certified copy of the bill presented.

Ordered that the bill be considered immediately.

Bill agreed to.

**Third Reading**

Mr ANDREWS (Menzies—Minister for Immigration and Citizenship) (4.37 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.

**YOGYAKARTA AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT**

Report from Main Committee

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—I have to report that the order of the day relating to the Prime Minister’s motion of condolence in connection with the Garuda 737 crash in Yogyakarta has been debated in the Main Committee and is returned to the House. I present a certified copy of the motion. I understand it is the wish of the House to consider the matter forthwith. The question is that the motion moved by the Prime Minister be agreed to. I ask all honourable members to signify their approval by rising in their places.

Question agreed to, honourable members standing in their places.

**SCHOOLS ASSISTANCE (LEARNING TOGETHER—ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH CHOICE AND OPPORTUNITY) AMENDMENT BILL 2007**

Second Reading

Debate resumed.

Mr RICHARDSON (Kingston) (4.39 pm)—I continue the speech that I started before question time. We expect students to learn and teachers to teach in classrooms that, in some cases, could be considered occupationally unsafe and against occupational health, safety and welfare standards. This is due simply to the fact that state Labor governments have not continued or maintained their responsibility to our schools, children, teachers and hardworking parents
who have paid their taxes and school fees. Whilst the state Labor governments are flush with GST funds, they are not keeping up their responsibilities.

We ask our teachers to give their all to provide a quality education to young people, some of whom come from struggling home environments, some of whom suffer from learning difficulties and some of whom simply do not want to be there. Yet the state government cannot provide an environment in which it is comfortable for them to do that. Even worse, how can we expect kids on a 40-degree day in Adelaide to sit let alone learn in those conditions? How can we possibly bring out the best in our children if we do not provide them with an environment which makes it possible for them to bring out the best in themselves?

Flaxmill School are not alone in their story. I have had a number of schools seek air conditioning and heating under this program. Just as bad are the stories of schools with threadbare carpets who have to rely on this program for replacements because the state Labor government has ignored their plight for years. Even worse are the stories of local schools without access to adequately shaded play areas or any play areas at all. Not only do we require our children to swelter in the heat of the classroom but, in their play times, the state Labor government would have them exercising and playing in the damaging and glaring heat of the mid-afternoon sun. We have spent countless years and countless amounts of money trying to push the anti skin cancer message to generations of Australians, but the Rann Labor government in South Australia could not even provide adequate shade so that children were protected from the dangerous rays of the sun.

I recently visited Christie Downs Primary School in my local area. The principal and parent governing body had put a great deal of time and effort into their application for funding. When I saw the outcome of that funding from the federal government, I was overwhelmed by what they had achieved. They had received funding for the construction of a specialised learning area. This is an exceptionally disadvantaged area in my electorate. Those who work tirelessly at the school, and the volunteers, tell stories of children who still suffer the after-effects of foetal alcohol syndrome—some of whom come to school unfed and unwashed and whose home lives are beyond anything a child should have to endure. But when I visited this school, I saw a pride and an enthusiasm in the eyes of the children, teachers and parents alike. Students were excited about going to school because of these exceptional facilities, and having facilities of such a high quality in an area so often ignored and forgotten has prompted parents to actually take an interest in their child’s education. This program is no longer just about providing facilities to our educational institutions; it is about putting a sense of pride back into our schools and local communities and it is about bringing the best out in our children.

I have also been surprised by the number of schools that have sought funding under the Investing in Our Schools Program for IT and computer equipment. In this day and age, when young people who graduate from our high schools are expected to be computer literate, I find it astounding that the state Labor governments have not even provided the most basic of computer equipment in some schools. We heard the Leader of the Opposition this morning talking about his grand broadband plan. I might take this opportunity to suggest to the Leader of the Opposition that the best way he can move this nation forward in terms of its access to and use of computer technology is to wander up to his Labor Premier mates and suggest they start
pulling their weight and put computers in our schools.

There are very few gifts in life that we can give our children which are more precious and more vital than a good quality education. For a young person from a disadvantaged background, an education has the capacity to raise them up, inspire them to greater things and ultimately break the cycles of poverty, welfare dependence and domestic violence. We owe each and every Australian student the best education in the best possible facilities we can provide, and this bill seeks to take another step towards achieving that aim.

While I am on the subject of schools which achieve great things for their students, I would like to take the opportunity to commend Seaford 6-12 School in my electorate, which today received the best national achievement award under the Australian government’s National Awards for Quality Schooling, as well as the inaugural medal of distinction. There is no greater example of what a school can achieve for its students through hard work and genuine dedication than what Seaford 6-12 has managed to achieve in the last five years, and I commend them on that achievement.

What the Seaford 6-12 example shows us is the momentum a little inspiration can create, and the Investing in Our Schools Program has been a catalyst for many schools to do exactly that—for teachers, parents and students to take that extra step, to create momentum and to create pride both in their school and in their own education. This program brings parents into the schools and makes them involved in their children’s education by seeking their input and approval of the project for which funding is sought. Who better to judge what learning minds need at their school than their parents and teachers together?

This program and this bill seek to provide funding to both government and non-government schools because we on this side of the House believe that when parents make choices in relation to their children’s education they should not be disadvantaged by a government which refuses to spend their taxpayers’ dollars on their child’s education. But then we on this side of the House are not beholden to unions that pay for our election campaigns. I would like to take this opportunity to thank and praise both the current and former ministers for education for creating and administering a program which actually works and provides on-the-ground outcomes for local schools and their students. This is a sensational example of what can be achieved with strong and disciplined economic management and the guidance of ministers who have a vision and belief in Australian education.

In closing, I have raised my two boys and lived my life guided by the ideal that we owe our children a standard of life and a standard of education better than we received, and this government seeks to uphold that principle with programs like Investing in Our Schools. That is why I am proud to sit on this side of the House and I am proud of this bill. And that is why I commend this bill to the House.

Mr Baird (Cook) (4.47 pm)—I rise in support of the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007. I think that all members of this House would very much welcome this program. It certainly has meant a significant difference to schools across Australia, particularly in my electorate of Cook. It was well received by the school principals, students and, of course, parents and P&Cs. Very often it is a monument to the fact that the education departments and the governments in the various states have failed to carry out the role that they should have.
Think of the article in today’s Herald, which outlines toilets in some schools that have been blocked for 10 years because they simply have not put the funds required into this program. Think of the many schools in my electorate that have been neglected for years. Some of them have not been touched for about 20 years. The only exception, of course, is if it is a marginal seat—then watch the funding go. I have the marginal seat of Miranda in my electorate. Hundreds of thousands of dollars—millions—have been spent on schools in that electorate while the one alongside gets hardly anything because it is not marginal and they do not care.

When you see the schools full of de-mountables, plumbing that does not work, inadequate facilities, poor maintenance, a lack of computers to assist students, a lack of musical and sporting equipment, lack of shadecloth and coverage you understand why it was necessary for the federal government to become involved in this program. It is not an area that we should naturally be in, considering the very significant increase in the amount of GST funding to the states. But, nevertheless, we are, and I know that schools across Australia are very grateful that this has happened.

In my electorate of Cook we have received $3.1 million for all rounds. This includes funding for Cronulla South Public School, Grays Point Public School, Gymea High School, Kareela Public School, Kirrawee Public School, Miranda North Public School, Miranda Public School, Sylvania Public School and Woolooware Public School. They are all very grateful for the assistance that they have received. By extending the funding of the Investing in Our Schools Program to a total of $1.2 billion, the government is demonstrating its commitment to education in this country.

We have an outstanding Minister for Education, Science and Training in this government. She is doing her best to deliver not only quality education and appropriate standards across the country but also the infrastructure and the physical facilities so necessary in the schools. We have provided new library books, musical instruments, play equipment and computers to hundreds of thousands of students around Australia. We have also provided urgently needed repairs and upgrades to infrastructure, again highlighting the state governments’ chronic neglect of their own government schools.

This bill provides an additional $181 million to the final round of the Investing in Our Schools Program. Of this, $127 million is earmarked for a final funding round for state government schools in 2007 while a further $54 million is for non-government schools for the year 2007-08. This funding is specifically intended for schools that have received little or no previous funding under the program.

The $1.2 billion spent on Investing in Our Schools from 2005 to 2008 represents a massive capital injection into educational infrastructure. When considered alongside the $1.7 billion spent on the Capital Grants Program over the same period, total Australian government spending on school infrastructure comes to $2.9 billion. That is an impressive level of commitment to teachers, parents and, most importantly, school students.

The members in my electorate are very enthusiastic about the program. It has allowed students to access equipment that would otherwise be beyond their reach. It has allowed teachers to incorporate learning tools in their classrooms that have, until now, been unaffordable in the school’s budget. It has given several principals in my electorate a chance to repair and upgrade basic infrastructure that has been left to fall into disre-
pair by the New South Wales government. Obviously this is a state responsibility, and yet we certainly have seen it neglected right across the country. Investing in Our Schools has gone some way to addressing this neglect by providing the Australian government with the direct ability to respond actively to situations where there is a clear need for resources and where chronic neglect is occurring in state government schools.

Last November I unveiled a new showcase computer room at Gymea Technology High School, an approved project under round 1 of Investing in Our Schools. This showcase computer room is filled with state-of-the-art equipment suitable for students studying industrial technology, multimedia and software design in their HSC year. I was shown examples of student work in this class and I was most impressed. The principal, John Bedwell, is doing a great job at that school. He was involved in wanting technology outcomes for his students. Equipment like this showcase computer room helps to make these outcomes reality and this is why schools in my electorate are such big supporters of the program.

In another example, in December last year I went to Grays Point Public School to officially launch $40,000 of new laptops funded under round 1 of Investing in Our Schools. These students were able to research on the internet as a class for a project they were doing on international aid to Africa, an area of policy in which I maintain a very close interest. It was fantastic to see this computer equipment at the disposal of these year 5 students, and I am told that these laptops are now being used by students in year 2 right through to year 6.

Grays Point Public School used an additional amount of $24,000, allocated under Investing in Our Schools, to install a rainwater tank system for their toilet block. I commend the principal, Phil Rouland, for such a forward-thinking approach and such an environmentally considerate use of funding that was available to them. Now Grays Point public are flushing their toilets with rainwater and helping to do their bit in light of Sydney’s water crisis.

From my observations at a local level, the Investing in Our Schools Program is doing more than just injecting much-needed money into capital projects. It is also developing a very significant culture in school communities, allowing greater involvement for parents and friends and teachers and all members of the school community in developing priorities for their school’s infrastructure needs. I am very pleased with this trend. It takes an inclusive approach to involve the parents, friends and students.

In addition to the bill’s provisions to extend funding for the Investing in Our Schools Program, there is also the additional amount for the Capital Grants Program. The Capital Grants Program is providing large-scale infrastructure projects for schools. As I mentioned earlier, a total of $1.7 billion has been allocated under this program from 2005 to 2008. There has already been $1.2 billion of this money allocated to state government schools and an estimated $495 million will be provided to Catholic and independent schools in the same funding period.

Again the primary responsibility for schools’ capital works and maintenance of school facilities is held by state and territory governments, but they continue to not provide and deliver. One school in my electorate has been very fortunate under the Capital Grants Program. Caringbah High School received funding of $6.9 million from the Australian government to completely rebuild and relocate their main school campus.

I have been down to Caringbah high. Caringbah high is an outstanding selective
school in my area. It achieves amongst the top results in the state at HSC time. I observed at this school a massive crack running from one end to the other. The building has been so poorly kept there was no saving the whole structure. It is a very large investment in Caringbah High School—$6.9 million—and I am sure the students, parents and teachers at the school will benefit greatly from the new facilities when they are completed. Across New South Wales, the Australian government has provided $96.4 million to public schools in 2007 alone.

In light of the current election campaign in full swing in New South Wales, I think it is fairly appropriate to reflect on these funding levels. Despite very significant support from the Commonwealth in recent years, the New South Wales government has failed abysmally to provide for its own schools. I have one school in my electorate, Burraneer Bay Public School, that was provided with a major amount of funding from the federal government under the Capital Works Program. Again it is waiting for matching funds from the state government, and they have not been delivered. The school is full of de-mountables.

The fact that it is in what is seen as a safe Liberal seat is why they have not given it priority. If it were in the seat held by Barry Collier, the member for Miranda, it would be an entirely different story. I am sure we all expect politics to be involved at some point, but the blatant use of it so that some students are advantaged and others significantly disadvantaged is totally unacceptable and smacks of a Third World country rather than a modern democratic country. The outline in today’s Sydney Morning Herald of the chronic problems across the state is significant. The most shameless part of it all is how the Iemma government try to blame the Australian government for their problems. They try to divert attention from their abject failure to deliver basic school services and to meet school maintenance and capital works needs.

I thank the Prime Minister and the Treasurer for their support for the program, as well as the Minister for Education, Science and Training, who does an outstanding job in her portfolio. I wholeheartedly support the intentions of this bill. I am sure we all are very pleased with the amount of funding that the schools in each of our electorates receive through the program. It has certainly changed significantly the aspirations of many schools in my area. The school communities have come together and the P&Cs work effectively. When the results are announced, it is like Christmas Day. You phone up the schools and they say: ‘I’ve been waiting for this for so long. This is going to make such a difference to the school. You couldn’t have given me a better present. We’re all going to be thrilled. We’re all going to celebrate this.’

This should be happening automatically. It is not as if we are in some broken-down Third World country; this is modern Australia. The level of GST funding going to the states has been at an all-time high. In terms of the funding they have received, they should be investing in the schools themselves. It is the federal government who has come in and provided this round of funding to the tune of $1.2 billion. I am sure we all support the program. We lament the fact that state education departments are not fulfilling the role that has been required of them. We look forward to further opportunities to see a rollout of funding to support the level of education for our children. It is so important for our future.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (5.00 pm)—Like most members of the chamber, I support the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007. I
congratulate the government on putting the program together. Thirty-nine schools in my electorate have been the beneficiaries of funding through the Investing in Our Schools Program. I would like to raise a couple of issues. I do not intend to speak for a long time. The original program, as I understand it—and the minister, Julie Bishop, may correct me on the finer detail—was put in place to operate between 2005 and 2008. The amendment we are looking at today will essentially top up some money but will also rearrange the maximum amounts available to any one school. I am aware that the minister and the department have received various complaints, with people taking issue with the changes—taking the maximum of $150,000 to any one school back to $100,000. That has caused some concern in my electorate and I am sure in other electorates as well.

I ask the minister whether she would look closely at this because there are some very genuine cases where schools have actually taken a little bit more time to plan the process of a particular extension to their school or a particular requirement for their school. We are all aware that getting quotes and those sorts of things does take time. In particular, in smaller schools it is not that easy to just get a quote for an extension to a school library or some other structure of the magnitude of $120,000 or $140,000.

Rather than actually name a school, I would just like to read part of an email that was sent to me from a school. We are not here to barbecue anybody, but I think it demonstrates to the minister and the department that the change in the rules has had an adverse effect on some schools. Other schools in my electorate and a couple outside of my electorate have also made contact in terms of what they believe is unfair treatment of their particular applications.

I read part of the email:

I am dismayed to read the guidelines of the 2007 round of submissions and find that the cap on the funding has been reduced to $100,000. Our school community has been planning to apply for funding for a library extension valued at $140,000. We received just under $10,000 in the 2005 round for a small project and expected that we could apply later for our library, making a total of $150,000, as promoted in the advertised guidelines. Our regional schools property officer, the school council—and the person who has written the email—have been working on our plans for well over a year and could have (with a rush)—and I think this is a key point—put in an application in the 2006 round. However, we were advised to do our planning properly—and I think that is quite legitimate—and thoroughly to maximise our chances of being successful. So we decided to wait an extra year to put our building scope and quotes together properly. At the time, our properties manager rang the department and checked whether there were to be any changes planned to the guidelines. She was told that all should proceed as advertised originally …

I again refer to the original program, which was for 2005 to 2008.

Now we find that the guidelines have changed and our whole project is a no-goer. There is no way we can extend the library with $90,000. We are a rural school with a multitude of disadvantages. It is tough to get tradesmen to come into our town for an emergency, let alone to walk through our plans and prepare quotes. We have worked damned hard to get our vision moving towards reality and we are devastated to find that the rules have been changed.

I can provide a level of documentation to prove that our plans have been in the pipeline for over a year and will do so if necessary, but that is an additional job that the community and I will look kindly upon. I am asking you to consider our case and stick to the original, well-advertised guidelines that we have been working within. We want to apply for our library extension to the value of $140,000 in 2007.
I know people have been in touch with the department and the answer is coming—that the guidelines have changed or that is under the old rules. I am not suggesting that everybody should suddenly be allowed to reapply for $150,000, but I think that consideration should be given where schools have a paper trail showing that they were working towards a legitimate expansion of their school within what they thought were going to be the maximum guidelines.

If you look at the original bill, as I understand it, for 2005 to 2008 the limit was $150,000, so schools would have quite rightly assumed that, if they were putting together their planning arrangements, they would have been able to make those plans in accordance with the rules and extend them into the next year. As I have suggested, the original program was for $150,000.

I would ask the minister at the table, Minister Andrews, whether he would convey this story to the minister. I thought of trying to amend the legislation so that some sort of appeals process could be put in place. That can be done at a future time, but I do not think that there is a need to play games with amending the legislation.

Where there are legitimate cases, there should be an opportunity for those cases to be treated and handled in the correct fashion. That is not to suggest that everybody now suddenly goes back out to $150,000, but where it can be shown that schools have been working diligently to achieve an outcome and have not just rushed a quote in to garner the money, they should be treated with the regard that I think the program was put in place to deliver. Having said that, I believe the program has been successful, and this is the only real blemish that I see on the horizon.

I notice that the Labor Party has an amendment condemning the government for reducing the amount from $150,000 to $100,000. I will not be supporting that amendment even though I have spoken about that very issue. It is the right of government to vary programs from time to time. But in doing so they have to make an allowance for those who had their applications and their procedural processes in train that were going to come forward under the old rules. They should be considered in a compassionate way.

Mrs DRAPER (Makin) (5.08 pm)—I rise to support the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007. This bill ensures the Australian government’s continued commitment to a strong education sector by providing government and non-government schools with the necessary support to guarantee improved educational outcomes for all Australian students. This support includes imperative educational items including capital infrastructure, important building projects and improvements in literacy and numeracy, all of which are vital to a student’s learning. Just one of the ways this will occur is through the Investing in Our Schools Program. This bill provides further significant investment for Australian school communities and, more importantly, it provides additional funding for capital infrastructure grants available under this Howard government initiative.

The Investing in Our Schools Program is an Australian government initiative providing $1 billion in funding for smaller infrastructure projects. Throughout the life of the program government schools have been allocated $700 million, with $300 million being provided to non-government schools. I can personally attest to the tremendous success and overwhelming popularity of this initiative from school communities who have accessed this funding initiative. Since the establishment of the Investing in Our Schools
Program, schools in Makin have received over $4.1 million. This investment is significant, but the most overwhelming positive for school communities is that it provided for projects that they chose and wanted. These projects invariably are ones that local parents, students and teachers feel would make the greatest amount of difference for their local school community. This funding has been provided for small-scale projects that help to repair, replace or install items critical to schools’ needs. On a regular basis I have had the honour and the privilege to visit these schools to see the real results and the positive impact this investment has had on the learning environment of students and the entire school community.

Some of the schools in my electorate that have benefited from the program include Ardtornish Primary School, Banksia Park International High School, Golden Grove High School and Golden Grove Primary School, Greenwith Primary School, Gulfview Heights Primary School, Ingle Farm East Primary School, Modbury High School, Modbury preschool to year 7 at Modbury North, Modbury Special School, Modbury West Primary School, North Ingle Primary School, Para Hills East Primary School, Para Hills Primary School, Pooraka Primary School, Redwood Park, Ridgehaven, Surrey Downs, Tea Tree Gully Primary School and Valley View Secondary School. Mr Deputy Speaker, you can see that schools across my electorate of Makin have benefited greatly from this wonderful program.

Some of the projects for the programs included air conditioning, ICT facilities, play equipment, shade structures, play areas, playground equipment, floor coverings, toilet blocks, school grounds improvements and general classroom improvements. It has been a wide-ranging program and these projects would never have been possible without funding from the federal government. Unfortunately, state governments, which are supposed to have responsibility for funding these projects, have not made them a priority. It has taken the Australian government, under the Howard initiative of the Investing in Our Schools program, to fund those projects.

I am extremely pleased that this bill will see an injection of funding into the Investing in Our Schools program. It is a practical measure relating to the Prime Minister’s announcement of 19 February 2007 that the Australian government will provide an additional investment of $181 million to schools across Australia. Of this further $181 million, $127 million will be directed to the final round of funding to state government schools in 2007 and $54 million will be allocated for non-government schools over 2007 and 2008. To be equitable, the additional Investing in Our Schools funding has appropriate safeguards to ensure equitable funding arrangements and it will be targeted towards schools that have received little or no funding to date.

Whilst this $181 million is a welcome announcement, the government recognises that these specialised programs must complement increasing budgetary funding for schools. We all know that it is only possible to increase funding in areas such as education, health, and law and order when the government finances are in check and the government’s policies are providing the climate for a strong economy. To this end, 2006 will go down in history as the year in which the Howard government finally rid itself of the $96 billion black hole left behind by 13 years of the Hawke-Keating Labor government.

The current bill complements the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004, which reflects the government’s funding commitments and educational priorities by providing a record esti-
mated $33 billion in funding to all Australian schools over the four years 2005 to 2008. This represents a 158 per cent increase in funding since 1996. Of this record level of funding, $9.3 billion was allocated in the 2006-07 budget; an estimated $3.4 billion has been allocated for state schools and $5.9 billion for non-government schools.

The Australian government believes that every parent, having paid their taxes, deserves some level of public assistance to support the education of their child, regardless of which school their child attends, and provides funding to all students accordingly. The additional funding provided by this bill demonstrates the government’s ongoing commitment to ensuring that students receive high-quality education in a high-quality school from a high-quality teacher no matter where they attend.

In addition to the Investing in Our Schools program, this bill also provides funding of $11.7 million under the capital grants program for non-government schools to maintain the current level of funding to the end of 2008. The Australian government funding for capital works provided through the capital grants program is supplementary to funds provided by state and territory governments and by non-government school authorities, which have the primary responsibility for providing, maintaining and upgrading their school facilities.

The bill will also provide nearly $9.5 million for the national projects element of the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program for 2008. The additional funding will ensure continued support for strategic national research projects and initiatives aimed at improving the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students.

Projects funded include the Literacy and Numeracy in the Middle Years of Schooling initiative and the annual National Literacy and Numeracy Week—-with activities across Australia including national school and individual awards for improving literacy and numeracy, the Read Aloud Summit and the National Simultaneous Story Time initiative. The annual National Literacy and Numeracy Week is a key annual initiative, with a range of activities across Australia, including national awards for schools and individual awards for improving literacy and numeracy. Key national activities in 2006 included the Read Aloud Summit, National Simultaneous Story Time, and the Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards.

The annual National Literacy and Numeracy Week aims to: showcase the hard work schools and individuals in the community are undertaking in improving literacy and numeracy skills, recognise the outstanding results that have been achieved, raise community awareness of the importance of developing effective literacy and numeracy skills, and build on national initiatives to improve literacy and numeracy skills among young Australians. This is a wonderful initiative by the Howard coalition government, and I am pleased to commend this bill to the House.

Ms JULIE BISHOP (Curtin—Minister for Education, Science and Training and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women’s Issues) (5.18 pm)—The Howard government’s Investing in Our Schools program has been a hugely beneficial program for thousands of schools throughout Australia. The Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2007 contains measures that will provide an additional $181 million in Australian government funding to meet the immediate needs of school communities throughout the nation. This bill seeks to exceed the government’s original commitment of $1 billion by providing an
additional $181 million for a total of $1.181 billion for this program.

To date, the federal government’s Investing in Our Schools program has provided more than $656 million for 15,100 projects in 6,166 state government schools across the country. It has provided $210 million for 2,031 projects in 1,603 non-government schools across the country. Due to the overwhelming popularity and incredible need for capital funding for basic infrastructure in schools throughout Australia, the Howard government has decided to give this additional funding so that more schools can benefit from the program. The success of the Investing in Our Schools program has highlighted the failures and chronic neglect, particularly on the part of state governments, towards school infrastructure.

Essentially, the federal government’s Investing in Our Schools program is a gift to schools in need and is fixing the problems that state Labor governments have ignored. Across Australia, there have been thousands of schools which have desperately sought this funding—funding which, for state government schools, is in fact the responsibility of state governments to provide. In many instances, it has been quite disheartening to see the condition which the state governments have allowed schools to be in throughout this country. During the process, I have seen and heard of many sad examples of neglect in maintaining state government schools.

Investing in Our Schools program funds have not only helped schools to repair basic infrastructure like toilet blocks; they have also refurbished classrooms and installed new computer equipment, upgraded old or dangerous playgrounds, purchased new items such as library books and sporting equipment, and installed air conditioning and shadecloth in schools across the country.

While this federal government program has actually now shamed a number of state governments into increasing their commitment to capital funding for state government schools—and that is a long overdue increase—I have found some aspects of the response by state governments throughout Australia to this extremely positive program disappointing. State Labor governments—and I will particularly identify Western Australia and New South Wales—have chosen to use this program as an opportunity to create their own financial gains by reaping funds from the Investing in Our Schools program, taking funds from schools by means of excessive project management or administration fees. State governments have actually taken fees from these projects that effectively stripped schools of some of their Commonwealth funding, and they are charging them excessive amounts for implementation. This is clearly unacceptable. It is an unfair action on the part of state governments, and I have written to them about it. They are taking money from school projects and that is not in the spirit of the IOS program. I renew my call to state governments who are skimming off excessive project management or administration fees to repay those funds to the schools. If a school receives funding from the Commonwealth for a project, then that is the funding that that school should receive. It should not have amounts skimmed off by the state Labor governments.

The Howard government have funded all Australian schools at record levels since coming to office in 1996. We will provide a record $33 billion in funding for Australian schools over the four years from 2005 to 2008. Funding to Australian schools has increased by almost 160 per cent, from $3.6 billion in 1996 to $9.3 billion in 2006-07. Through increased financial assistance to schools, particularly schools serving the neediest communities, the government are
seeking to improve the outcomes for all Australian students.

State governments have primary responsibility for education. The state governments own, operate and are the major source of funds for public schools, while the federal government supplements that funding as a percentage of the state investment. State governments accredit and regulate non-government schools, while the federal government provides the majority of public funding. So the responsibility for government and non-government schools is shared by the state and federal governments.

It has been claimed that there is decreasing Commonwealth funding to state government schools. That is not true. In fact, the opposite is true. The government has provided record levels of funding to state government schools every year since 1996—an increase of over 118 per cent. It is interesting to note that enrolments in government schools have increased by only 1.2 per cent during that time. It is also claimed that non-government schools are supported at the expense of government schools. That is not true; that is not the case. The Howard government believes that it is every parent’s right to choose the best educational outcome for their child, and this government’s funding policies have provided parents with greater choice in schooling than ever before. There has been a 21½ per cent increase in enrolments at non-government schools since 1996. Even so, 67 per cent of students are enrolled in public schools that receive 75 per cent of total public funding. Thirty-three per cent of students are enrolled in non-government schools that receive 25 per cent of total public funding.

The Howard government is already making a significant investment in school buildings and infrastructure under the capital grants program. This program is providing an estimated $1.7 billion over 2005-08 to assist with the building, maintenance and updating of schools throughout Australia. This includes an estimated $1.2 billion in capital grants funding for state and territory government schools and an estimated $480 million for Catholic and independent schools. That does not include the funding in this bill. This bill will provide $11.7 million for capital funding for non-government schools for 2008. This funding is to maintain the existing levels of funding; without this amendment, capital funding for non-government schools for 2008 would decrease.

So, through this bill, the highly successful Investing in Our Schools program will be bolstered by an additional $181 million. Of this funding, an additional $127 million will be made available for state government schools and $54 million will be provided for non-government schools. Almost 90 per cent of state government schools throughout Australia have already received funding through this program.

While the majority of students across the country are already benefiting from projects funded by the program, there remain a number of schools that have not yet applied for funding or that have only received a small amount. The Australian government is targeting these schools for the additional funds, to assist all Australian state government schools to benefit from the Investing in Our Schools program and give all state government schools the opportunity to access the new funding. State government schools which have received no funding or smaller amounts of funding will be able to apply for projects that take their total approved grants from all rounds of the Investing in Our Schools program up to $150,000. That is the average amount that schools have received under the three rounds now completed. For non-government schools, the additional funds are
for grants of up to $75,000, again targeting schools that have received little or no funding under the program to date.

This bill takes our commitment over and above our 2004 election commitment of $1 billion; it is now an almost $1.2 billion program. This bill responds to the specific needs of schools and school communities. This government will continue to identify and respond to community aspirations for Australian schools to deliver the highest standards of education possible. The Australian government are committed to supporting a quality school education for all Australian children. The programs and initiatives we are putting in place are helping to create an Australian education system of high national standards, national consistency and quality so that all young people are prepared to meet the future demands of life and work.

This bill reinforces the Howard government’s ongoing commitment to ensuring that Australian children are given the best opportunity to have a quality learning experience in the best possible environment. I commend this bill to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—The original question was that this bill be now read a second time. To this the honourable member for Perth 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.

COMMITTEES
Selection Committee
Report
Mr CAUSLEY (Page) (5.30 pm)—I present the report of the Selection Committee relating to the consideration of committee and delegation reports and private members’ business on Monday, 26 March 2007. The report will be printed in today’s Hansard and the items accorded priority for debate will be published in the Notice Paper for the next sitting.

The report read as follows—

Report relating to the consideration of committee and delegation reports and private Members’ business on Monday, 26 March 2007

Pursuant to standing order 222, the Selection Committee has determined the order of precedence and times to be allotted for consideration of committee and delegation reports and private Members’ business on Monday, 26 March 2007. The order of precedence and the allotments of time determined by the Committee are as follows:

COMMITTEE AND DELEGATION REPORTS

Presentation and statements
1 Australian Parliamentary Delegation to Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum

Report of the Australian Parliamentary Delegation to the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum, Moscow

The Committee determined that statements on the report may be made—all statements to conclude by 12:40pm

Speech time limits—
Each Member—5 minutes.
[Minimum number of proposed Members speaking = 2 x 5 mins]

2 PARLIAMENTARY JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE AUSTRALIAN CRIME COMMISSION

Inquiry into the manufacture, importation and use of amphetamines and other synthetic drugs (AOSD) in Australia

The Committee determined that statements on the report may be made—all statements to conclude by 12:50pm

Speech time limits—
Each Member—5 minutes.

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

3 JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AND EXTERNAL TERRITORIES

Review of the Griffin Legacy Amendments

The Committee determined that statements on the report may be made—all statements to conclude by 1:00pm

Speech time limits—
Each Member—5 minutes.

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

4 JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON TREATIES

Report 83: Treaties tabled on 20 June (2), 17 October, 28 November (2) 2006 and CO2 Sequestration in Sub-Seabed Formations

The Committee determined that statements on the report may be made—all statements to conclude by 1:10pm

Speech time limits—
Each Member—5 minutes.

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

5 JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

Review of Australia’s Relationship with Malaysia

The Committee determined that statements on the report may be made—all statements to conclude by 1:20pm

Speech time limits—
Each Member—5 minutes.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Order of precedence

Notices

1 Mr Forrest: to move—

That the House:
(1) notes the renewed interest being taken in the potential for cloud seeding to enhance precipitation across Australia;
(2) acknowledges that Snowy Hydro has rolled out an extensive cloud seeding operation over the past two winters for snow fall enhancement and that Hydro Tasmania has been undertaking cloud seeding precipitation enhancement operations for several decades;
(3) notes that many countries around the world continue to invest heavily in cloud seeding research, whilst in Australia it has not been enthusiastically embraced by the scientific community; and
(4) calls for the establishment of an Australian Cooperative Research Centre for weather modification to follow similar models in other countries. (Notice given 27 February 2007.)

Time allotted—remaining private Members’ business time prior to 1.45 pm

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

[Minimum number of proposed Members speaking = 4 x 5 mins]

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

2 Ms George: to move—

That the House:
condemns the Mugabe Government in Zimbabwe for the brutal bashings in police custody of Morgan Tsvangirai and other leaders and supporters of the Opposition Party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC);

expresses concern at the ongoing threat of violence as evidenced by the additional vicious beating of MP Nelson Chamisa in recent days;

notes that the Mugabe Government has clearly abandoned the rule of law and tolerates no dissent;

expresses its concern for the safety of former Australian passport holder Mrs Sekai Holland and her Australian husband Jim Holland, and urges the Australian Government to use its best endeavours to intervene to have Mrs Holland released from custody and safely transported out of Zimbabwe for urgent medical attention; and

calls on the Australian Government to have the Mugabe regime’s actions brought before the UN Security Council and if appropriate, the International Criminal Court, and calls on Zimbabwe’s neighbours, particularly South Africa, to take action in support of human rights in Zimbabwe. (Notice given 20 March 2007.)

Third Reading

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

Mr Hardgrave: to move—

That the House:

condemns the Mugabe Government in Zimbabwe for the brutal bashings in police custody of Morgan Tsvangirai and other leaders and supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC);

expresses concern at the ongoing threat of violence as evidenced by the additional vicious beating of MP Nelson Chamisa in recent days;

notes that the Mugabe Government has clearly abandoned the rule of law and tolerates no dissent;

expresses its concern for the safety of former Australian passport holder Mrs Sekai Holland and her Australian husband Jim Holland, and urges the Australian Government to use its best endeavours to intervene to have Mrs Holland released from custody and safely transported out of Zimbabwe for urgent medical attention; and

calls on the Australian Government to have the Mugabe regime’s actions brought before the UN Security Council and if appropriate, the International Criminal Court, and calls on Zimbabwe’s neighbours, particularly South Africa, to take action in support of human rights in Zimbabwe. (Notice given 20 March 2007.)

Time allotted—remaining private Members’ business time.

Speech time limits—

Mover of motion—5 minutes.

First Opposition Member speaking—5 minutes.

Other Members—5 minutes each.

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

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

FARM HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT AMENDMENT BILL 2007

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 1 March, on motion by Ms Ley:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr CREAN (Hotham) (5.30 pm)—I rise essentially to indicate on behalf of the opposition that we support the Farm Household Support Amendment Bill 2007 because we take the view that anything to address the...
plight of drought affected farmers and the communities they serve, in this the period of the worst drought in a thousand years, is worth while. Our concern is whether the initiatives that are proposed in this bill will work given that they seek to replace an earlier government initiative that has been a dismal failure. Secondly, I wish to take the opportunity in this debate to point out that the government really has done very little to address the causes of this severe drought in this country.

If one goes back over the period of time since the first drought bill was brought in back in 1992, this government has done very little to advance drought policy or initiatives to obviate drought in this country or to lessen those things that have an impact on it. The truth is this is the worst drought in a thousand years and it is continuing. Forty-four per cent of the nation is declared to be in exceptional circumstances. That is a desperate situation for all affected communities. We know because on this side of the House we visit them and in many cases we represent them given that the coverage of this drought affected area now is so huge. We have had to put forward our own policy initiatives in the past—and I will come to those in a minute.

What we are really critical of this government for is its failure to take any leadership to address the real causes of the problem. This government inherited the national drought policy that it operates under. It was a policy that I introduced as minister for primary industries in 1992. It is a drought policy that has stood the test of time when drought occurs. Up until this, the worst drought in a thousand years, the drought in 1992 was the worst on record. We have always recognised that much more has to be done to address the causes of drought, not just the consequences of it and the impact it has on families and their communities. The policy that we introduced back then recognised fundamentally the need, once drought had happened, to put food on the table, to ensure that people can survive and to try and restore some of the dignity, much of which is lost, of many farming families during these debilitating circumstances.

But we also recognised the need to ensure that farmers were not just provided with income support. We put in place policies to better equip them to prepare for drought in the future and adopt appropriate drought management solutions. The approach that we put forward, which was adopted, included structural adjustment, interest subsidies and the introduction of the farm deposit scheme, as it is now known, so that people could put aside money in the good times without it being taxed and draw down in the bad times. We also proposed many initiatives to better train our farm community for better drought management techniques—better farming techniques generally but in particular better land usage and better preparation for drought into the future.

That was a comprehensive policy put in place back in 1992, and this government has really failed to build on any of those initiatives in the time that it has been in office. Even worse, this government has failed to address the climate change issues identified as the key cause of the drought. I do not know how many times I have had to come into this chamber when this government has been in charge through this drought and listen to them constantly blaming the states. We know that their constant refrain is to never accept any responsibility for anything that goes wrong and to simply shift the blame. They claim credit for everything that goes right but they shift the blame for anything that goes wrong, and the constant refrain when it came to drought policy was to always criticise the states either for failure to move quickly on the exceptional circumstances considerations or failure to declare
certain areas et cetera. People are sick to death of the blame game being used as an excuse for failure on policy grounds.

The drought continues and is having a devastating effect on rural communities. It is a devastation that we try to empathise with, but unless you are in the middle of it you do not really fully understand it. You do understand when you visit people. You see the hardships and the hurt. It is not just loss of incomes to families. In many cases it is loss of the family history, the loss of the family farm. It is the isolation that comes from it, the sense of failure and despair and the inability to feed the family and find income that enables the basics in life to be met. It tears not only at the individuals but also at the social fabric of the communities and the rich cultural history that the farming community has given to this country.

I said before that, during the last worst drought on record, I did see the need to respond to these circumstances—to address the pain and suffering as best we could and prepare for the future. The drought policy of 1992 was not an easy exercise because it did require the cooperation of all state governments. In those days, unlike today, all but one of those state governments was a coalition government. As a Labor primary industries minister I had to negotiate with coalition ministers to develop the national drought policy. There was only one Labor primary industries minister, the late Ed Casey from Queensland.

It took a lot of time because there was this argument as to who was responsible and the proportions and shares that should be paid up in the case of exceptional circumstances. I was prepared to go the extra steps and commit the additional resources to secure an outcome because I believed that it was in the interests of the country and our farming community. We did reach agreement between the state and federal governments. We did, in those years, end the blame game. That is why nothing annoys me more than to hear this government revert to it when all it had to do was effectively implement that which it inherited. I hear the Treasurer in this parliament talk about the people who were the authors of the policy and why not let them have the opportunity to implement it. I turn those words back on him. I do not understand why in this coalition government the National Party predominantly always gets the agricultural portfolio. It does not have the wit or the wisdom to develop a sensible drought policy for this country or to build on that which we put in place. If the National Party in this country does not stand for effective drought policy and looking after farmers, what the hell does it stand for? Yet I look in frustration at the wasted opportunities, especially in these very hard circumstances, where we could have built on the initiatives and done much more to help struggling farmers in the circumstances.

The Rural Adjustment Scheme, which is a scheme that I implemented, was the vehicle for providing assistance to farmers in times of exceptional circumstances, including, but not limited to, drought. That was an important part of the broader drought policy. The objectives of the policy were to encourage the agricultural sector to adopt a self-reliant approach to management for drought. They were also to maintain and protect Australia’s agricultural and environmental resource base during the severe drought, to preserve as best we could the land—the productive capacity of our great farming community. It was also a policy that, in having preserved and retained that productive capacity, enabled us to adopt long-term sustainability practices and put in place the mechanisms by which long-term sustainability became the way forward.

One of the key features of major changes to the Rural Adjustment Scheme announced
in September 1992 was to introduce the exceptional circumstances provisions, which included the differentiation between financial assistance to farm business and to the farm household, keeping the business, the viable farmers, on the land, but providing the much-needed household support for those who had no income whatsoever. It was a drought policy that demonstrated that Labor can work in cooperation with the states to deliver a cooperative approach. More importantly, it was the Labor government that gave the lead on this. We do not see that leadership from the self-styled supporters of the rural community over there. I hope the farming community, as much as they might have history, prejudices or whatever you want to call it against the Labor Party, do understand which party in office not only has stood behind them but has been prepared to develop the innovative, creative solutions to deal with their problems.

The bill being debated today extends the exceptional circumstance relief payments and ancillary benefits to agriculturally dependent businesses that have endured a sustained negative impact on their businesses and incomes due to the drought. But again we see in this legislation a government acting only when it becomes a crisis situation. It is also worth while noting that this is legislation to fix an initiative announced, I think, in 2005 which has been a failure in its implementation. The government got it wrong last time when it tried to extend payments to agriculturally dependent businesses in rural communities. We support the notion that communities, not just the farms themselves, may need support. We do not argue against the principle inherent in that. The government made an earlier attempt to assist small businesses affected by the drought, and I go to the explanatory memorandum to remind the House as to what we are dealing with here. It says:

Agriculturally dependent small business operators are currently able to access EC Relief Payments through ex-gratia arrangements. The amendments to the FHS Act—that we are dealing with—will formalise these arrangements as well as provide agriculturally dependent small business operators with access to a Health Care Card.

The extension of entitlement is worthy, but I am still looking for a demonstration that this legislation fixes the problem that the earlier announcement was supposed to address. Let me remind the House of what we were told. The government did make an earlier attempt to assist small businesses and to extend to them a similar definition where, I think, 70 per cent of the income of the business is derived from agricultural activity—that is the test. But when the National Audit Office did a performance audit into drought assistance in 2004-05, it noted that when the government introduced the initiative that was supposed to cover agriculturally dependent businesses in rural communities, the government claimed that they expected to get up to 17½ thousand applications, 14,000 of which, they assessed, would be successful.

I ask the question: does the parliamentary secretary at the table know what the actual result was? There were 17½ thousand applications expected. Do you know how many were actually received? It was 452. If you were that far off the mark, you would be drummed out of a business for incompetence. The shareholders would be demanding that the board be sacked. There was all the hoo-ha about looking after businesses in rural communities affected by the drought, not just the farmers. The government said that this was going to impact on 17½ thousand people and there were only 452 applications. How many do you think were successful? It was only 182—a third. So not only were they way off the mark in terms of the reach of this policy; the application process was so hard to
get through, presumably, that people either gave up or did not know that the scheme was there. I do not know. I would be interested when the minister comes to explain this in response.

How is it that of so few applications even fewer get up? How could the government get it so wrong? How could the National Party in particular stand by and let this happen to its constituents? It is all very well to argue that this bill extends the notion of the health card, but the question I ask is: where is the evidence that they have fixed the problem in applications? Where is the evidence that this legislation is actually going to hit the mark? It is little wonder that businesses did not access the government’s initial provisions, because the government made it too hard.

Criticisms that were made of the previous program included that small business operators were too busy to complete the forms, the forms were too complex and the effort to complete the forms was greater than the benefits. Previously, businesses have found it difficult to prove that 70 per cent of income derives from ‘farm business’. What is farm business? These are all the definitional issues that this bill does not address.

I suspect that here we have another piece of legislation where the government are trying to give the impression they are doing something when in fact the policy will fail again. I want the minister, when he responds, to tell us how they have fixed the failure that was endemic in the scheme previously. I would also like to understand why, in this exercise, the definition of small business in a rural community is the one that they use for the workplace relations test—100 employees or less. I ask the House to reflect on this: what we are being asked to do here is to extend farm household support to a business which is 70 per cent reliant on agricultural income. If you have to give farm household support to the business owner, does anyone seriously suggest that they would still be employing 100, 90, 80, 76, 60 or five people? If you need farm household support, how the hell can you employ anyone? This is the point I am making. This bill does not seem to have been thought through.

I wonder what we are debating here. No one argues against the need for this sort of extension, but are we really addressing the problem? Are we hitting the mark? The government did not hit the mark on the earlier occasion and I suspect they will not hit the mark on the next occasion. Labor have an amendment. The amendment will not fix the problem—it is simply to try to draw attention to the problem—but I think it is incumbent on the minister to explain how this problem is going to be fixed into the future. Unless they do it, I think farmers are entitled to think that they are being let down seriously yet again.

I make the point: no-one can question Labor’s bona fides or our commitment to both providing farm household support and trying to address and alleviate the pressures consequent upon drought. Our record stands. The policy that we put in place still stands. The policy that we put in place has not been built upon despite the fact that we are experiencing a worse drought than when I introduced the policy some 15 years ago.

That brings me to another point that I want to make in this debate. While it is one thing to provide drought assistance, it is just as important, in terms of a balanced approach to policy, to ensure that we deal with the cause of the drought and implement policies that address the cause. Back then I argued that we had to recognise that water management issues could not be looked at separately, that they must be considered in terms of industry development and environmental protection and that all of these were linked. I have also said on previous occa-
sions that water is not just an environmental issue, an economic issue or a social issue; it is all three of them. That is why this issue of addressing both climate change and water policy is so vital. This is where the Commonwealth does have to play a leadership role. Back then we did not develop just the drought policy; we also developed a national water quality strategy. We amalgamated the agriculture, soil conservation and water resource councils to deal with natural resource management in an integrated way. I used the funding in those programs to leverage a commitment from the states, local government and individual stakeholders to invest in the infrastructure that was going to help retain water through technological solutions as well as channel covering and lining for the prevention of evaporation and seepage, through which so much of our great natural resource of water goes. We were arguing that 15 years ago; again, the basis for that was laid by us.

What did we see from this government until this year? Nothing. We saw the hastily cobbled together $10 billion Water Initiative of the Prime Minister that did not even go to cabinet. We had the Minister for Finance and Administration, who is in another chamber, say, when asked about this in Senate estimates, ‘What’s a billion dollars a year?’ And they have the gall to lecture the Labor Party about fiscal responsibility! So you don’t have to take to cabinet initiatives for $10 billion expenditure into the never-never! So you don’t have to consider the consequences; you just dump this out because you know you’re in strife and you’ve got to be seen to be doing something!

I lament this country’s wasted opportunities because this government failed. It was derelict in its duty because it did not build on the initiatives that Labor put in place in terms of drought, water policy and natural resource management. The base was laid, but this government, as with so many other things, went to sleep at the wheel. It wants to talk about the good things that happened, but they happened not by any policy direction of its own. Imagine what could have been done had the initiatives been carried on.

True, they have continued the national Landcare program—again an initiative that Labor introduced. They have scrapped the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and want to set up a Commonwealth takeover. I think it is a moot point as to whether it is better guided by a national body or an independent body. I happen to believe an independent body is the right way to go. Some three years ago in this place, as the Leader of the Australian Labor Party, I proposed, in a budget speech in reply, an initiative to save the Murray River and to put in place a scheme to put river flows back into the Murray-Darling Basin system. I proposed an initiative called Riverbank, whereby a Commonwealth investment would put into this fund money that would enable the necessary infrastructure to be undertaken to preserve our precious water. The water that we saved would be banked; it would be deposited. Once you had deposited it, you had to have a strategy by which you allowed the deposits to be taken out and go back into water flows. I proposed the establishment of an environmental flows trust, a body independent of government that, based on the science and the priorities, would make the decision as to where the savings from the initiatives went. That is smart policy. It was proposed and offered in a bipartisan way over three years ago, yet this government wants to make out it is doing something on water by appointing a minister. And what is the minister’s solution? Reversion to the blame game, to go around bagging the states for not doing certain sorts of things.

I am the first to accept that the states are not always the easiest to deal with and that just because you have come up with an idea it does not necessarily automatically get
adopted by them. But I do know this, because I have done it and practically implemented it: if what you have got are the resources of the Commonwealth and effective leverage over initiatives that drive partnerships with the states, with local government and with the stakeholders, therein lies the solution. But you have got to have the preparedness to put the hard work in, to look at the initiatives, to get the right people around you, to commit the resources of the Commonwealth and to forge a partnership with the rest of the proponents.

As I will have opportunities on other occasions to talk more about water initiatives, I will go to the question of climate change in the brief time that I have left. This government argues that we should not sign the Kyoto protocol. I will tell you why we should sign up to Kyoto: it gives us a seat at the international negotiating table. If we are to address emissions in this country, an emissions-trading regime has to be developed. It has to be international. I would have thought that it would be in the interests of a country like ours, one of the most efficient producers of energy in the world, to be participating in a framework that gave us recognition for that efficiency. It would give us credits, bankable commodities or bankable instruments, that we could present as part of the equation when we went to negotiate in international marketplaces to try to win contracts. Think about it: it is what we did as a Labor government with the Rio summit at the last attempt at greenhouse gas reductions where we insisted that greenhouse sinks—plantations, if you like—should be included in the calculation for abatement. We won that argument. We won it because we had a strategy, we had a plan to implement it in this country and we were prepared to turn up at the international forum and argue for it.

This government’s solution is to stay away from the forum. Everyone knows that this issue cannot be solved unless there is an international solution, and that is why we need to sign Kyoto. But it is not just about Kyoto. It is about investing in clean coal technologies and renewables. It is about embracing MRET in advance of an effective emissions trading regime. We have seen none of this policy development from this government, and that is why we have real reservations about this bill. We do not think the details will work and, unless there is an explanation, we think this will be another costly failure and another disappointment. But, most of all, it is about the failure of the government to address the causes of drought through climate change measures, better water management and building on the initiatives of the drought policy that only Labor had the wit and wisdom to introduce. Get behind the authors of what is good for this country in terms of land management. Re-elect the Labor government and you will see these issues properly addressed for the first time in 12 long years.

Mr BROADBENT (McMillan) (6.01 pm)—It is fortuitous that we are having this debate at a time when 90 per cent of Victoria has been declared to be in exceptional circumstances. My contribution to this debate follows the contribution made by the member for Hotham, who was the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy in the Labor government from June 1991 to December 1993. While the Labor government was in power, he stood up to his thighs in green grass in the good times in Gippsland. In his time as a minister he has also seen the tears of rural communities falling in the dust on dry ground. He has lived through this and will know exactly what I am talking about. I do not for one moment come to this House to blame anybody for the difficulties we face as a community together across Australia. The member for Hotham probably has a broader
knowledge of the issues than anybody in his party, particularly with regard to rural Australians and the people who have had to face up to these most difficult times. Coming from the community that I come from, where we normally have an abundance of water and green grass, he will understand what it is like to stand with farmers in the bottom of their empty dams when they are spending $250 per day just to cart water for their stock.

I hope the Howard government and this parliament will be seen as the best friends the Australian farming community has ever had. This government is determined to keep farmers farming through these difficult times of drought by holding the line in support of farming families to ensure their futures in agriculture and the futures of their collective community; by standing in support of the farming women who, in turn, support their men; by standing in support of the men of the land, who are held up by rural women; and by standing beside the children of farming families in the knowledge that, like their parents and their grandparents before them, they too will have a future in agriculture, not only in Gippsland in Victoria but throughout the nation.

I welcome this opportunity to speak on the Farm Household Support Amendment Bill 2007. Representing a rural electorate as I do, I am painfully aware of the serious impact that years of drought have had on our farming communities and rural businesses, which rely on water for their very prosperity. In my electorate of McMillan, that impact has been devastating. It goes beyond what the member for Hotham explained as exceptional circumstances. We now understand that exceptional circumstances triggered the Australian government relief for farmers that was put in place in 1992. In my area we are now enduring what I have termed extraordinary circumstances, which profoundly affects all aspects of rural life.

The Howard government has responded with compassion to the plight of our farming communities during the progress of this extended dry period. Since coming to office, it has expanded and refined the application of exceptional circumstances, which were first accepted in 1992. In 1999, agreement was reached on new criteria for exceptional circumstances, and these are the criteria we use today. This was followed in 2000 by a review of EC, which led to the recognition of buffer zones where farmers living in close proximity to a declared area could also apply for assistance. In 2002 the government agreed to provide immediate access to drought assistance as soon as an application for an exceptional circumstances declaration was received. This prima facie declaration meant that farmers immediately became eligible for income relief for six months even if the National Rural Advisory Council subsequently recommended against the declaration.

The reforms to the exceptional circumstances process continued in 2005 with a new drought package. That drought package increased the interest rate subsidy level from 50 per cent to 80 per cent for farm businesses in their second or subsequent years of EC declaration, doubled the off-farm assets threshold and introduced a $10,000 annual offset against the income support test and an automatic reassessment process for exceptional circumstances declared areas nearing the end of their second year of assistance.

More recently, the government announced two further expansions of its drought assistance program. In October 2006 there was a significant policy change to EC arrangements that extended income support payments and interest rate subsidies to all eligible producers. This removed the differentiation between producers such as irrigators, dryland farmers and dairy farmers in certain exceptional circumstances declared areas. In
November 2006 exceptional circumstances drought relief was further extended to include thousands of small businesses that derive a minimum of 70 per cent of their income directly from agriculture. This meant that people like harvesting and fencing contractors; seed, feed and fertiliser merchants; livestock carriers; shearing contractors; and farm machinery businesses could access assistance.

The bill now before the House will give effect to these important changes. It will enable small business operators dependent on agriculture to gain access to relief payments and ancillary benefits such as concessions under the youth allowance and Austudy. It also gives effect to the current ex gratia arrangements for small business income support and sets out the criteria that will determine eligibility, to ensure the assistance is available to those small businesses most affected by this most difficult drought. It will clarify the position of small business operators who could also be considered farmers and might not be eligible for assistance under the current criteria. The Farm Household Support Amendment Bill 2007 will also affect the Social Security Act 1991 and the Age Discrimination Act 2004. The changes to the Social Security Act are necessary to enable small business owners to gain access to concessions under the youth allowance and Austudy means tests. These are already available to farmers.

The bill before the House also makes a number of changes to the Farm Household Support Act in order to bring it into line with the Age Discrimination Act. The Attorney-General has provided an exemption from the provisions of the Age Discrimination Act to enable EC relief payments for both small business operators and farmers to be calculated according to their age. Those sections of the Farm Household Support Act that have age qualifications that do not already have exemptions under the Age Discrimination Act will be removed when this bill is passed.

The Howard government’s response to the unfolding issue of what has become the worst drought in living memory has been both measured and timely. In consultation with farming groups, individual farmers, small business operators and community groups, it has introduced change when needed. As was pointed out in the second reading speech of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Australian government has provided $1.3 billion in drought assistance since 2001 and is committed to a further $900 million to the year 2008.

Some measure of the seriousness of this drought can be drawn from its impact on those parts of Victoria’s South and West Gippsland regions that make up my seat of McMillan and the seat of Gippsland, held by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Peter McGauran. In more normal times, this area is regarded as one of the most stable and consistent rainfall areas in our state. However, the cumulative effects of the past 10 years have had a severe impact on the dairy industry in particular, one of the mainstays of our regional economy. Each year, as the drought progresses, there is mounting concern as we miss out on any meaningful autumn breaks and get well below average winter rainfall, the lifeblood of the dairy industry.

What concerns me most about the impact of the drought in my electorate is the unfolding human and animal welfare crisis. After 10 years of worsening conditions, we have now reached the point where it is likely that a significant number of the most vulnerable dairy farmers may well not survive into the future. The least resilient and therefore the most at risk of being lost to the industry are the sharefarmers and leaseholders, consid-
erred by most as the future of the dairy industry in our area. They are struggling to maintain the value of their only real asset, their herds, which have dropped to about half their value at July last year. My office has been inundated with calls from farmers and their families at the end of their tether, physically and financially, and not knowing where to turn for help. We have had stories of several hundred farmers across the electorate paying as much as $250 a day, as I mentioned before, just to cart water in order to keep their livestock alive.

In southern Victoria the countryside in normal years supports perennial pasture species. This is no longer the case. Because of the drought, our farmers are now facing the additional burden of having to resow these pastures. With no pasture, fodder stocks have also been exhausted, and the same farmers have had to borrow substantial sums to pay huge feed bills, with round bales six to eight times their normal price. Much of this debt is owed to cooperatives that have to be repaid. The result of this is that even when dairy farmers in my electorate get back to meaningful production many of them will face the prospect of receiving no milk cheques—or very little of their milk cheques—until their loans are paid back.

Apart from the farmers, who are bearing the brunt of these effects of the drought, milk factories have also been seriously affected. The Murray Goulburn Cooperative Company, the largest dairy processing company in Australia, has reported a drop of 14 per cent in the daily deliveries of milk. It has had at least 50 suppliers quit the industry across Victoria, and I suspect this number will increase. Murray Goulburn has a major plant at Leongatha, in the centre of my electorate of McMillan, in the heart of one of Australia’s most important dairying regions. The company’s chairman, Mr Ian MacAuley, said its future viability is critical to the prosperity of the region and of the state of Victoria. Murray Goulburn has invested heavily in its Leongatha plant, and Mr MacAuley said future investment plans of more than $200 million relied on the continuing strong productivity of the dairy farm sector.

For the past six months I have been visiting and talking to farming groups, individual farmers, industry and community leaders and regional water authorities. These talks resulted in a strong case being put to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and his Victorian state counterpart to have exceptional circumstances declared in the four shires that make up the majority of my electorate of McMillan.

I have also made these concerns known to the office of the Prime Minister and to the Prime Minister himself when the opportunity presented itself when he came to Garfield recently for an announcement on extending broadband opportunities. The Prime Minister then stood on ground that was bare. Whilst the individual farmer himself had water and feed for his cattle—it was not a dairy farm but a beef farm—he explained to the Prime Minister as we looked across Koo Wee Rup swamp from where we were standing on the Garfield hills that those down there were desperate for water and feed.

As I have said, the conditions being experienced by farmers in parts of my electorate—and I am sure in many electorates around the country—are beyond exceptional circumstances and are surely this time extraordinary circumstances. Farmers occupy and manage 60 per cent of Australia’s land mass and know better than anyone how harsh the Australian climate can be. In periods of exceptional circumstances the best and most experienced farmers are normally able to cope as a result of forward planning and decision making based on their experience. But, in the present circumstances, even some
of the most experienced farmers are struggling, and I fear there will be many farming operations that simply will not survive this drought.

I have been standing on the parched earth of McMillan. It is not something I remember well, though we have experienced droughts before. I grew up in a dairy-farming community. I grew up with the people that lived on the land. I have milked cows for a very short time—I think a week; I found it was not for me. I hold in awe those people who milk twice a day and who are out there struggling—for some, for the first time in their lives. These are people I mentioned just before. These people are not struggling farmers; these people are very, very good farmers. These people are across our nation. I know that they are not only in my area; I know they are in Tasmania. I know I am speaking to people across the nation on dairy farms. But I am telling you now that for the second time in Gippsland—and we have had a drought going on for 10 years; since 1997 this drought has been afflicting us—this has brought us to a stage where there has been no run-off since May last year in these areas that I am talking about. Even though we would have snippets of rain and you would come down to some parts of the electorate and you would say it was green, there is no water there.

The reason I have been pleading with my own minister, Peter McGauran, and with Joe Helper in Victoria, is that we are seen in Gippsland as not needing exceptional circumstances assistance. That is why I keep calling them extraordinary circumstances, because I can tell you, if we do not get autumn rain and if this nation does not get autumn rain, there will be a lot more people on our plate for this nation to look after.

We do have a responsibility to our rural communities that feed us, look after us and export for us, remembering that 70 per cent of this milk is exported overseas. But when they are having a tough time, isn’t it right that the communities in the cities, through their taxes, support these people as best we are able? I repeat again: we are not supporting inefficient farmers; we are supporting efficient farmers, determined farmers, third-generation farmers, who are saying, ‘I am not going to lose this farm because my dad had it and my grandad had it.’ I know there are members in this House today that have stood with farmers exactly the same as those people. That is why I say we have got to hold
the line to support farming families to ensure
their futures in agriculture and the future of
their collective communities. We are talking
about the loss of community. We are really
talking about the future generations, standing
beside the children of farming families in the
knowledge that, like their parents and their
grandparents—the generations before
them—they too will have a future in agricul-
ture. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (6.21
pm)—I compliment the member for
McMillan on his speech. I listened intently to
it and I can assure him that there are other
members in this House who agree whole-
heartedly with the sentiments that he has
conveyed. I would also thank the member for
Hotham for the contribution that he made
earlier. I remember the time that he was the
primary industries minister. I know that
many farmers, who probably were not Labor
voters at the time, remember some of the
initiatives that he put in place. I certainly do.
I commend him for his interest in the agri-
cultural sector over those years and since that
time.

In recognising and supporting the Farm
Household Support Amendment Bill 2007
before the House, I want to go to what the
member for Hotham said, because I think he
made some very important points in terms of
policy and what we are actually trying to
dress. He made a very disturbing point, in
my view, that, when this policy of support to
small businesses was actually put in place,
the projections were that 17,000 small busi-
nesses would apply and 14,000. I think he
said, would be successful—and this was all
in a report. Only 450 small businesses ap-
plied and 181 were successful in gaining
support. I criticised the government at the
time because they used different numbers to
determine what a small business was. They
were using 20 when it suited and 100 when it
suited in other circumstances in the industrial
relations legislation. There was duplicity in
the numbers in terms of what a small busi-
ness was. That matter has been addressed in
this legislation.

At the time, it was promoted as an initia-
tive to help those small businesses that were
reliant on agriculture for their income and
were suffering from the drought but were
needed for the long-term viability of the farm
sector in regional communities when the
drought broke. There was a legitimate reason
for supporting them. That number that the
member for Hotham mentioned of 181 busi-
nesses successfully gaining support I find
quite astonishing. I would like the minister to
tackle this in his response, or maybe some
members of the government could. If that is
in fact the number, I think we really need to
revisit this legislation. I thought the member
for McMillan put this very well: this is not
just about farmers; it is about communities.
There is no doubt that there are a lot of small
businesses out there—whether they be spray
contractors, harvesting contractors or fencing
contractors. Because the very nature of agri-
culture is changing, a lot more contract work
is being done. Hence those businesses are an
integral part of the future of agriculture. We
really do need to make sure that there is
genuine support going to those people. Like
the member for Hotham, I am not convinced
that this legislation will actually do that. Re-
grettably, the only way we will ascertain
whether it will provide that support will be
with hindsight. Hopefully, damage will not
be done to those people, but it could well
happen, and damage has been done in recent
years.

I would also like to talk about the general
support given to agriculture and the way
various people, particularly in the media and
in the city, some with political objectives—
and, thankfully, I have not noticed it too
much in this place—portray the support
given to agriculture during a drought as ex-
orbitant support. I think the government tends to be a little cute from time to time in terms of what is actually support for the farm sector. If you look at business support to agriculture during the worst drought in history—and I do not have the absolute numbers at this particular time, but I have raised this issue before and the minister can address the numbers—from 2001 to 2005, a four-year period, you will find that $242 million was spent on business support. Some people might know what business support means. It is exceptional circumstance interest rate assistance. In that period of time, the government argued that a vast amount of money was expended on farm support. Much of that support was by way of household assistance.

Household assistance is no different to the dole: unemployment benefits given to a family not receiving an income. In this case, it is a farm family who really needs to stay on the land to maintain the farm rather than leave the farm and seek income from another job. In that sense, that is not industry support; that is personal support to those households. In that particular four-year period, we have this extraordinary number: an average of $60 million a year in business support to the farm sector. As I said, I do not know what that number is today.

In her speech, the parliamentary secretary said that total support to the farm sector from the government over six years has been $1.3 billion, and she projected some hundreds of millions of dollars more into the future. My estimate of the business support to agriculture during that period of time is no more than about $450 million. Even being polite about it, say it is over five years, that is $90 million a year during the worst drought in living memory for a very important sector of our economy.

About 18 months ago, an article in the Australian said, and others were saying the same thing, that we cannot keep propping agriculture up. There was a myth being developed, aided and abetted by some people in the government that millions of dollars were going out to the farming community. When you track the actual business support, it would be lucky to average $100 million a year—I think it would probably be closer to $90 million. That is good support, and no one is criticising that. But the majority of support going to farm families are unemployment benefits because there is no income going to those families. It is not correct for people in the press or in the parliament to say that that is an agricultural subsidy. Anybody who is unemployed in this country and who cannot find additional work will get support from government—so they should and so the farm sector should.

Let us look at other support in this country, bearing in mind that this is the worst drought we have had in living memory. Let us look at other industries, for example the building industry. When the GST was brought out—that was not brought about by a natural disaster; it was government policy, and a policy that I agree with—the government had an enormous response from the building industry, which said that a 10 per cent increase in the price of homes would destroy the economy, that there would be mass unemployment and that people could not bear the cost. So the First Home Owners Scheme was put in place. Since then, in a period of time comparable to that of the drought, nearly $6 billion of support has gone to the building industry, which is an average of about $1 billion a year. On average we give about $2 billion a year to the car industry and about $11 billion a year to other industries. Every time the Productivity Commission is asked to comment on subsidies to agriculture it says, quite rightly, that the support is quite low.
So it is grossly unfair for members of the media and some members of the parliament to suggest that enormous gratuities have been given to the farm sector. I support the member for McMillan. In these areas that are really suffering, we have to look to a policy initiative that actually does something on the ground. If the member for Hotham is right, and 180 businesses have support—if they are the only ones out of 17,000 who have support—then it says something about the policy mix, because I am sure the other 16,800 are not doing terribly well either. Surely there is a need to revisit that particular initiative.

I am not becoming a member of the member for McMillan’s fan club but, again, he addressed the issue not of exceptional circumstances but of ‘extraordinary’ circumstances. And they are extraordinary circumstances—not in every farm in Australia but in many areas. I would suggest that, where the creeks have not dried up for 60 years and they have now, it is a natural disaster, not drought. What we should be doing in this place in policy terms—rather than have this begging bowl mentality where we issue money to the farmers, make a press announcement and make them more depressed because they feel as though they are beggars—is put in place a natural disaster policy that in a sense is an insurance policy. Whether it applies to the Newcastle earthquake, whether it applies to the hailstorm in Sydney, whether it applies to a mudslide in Wollongong or whether it applies to a massive drought such as the one we are experiencing now, those events should be treated as natural disasters. It may be a Cyclone Larry or a Cyclone Tracy—those events should be treated as natural disasters and funds should be made available from a fund that everybody contributes to.

To simplify the issue, a dollar a week from every Australian would raise $1 billion in a year. If you look at the insurance records—and I am not sure whether or not this includes Cyclone Larry—since 1974 there has been one disaster that has cost more than $1 billion in the year, and that was the Newcastle earthquake. Normally it averages out—and it is not dissimilar to what is happening with this drought at the moment—at about $200 million a year. That is 20c a week from every Australian or 40c a week from every taxpayer.

So there is an easier way to go through this than the convoluted message where you create divisions between city people and country people and paint the picture that when the farmers are experiencing a drought they are being subsidised. The city people do not particularly like that and it is unfair treatment in some people’s eyes. If we created a national natural disaster fund, triggered by certain criteria, to assist people who were facing a disaster, rather than having the politics of blame and of playing the moment in the media when a disaster strikes, it would be a much better system than the one we have in place at the moment. It could be quite easily funded and could become some sort of national insurance scheme for disasters.

We have all seen insurance companies, when a flood occurs, arguing about whether the water fell down or the water came up. That has a significant influence on whether or not you get paid for the house and buildings you have just lost. If you have just lost your house and buildings, you really do not want to get into an argument about whether it was water falling on it or water rising up that caused the problem; you want some compassionate treatment. I think that in those sorts of circumstances you need a national insurance scheme. Whether they be city people or whether they be country people, if they are unlucky enough to be struck down
by a natural disaster of some magnitude then there should be assistance for them.

The other issue raised today in terms of drought relates to the profitability of agriculture. Obviously, if you can lift profitability, you can lift the capacity of people to handle drought when it does come. There are a number of policy initiatives we should be having a close look at in this place. One is the renewable fuel debate. We still have not really addressed that issue. One of the impacts it can have is to lift the profitability of grain farming. It moves the income source from a purely food based market to an energy based market.

We have seen what has happened in parts of the United States with the lift in the corn price. We have seen what has happened to the canola price in Europe, and the pressures that puts on—and the benefits that that has for—Australian prices, even though we are almost nonplayers in the renewable fuels business. We have seen those impacts. We have seen the Brazilian ethanol industry’s impact on the global price of sugar, which has probably saved sugar communities on the Queensland coast. So there is a way of lifting the profitability of agriculture by looking at the ways in which we can enhance the income status of those involved.

The other issue I wish to raise—and the member for Hotham also raised it briefly—is climate change. What can agriculture gain from climate change that is not negative? I think there are a number of potential positives, so I was extremely disappointed that the Prime Minister did not include the farm sector in his carbon task force, for instance. If the storage of carbon in our soils through the accumulation of humus and organic matter can have a positive impact on the carbon dioxide in the air and on global warming, then maybe—through carbon trading et cetera—there is a way that agriculture can, again, lift its profitability if it can in fact store that carbon in soil.

One of the offsets is that, if you improve the humus and organic matter in our soils, you not only improve the capacity in terms of yield for our farm sector but also reduce the run-off and increase the infiltration rate and the microbial activity in the soil—you actually create a better soil. We talk about stewardship payments and all the other things that are talked about in the landcare movement and others. Why don’t we get to the basis of this problem? Where the pressure is coming on our soils, it is because the farmers of those soils are not as profitable as they would like to be and so the pressure is on their properties to produce income when the income producing times are on—and drought only exacerbates that. So I would encourage the government to look closely at that.

I do not know the answer, categorically, in terms of the capacity of our soils to absorb carbon. Obviously our better soils, such as those in the Darling Downs and Liverpool Plains—and probably even some soils in South Australia—may have the capacity to improve their organic matter and soil structure et cetera. But I think it is something that we should have a very close look at. Not only may it help those farmers in terms of their profitability, but also they may be part of the solution to the broader problem that has been caused partly by industrialised society.

In conclusion: obviously, I support the legislation. But I do think that, when we are passing these sorts of amendment bills, we should have a closer look at what we are trying to do with policy into the future. And I do not believe that, in the last decade or even in the last 15 years, we have progressed terribly far in terms of addressing drought through policy. If the number of 181 out of
17,000 small businesses that the member for Hotham suggested is correct—and I would ask the minister to reply to that tonight—that says to me that this policy is not working correctly. And that adds to the argument that the totality of the policy mix that we have been operating under for drought and other disasters is not helping the people who deserve that help. (Time expired)

Mr SECKER (Barker) (6.41 pm)—We have heard some very interesting speeches this afternoon in the chamber. I took note of what the member for McMillan was saying in what was certainly a very passionate speech from someone who really cares about his constituents. I also found the speech from the member for New England quite interesting. I am not sure that I would agree with everything he said, but many of the things he said are worth supporting.

I noted that the member for New England again brought in the idea of having a larger renewable energy industry in Australia, with the idea that it would make it more profitable for those who grow grain—and that may be the case. But I think you should always be very careful when you start putting one industry in front of another. If, for example, grain were to go up 50 per cent as a result of extra demand from the renewable energy industry, then that would also affect those other farmers who have to buy that grain to feed their stock—for example, dairy farmers, pig farmers and feedlots. If, for example, it doubled the price of grain in Australia then, yes, the grain farmers would do very well, thank you very much, but I doubt whether you would have a dairy industry or a pig industry left in Australia—as a result of government action. And if that were the case then I think you would have a lot of explaining to do to the pig farmers or dairy farmers in your electorate. Perhaps the member for New England does not have too many dairy farmers or pig farmers in his electorate—

Mr Windsor interjecting—

Mr SECKER—but I certainly have quite a few in my electorate of Barker in South Australia. In fact I have about 90 per cent of South Australia’s dairy farmers in my electorate, which equates to a bit over five per cent of Australia’s dairy industry. Not only do we have a large pork industry, a large number of pig growers, in my electorate of Barker, but also we have a very large processing plant, Big River Pork. If they were to find it very hard to obtain pigs because the pork industry had collapsed as a result of high grain prices then I think you would find that would affect other jobs. So there is a domino effect from any government decision that you make.

This legislation amends three acts: the Farm Household Support Act 1992, the Social Security Act 1991 and the Age Discrimination Act 2004. It is certainly legislation that this House should support. The fact is that my electorate is in what you might call uncharted waters. For example, areas around Tintinara, Keith, Coonalpyn, Bordertown, Mundalla and Naracoorte have had the lowest winter rainfall on record, and the records date back 100 years. As the member for McMillan said, it is extraordinary. We have never had anything like this—in 2006, the lowest winter rainfall on record. That followed a pretty tough year in 2005 and, frankly, if it were not for one month, October, then 2005 could have been just as bad as, if not worse than, 2006. There was not much feed growing during the winter and it was only that rainfall in October that allowed the crops to finish growing and many of the farmers to cut a lot of hay. There are farmers in my electorate who have been feeding their stock hay for nearly 18 months nonstop as a result of the drought conditions that we are facing.
Whilst October 2005 did allow some hay to be cut, some grain to fill out and some reasonable yields, it was not helped by the fact that prices were pretty low. Many farmers barely covered their costs. They had already had a tough year and we thought we were going to have a good opening, and we did in late March and early April last year in much of my electorate, but it just forgot to rain. This is an area that is generally considered very reliable. They had never seen anything like it before. It rained and then it just forgot to rain after that. I can remember that, in about September 2006, we had half an inch of rain and people thought, ‘Hell, we haven’t had rain like this for 12 months.’ So it has been a very tough year in those reliable areas where generally the farmers would say, ‘We have dry years and we have wettish years, but we don’t have droughts.’ Well, we certainly had one in 2006.

We did have some rains in January, but they were generally pretty useless for our Mediterranean climate. That Mediterranean climate in most of South Australia basically means we have a drought every year—it is called summer—and that drought usually lasts for five or six months. Those rains in January really are not all that useful to us as a rule, unless you happen to have a bit of lucerne. The January rain certainly brings that up, but I can say from my own experience—I am on the land; my son runs the farm—that the lucerne that resulted from the rains six months ago has now all been eaten off. It was an extraordinary two years, and the year before that was also pretty tough, so we have had three pretty bad years, and not only are farmers affected but also those businesses that rely on the farmers are affected.

That is why I was very pleased in November 2006 that businesses that rely on farmers were able to become part of the exceptional circumstances relief that the government so generously provides. I know of a tyre businessman in my hometown of Keith who not only is getting little business—because the farmers are making their tyres last a bit longer and not replacing them as they should or are perhaps just doing a patch-up rather than buying new tyres—but is having trouble getting payments owed to him, because the farmers do not have much money to pay him, so he is getting the double whammy. I am very thankful that we as a government were able to acknowledge the fact that, as the member for New England mentioned, not only farmers but whole communities suffer. We have now acknowledged that. I think the government probably did get it a bit wrong previously, but we were very quick to change the definition of small business from 20 employees to 100, which, as was pointed out by the member for New England, is the same definition used in the Work Choices legislation.

That change affected one business very near me that had 30 employees. That business could have got rid of 10 employees to become eligible for EC relief, which would have had quite a disastrous effect on the town. We used our nous and amended the legislation very quickly, and that enabled businesses in rural areas that I would consider to be small businesses to become eligible. That was an example of the government acting very quickly to fix an anomaly. The last thing we want in drought affected areas is for businesses to cut back, because when the rains do eventually come it will be very hard to get those employees back. We already have shortages in some fields, such as mechanics, and if they left it would be very hard to get them back.

The prolonged drought is having a severe effect on farmers and regional communities. Of my electorate of Barker, which is 64,000 square kilometres, over 40,000 square kilometres have already been EC declared, and I suspect that by the end of the next month or
two it might actually be up to about 60,000 square kilometres. This is the first time that people in my electorate have had their areas fully declared as being in exceptional circumstances, so it is not as if we are used to the idea of going to the government for help. In fact, as many in this chamber would know, that would be the last thing on the minds of many farmers. But I have encouraged them. I believe this drought is, as other members have said, a natural disaster of unforeseen magnitude, and it has occurred in areas that have not seen drought before. I am not sure whether it is the worst drought in history—I have read the history and note that, from 1895 to 1903, the Federation drought was pretty severe—but, if it is not the worst, it is pretty close to the worst. These are quite extraordinary times for our rural communities.

Three areas have been EC declared in the Barker electorate, and they are the Murraylands, the Murray Mallee area and the upper south-east. Including those in Barker, there are now 64 areas of rural and regional Australia that are EC declared, and a further two areas in my electorate are currently being assessed for EC declaration—and, as of yesterday, I believe there may be another application from the South Australian Dairyfarmers Association. The total area that is now EC declared is approximately 45 per cent of Australia’s agricultural land, which is quite extraordinary.

In November 1996, the Prime Minister announced that agriculturally dependent small business operators would have access to the same EC assistance that is already provided to farmers. This assistance includes EC relief payments and ancillary benefits, such as a healthcare card and concessions under the Youth Allowance and Austudy means tests. Assistance will be available to eligible small business operators until 30 June 2008 unless that date is extended by regulation. For farmers, it actually goes until March 2009, and that is on the basis that for every year of drought you need one year for recovery. In many cases we are basically looking at three years of pretty tough conditions.

That is going to be very important to our farming and business families who want to send their children off to university. When times are tough, farmers tighten their belts and, unfortunately, the children often miss out on university, because of the extra cost, if they are unable to qualify for Austudy and rent assistance. Quite conservatively, because those people from rural areas have to move to a town and rent a place to live, you could say it costs them at least $10,000 more than if they could stay at home. That is $10,000 more than their city cousins would need; they can drive to university or catch a bus. So that is an extra cost for farmers and, as I said, in tough years their children tend to miss out. I think that measure is very important to ensure that our rural youth do not miss out on tertiary studies as a result of climatic conditions.

Agriculturally dependent small business operators face many financial challenges; therefore, it is imperative that this assistance be available and it warrants the prompt action that we have taken. We need to assure rural communities that there is support available for those businesses that can demonstrate a sustained negative impact on business activities and income. The proposed amendments provide small businesses which would otherwise be at risk with the ability to bestow services on rural and regional communities which, if not addressed, would have a significant impact on those communities and the broader economy.

The purpose of the Farm Household Support Amendment Bill 2007 is to allow agriculturally dependent small business opera-
tors access to the same EC assistance that is already available to farmers who have been adversely impacted by drought. Specifically, the bill will formalise current ex-gratia arrangements for EC relief payments and allow agriculturally dependent small business operators to access a healthcare card and concessions under the Youth Allowance and Austudy means tests. The bill will also make amendments to the Farm Household Support Act 1992 to bring it into line with the intent of the Age Discrimination Act 2004 and the changes made to that act in April 2006.

Agriculturally dependent small business operators are currently able to access EC relief payments through the ex-gratia arrangements. The amendments to the FHS Act will formalise these arrangements by outlining eligibility criteria, payment rates and multiple entitlement exclusions, and will provide agriculturally dependent small business operators with access to a healthcare card.

The amendments also include provisions for farmers who have diversified into agriculturally dependent small businesses—for example, they might be contractors engaged in trucking or harvesting crops or making hay for other farmers. As these farmers are no longer deriving a significant proportion of their income from the farm, they would not be eligible for EC relief payments as farmers, and their continued ownership of farm assets would affect their eligibility under the small business assets test. To make sure that this category of farmers is not disadvantaged, applicants in this situation will have specific farm and small business assets exempted from the relevant assets and means tests. These provisions do not apply to farmers who continue to derive a significant amount of income from their farms but who also operate small agriculturally dependent businesses.

The amendments affect agriculturally dependent small business operators where 70 per cent or more of their gross business income is derived from providing farming related goods and services to farmers in EC declared areas. To ensure that small business operators can continue to access assistance where they are reliant on providing agriculturally related goods and services to farmers in areas that continue to be EC declared, it may be necessary to extend the availability of EC assistance for eligible small business operators. The bill provides for this by allowing the end date to be extended by regulation.

The consequential amendments to the Social Security Act will provide agriculturally dependent small business operators with concessions under the youth allowance and Austudy means tests, mirroring those that are currently provided to farmers. The changes to the Social Security Act will make the same exempt assets, as outlined in the Farm Household Support Act, exempt under the youth allowance and Austudy means tests.

The consequential amendment to the Age Discrimination Act will make certain that the Age Discrimination Act applies consistently to the provisions in the Farm Household Support Act that relate to payments made to farmers and those made to agriculturally dependent small business operators. The change will allow exceptional circumstances relief payments to be provided to eligible small business operators at a rate that is in accordance with their age. Sections in this act that limit access to assistance based on a person’s age and which have not already been granted exemptions under the Age Discrimination Act will be repealed in order to bring it into line with the intent of the Age Discrimination Act. (*Time expired*)

Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (7.01 pm)—For those of us who come from rural Australia,
and on my father’s side I belong to a family that have lived on the frontiers of Australia for 120 or 130 years, we speak with some authority. Whilst I have had cattle for almost all of my adult life, I come from a family very experienced in businesses that serviced the cattle industry but were not directly involved with cattle. Whilst the businesses we had would not fit within this criterion, I applaud the government for taking this initiative. It is one that has needed to be undertaken for some time.

It would appear from my reading of the minister’s speech and the legislation itself, the Farm Household Support Amendment Bill 2007, that this only extends to 30 June 2008. I cannot for the life of me see why the good principle that is espoused here is concluding then—and the minister is looking at me here and I would like clarification if that is in fact incorrect. I find it misleading, and I notice in the minister’s speech that the date is 2008. It is not a matter for giggling at me.

Mr Byrne—I am not giggling. I am just saying that the member for Eden-Monaro is not the responsible minister.

Mr KATTER—It is a matter for clarification as far as the parliament is concerned. In any event, I do not think that the subject matter we are talking about here would be a matter for frivolity. These related industries are far more vulnerable than the industry itself. In the cane industry, a cane farmer in the areas which I represent, which is probably about 40 per cent of the Australian cane industry—a very big industry; probably $1,000 million worth a year would be produced there—can sell out to lifestylers or to timber people who are advocating that you will not pay as much tax if you invest with them. There are a number of alternatives available to a cane farmer. He can switch to small crops. He can put lychees in. He has a number of other options, such as cattle fattening, open to him.

But a cane harvester often has more money—an awful lot of cane harvesters I know have two or three harvesters at half a million dollars a piece—invested in the industry than the cane farmer. If sugar continues on its downward spiral and the government does not come to its senses with respect to ethanol, then we have got very grim days ahead of us. But it is much less grim for the cane farmer than it is for the cane harvester. As I said, there are a number of alternatives open to the cane farmer. He can diversify, but a cane harvester cannot. What do you do with a cane harvester if you have got no cane to harvest? You indeed are up the creek without the paddle!

In cattle, for example, we have the livestock hauliers. Whilst their prime movers are marketable, the trailers are really not very suitable for anything else and to modify them so that they would be useful for other purposes is not practical. Again, here is an industry that is related to cattle but one that would be far more badly hurt by a drought or flood or the various other exceptional circumstances criteria than the farmer himself. So we applaud the government for the big moves that are being made here, but we seek some clarification on some of the details. We would strongly urge the government to reconsider, if there is a cut-off point in 2008, removing that provision.

Having said those things, we have to put this into the bigger perspective. When I say ‘industries’, people immediately imagine a man on a horse or a man on a tractor, but the vast bulk of the employment in most agricultural industries is in the support industries whether it be livestock hauliers, fencing contractors or mustering contractors, the helicopter owners or the people that sell supplementary feed in the cattle industry. In the
cane industry, similarly, there are miles of ancillary industries depending upon the farmer for their existence.

What these industries require, whether they be the farmers themselves or the backup downstream industries and service businesses, are two things. Like everyone, they require a fair go—a level playing field. What this government has done—and far more culpable was the Keating government before it; but this government is equally culpable—is that it has not delivered a level playing field. In fact, it took our level playing field away from us. The last time I looked, the average tariff level for OECD countries was 49 per cent. The same figure for Australia was six per cent, most of which comprised the dairy levy and the sugar levy, both of which are being phased out—they may have even been phased out at the time I am speaking of. So a fair figure for Australia would be about 3.5 per cent or four per cent. We do not have a level playing field; we have our competitors up there running 100 metres with a 30-metre start, and we are expected to catch them. Our government has deprived us of the right to have a level playing field, whether that government was the Paul Keating government or the current government. I am deeply disappointed that there has been absolutely no attempt by the members of the government of Australia or the people that represent rural Australia to bang home this point to their own government. I would find it very difficult to find a single speech in this House that draws attention to the fact that while they preach level playing fields they in fact have put us on the most unlevel of playing fields.

The second thing required desperately by the rural industries—and I am talking about broadacre farming and the drought, but also flooding because sugar can be argued to be a broadacre crop and it is subject to flooding, which comes under exceptional circumstances, or did last time I looked—is assistance from government in the financial markets. All our rural industries that are competing on the world market are by their very nature cyclical. The price goes up and the price goes down. If you look at long-term prices in the wool industry, prior to the intervention by Doug Anthony with the buying scheme, and even afterwards, you will see that they are cyclical. The cycle is on a much higher level than the cycle was before the introduction of statutory marketing in the wool industry. It is similar in the wheat industry, the cane industry and the cattle industry.

But in those down cycles the banks panic. Australian banks are not very enlightened. They do not take a long-term view. The major banks have given up about 40 per cent of the market and they are desperately trying to win it back. When I was driving from the airport in Townsville back to Charters Towers, it was very funny to see a huge sign up there from one of the major banks—I think it was Westpac—effectively saying, ‘We love farmers; we want you to do business with us.’ Well, they closed all their rural branches, they lost all their expertise in this area, they did not want to know us, they sold us up and let Rabobank come in and take all of that ground from under them. Rabobank is now one of the major rural banks in Australia. Elders, the QIDC Bank and the rising and aggressive Bendigo Bank have taken a huge swathe of the rural markets from the mainstream banks because they have no enlightenment, no long-term view and no great or significant understanding of the industries that they are dealing with.

Let me be very specific: during the downturn in the cattle industry which was coupled with the drought in the late 1980s and early 1990s, our interest rates went to 23 per cent. That was the normal and almost universal interest rate in the cattle industry throughout
that period. We were penalised because we were an at risk industry, which added 2.5 per cent to the 17 per cent interest rate regime of Mr Keating, the world’s greatest treasurer. He let all his supporters run away with thousands of millions of dollars playing monopoly games with each other whereas the Australian people had to pay 17 per cent interest rates to rescue the mainstream banks that had been so frivolous with their money. Whilst that figure was 17 per cent for Australia, we were hit with a penalty rate of 2.5 per cent because we were in an at risk industry. Then we were hit with another 2.5 per cent on top of that because we were in an at risk area which was suffering drought at the time. So another 2.5 per cent got piled on. Then, normally another one per cent went on in bank charges, because they wanted to oversight us. They put all sorts of charges on us—they had to pay three valuers to come out and look at our place, they had to review it, they had to do an inspection and they had to get a consultant in to give them another report on how we were going to get out of our troubles. I speak with great conviction and knowledge because we in fact paid 29 per cent in 1989, I think it was. That was the figure with bank charges that we paid in that year.

There have been enlightened governments in this country: Theodore and McEwen were the dominating figures in Australian history in the last century. I think all the history books tend to agree on the very great influence of Theodore that was carried on with Curtin and Chifley after he was gone. Those people said that we needed development banks. They used the words ‘development banks’, and they were not bad words to use. What happened was that when you got into the sort of situation that the cattle industry was in at the end of the eighties then you would go to this bank and it would ensure that at least you were paying only 17 per cent ordinary interest rates instead of penalty interest rates.

I speak again with very great conviction because I was one of the two ministers charged with the responsibility of the state bank in Queensland, which was called the QIDC. I received much criticism when the QIDC was switched over to a formal bank, as many in this place were quite aware of the prominent position that I held at the time. I will not use his name or be specific but the chairman of the bank at the time informed me that a third of the sugar industry would have to go. This was during a downturn in the sugar industry in the mid-eighties. I tried to explain to him that the industry was cyclical. We were at a function and I said, ‘No, I’ll come tomorrow,’ and the next day I brought to him the cycle of prices in the sugar industry and I showed it to him.

He explained to me as if I were a simpleton and a person that did not know anything about anything of importance that it was beet sugar from Europe that was crashing the world market. I informed the chairman that beet sugar had crashed the Australian sugar industry in 1898. It was not a new phenomenon for us to live with. We had lived with it for 100 years and it was not to be taken into account. I said: ‘We are at the bottom or maybe halfway down a down cycle—who knows, but we are not going to kiss goodbye to a third of this industry when we know we have a cycle here and we know that, with a proper government approach to this matter, it will recover.’ People said, ‘You did this to subsidise.’ No, we made huge profits in the QIDC. We went from a little bank of $250 million to a giant bank of nearly $4,000 million in a very short space of time. I think we are talking about nine or 10 years.

We people in rural Queensland will never forget that it was the National Party government, the Borbidge government, that sold...
that bank out from under us—we will not forget that. It was put in place to rescue those people. We brought almost every single sugarcane farmer through that period. If we had listened to this man we would have let a third of the industry go, but then, not eight months later, the price of sugar doubled because there was a cycle and it just happened to be a shorter cycle than normal.

We had the resources and the accumulated knowledge of government behind us when we made that decision. This man had come from the financial accounting industry and he had a towering ignorance of the subject he was dealing with but he would not be advised or listen to anyone; he was going to make his own decision. We had to ask him to stand down. It was a very controversial decision by the government. If we had not done that a third of those hardworking cane farmers—almost every one of them who had cut cane by hand as young men—would have vanished. Thousands of mill workers and downstream people that depended upon this industry, the people we are talking about today, would have been utterly distraught.

The greatly enlightened men of Australia, Mr Theodore and Mr McEwen introduced the Commonwealth Development Bank and the AIDC. Bjelke-Petersen introduced the QIDC in Queensland and the Rural Reconstruction Board. There were five different organisations that we could go to for help to get us through these periods. That is one of the reasons that the accumulated wisdom that a farmer has is so important. As one of my great friends in the citrus industry said: ‘People say I’m making a lot of money today as a grape farmer. What they forget is that it took me 15 years to become a grape farmer.’

In farming sometimes it might take you two or three generations. The station property I own never had cattle on it because no one knew how to handle that country. But through the accumulated wisdom of three generations and some very good people who worked in agricultural science for the state government—they do not exist anymore; they have been wiped out by the current state government in Queensland—thanks to those people, we found out how we could run cattle and run them prosperously in that country. Because there is water everywhere there, there is lot more wildlife there now than in days past. Terrible fires went through there. In our second year on St Francis, fire broke out on the place next door and went for 800 kilometres. It took out every single tree for 800 kilometres. If you flew over it, you would see the imprint of the tree because there was ash on the ground that was a dark fawn in colour. But now man is there and there are firebreaks so that the terrible calamities that happened in the past cannot happen in the future. We have made this Australia that we live in a much better place.

As for it being the worst drought, Australians do not read the history books. It is a terrible shortcoming in this country that we have the shortest of knowledge time spans. From about 1884 through to 1914 it hardly rained in Australia. They called it the Federation drought but it actually started in 1884. Whilst there were some good years in there, it hardly rained at all. The spawning of the Labor Party came out of that because the cockies were broke and they demanded that they pay less to the shearers. The shearers got their backs up, they went on wild strikes and then there was violence in Queensland. There were 2,000 troops that were moved into western Queensland and the entire state executive of the AWU was jailed. I think 13 of them in the Rockhampton branch of the AWU got three years hard labour for going on strikes. There were woolsheds burned all over the place, people were shot and tied to railway lines. Out of that great violence was born the great labour movement which did a
lot of wonderful things for this country, and I do not hesitate to say that. Some 26 million sheep died in a period of three or four years during that time. It is fraught with these things but the great instruments that the Theodores, the McEwens and the Bjelke-Petersens gave us in the state banks that helped us in these situations have been removed. (Time expired)

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (7.22 pm)—I am really pleased to have an opportunity to participate in this debate on the Farm Household Support Amendment Bill 2007. I begin my remarks by saying that I am supportive of this bill as it further assists rural communities and the vital businesses providing services to primary producers in this country at a time when we are experiencing one of the worst droughts on record. I listened carefully to the words of the member for McMillan, who spoke very passionately. Clearly, he has a very close working relationship with his constituency. I thank him for the work that he has done to personally convince our government and ministers to continue to work on providing a better response to the people in this country affected by drought.

I also listened to the member for New England. It has often been said in our community that rural people are the backbone of our society. It is certainly true that over the years primary producers have made a very significant contribution to the development of this country. We live in a country that has seven amazing parliaments, a national library, libraries in every state and territory, art galleries, museums and theatres. Many of these were built during the heyday of primary production, so we did indeed ride on the sheep’s back, as they say, although we also benefited from the wheat and other produce that was grown as well as from the dairy industry and the many other industries that form the primary production sector.

Like the member for New England, I get very angry when I hear members in this place, those in the financial press and others in the financial sector having a go at the farming sector when it gets a bit of help during these ‘extra’ exceptional circumstances, accusing farmers of being agrarian socialists. I really find that highly offensive. As the member for Kennedy has just said, many in this country have a very short memory. I think that all of us have an obligation to stand by those in our community who are going through hard times through no fault of their own. This is not about poor business management. This is about adverse conditions, in this case the ‘extra’ adverse conditions that these people have no control over. I also agree with the member for New England that we could better respond to and overall plan for these drought events because they are regular events in Australia, although we are never quite sure of the time frames between them.

Having grown up in rural Western Australian towns and as I am now representing a substantial farming area, I have seen first-hand the contribution that rural communities make to our country. I have also witnessed the suffering that drought brings, not just to the producers themselves but to all the people who live in those communities and rely to some extent on the health of primary production for their wellbeing. I think the coalition recognises the importance of primary production in our country and the fact that our primary producers not only grow food for local consumption but also play a very significant role in producing the exports which assist Australia to maintain a healthy balance of trade. I think this point was lost on the previous Labor government when, indeed, the then Prime Minister had to be shamed into providing support for drought-stricken farmers by the generosity of the wider community. Who can forget the previ-
ous Labor Prime Minister saying these people had just got to learn to deal with these situations and the government was not going to provide subsidies for them? This was after four years of sustained drought going back to the early 1990s. We saw through the Farmhand Appeal project—run by Ray Martin, if my memory serves me correctly—a generous outpouring from the general public of Australia that shamed the then Labor government into doing something about providing support for farmers in drought stricken areas.

Despite a widening disconnect between rural and urban dwellers, when the dire circumstances that farmers face in adverse conditions become known to the community at large there is considerable sympathy and a real willingness to dig deep and help. Etched deeply in my memory bank is a visit I made to drought stricken rural New South Wales in 1994, when I was a new shadow minister for small business. After four successive years of drought, many primary producers were at breaking point. I witnessed during that trip grown men, tough men, cry—and women, but I mention men in particular because men in this country are not supposed to cry; well, that is the folklore. I saw men break down and weep as they told the story of the devastation on farms—farms that had been held by their family for several generations—where they had no hope of a future. These people were unable to keep their breeding herds alive. They watched as the country sank deeper into drought and as their life’s work, and indeed that of several generations of their family, disappeared before their eyes. Along with that, sadly, this country saw record numbers of young men in rural areas taking their own lives.

The generosity of town and city folk was evident in Casino, for example. In Casino business women set up a scheme to invite farm women to come into town once a week to use showers and washing machines. Things were so bad that whatever little water that could be carted was used to keep their breeding herds alive, leaving no water for the basic things that we take for granted like having a shower and doing the weekly washing. Meetings in town halls in Coraki and Tenterden and in towns in other parts of rural New South Wales brought heart-wrenching tales of proud people and proud communities brought to their knees by drought. One of the flow-on effects was the disastrous effect on businesses in the towns. As the member for New England said, I can never understand why we do not have a proper planned response to drought so that there is not this lag time and there is not this ridiculous political discussion about—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—Order! It being 7.30 pm, the debate is interrupted. The debate may be resumed at a later hour and the member for Pearce will be entitled to continue her remarks when the debate is resumed.

ADJOURNMENT

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—Order! It being 7.30 pm, I propose the question:

That the House do now adjourn.

Broadband

Ms KATE ELLIS (Adelaide) (7.30 pm)—I would like to take this opportunity to make some comments in relation to today’s broadband announcement and my deep belief that this is exactly the sort of nation-building and planning for the future that the Australian people both need and deserve. In my electorate of Adelaide, the issue of broadband speeds and black spots in our inner metropolitan areas is a source of intense anger and frustration and has been an ongoing impediment to businesses, students and families who all wish to access the internet at internationally competitive speeds. I have reported previously on several occasions in
this House on my frustration that, in my inner metropolitan seat, there are households that have been unable to access high-speed broadband or, in some cases, any form of broadband at all. I have reported problems experienced by residents in Northgate, Prospect, Dulwich, Wayville, Goodwood and Unley and I have reported that the inner metropolitan council area of Prospect in my electorate has been found, in one recent report, to have the slowest average broadband speeds in South Australia at an average of just 56 kilobits per second. Needless to say, this is both outrageous and ridiculous and, frankly, we need to act urgently.

I represent an inner metropolitan capital city electorate and I have been shocked and appalled that Australia’s broadband infrastructure is so poor that we experience these sorts of problems in the cities. I can only imagine the scenario that regional Australia faces. I have raised these issues in parliament on several occasions, I have made representations to the minister, I have spoken with Telstra, I have spoken with residents across my electorate, I have spoken to local business, I have written about the problems in the South Australia media and I have raised them on the local television news. Despite this, the Howard government has remained absolutely and completely unresponsive, acting only to insult every one of us when the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts publicly argued that Adelaide residents ‘ought to be happy with broadband speeds as they are’. The reality is that we were not happy then and, more than six months on and with no progress made, we are still not happy.

It has been outlined in great detail already today how poorly Australia compares with other OECD countries in terms of broadband capabilities, and the significance of this in terms of e-commerce, e-medicine and our competitiveness generally. In light of this, it is nothing short of amazing that the Howard government continues to walk backwards on this issue at a time when it is so vital that we move forward in leaps and bounds.

In contrast, in what will be a significant and radical leap forward for Australia, federal Labor has today announced a plan to revolutionise Australia’s internet infrastructure by creating a new world-class national broadband network. Our announcement today will see up to $4.7 billion invested to establish a national broadband network in partnership with the private sector. This plan will have a significant positive impact across Australia and in my electorate of Adelaide. The national broadband network will connect 98 per cent of Australians to high-speed broadband internet services at a speed that is more than 40 times faster than most current speeds. Federal Labor will increase the speed to a minimum of 12 megabits per second. For businesses, educators and householders in Prospect, where reportedly the average speed is currently 56 kilobits per second, this is a significant leap forward that will bring them rocketing into the 21st century with internet speeds fast enough to allow access in real time.

For the people across Adelaide who are struggling with internet speeds or with gaining access to broadband, this development will mean slashed telephone bills for small business; enhanced business services such as teleconferencing, videoconferencing and virtual private networks; enhanced capacity for services like e-education and e-health; and high-definition, multichannel and interactive TV services. Today’s announcement will be the greatest national investment in improving information and communications technology and broadband internet access in Australia’s history. I am delighted that this announcement has been made by Labor today. It will bring significant benefits for the people of Adelaide. I am constantly con-
tacted by residents of Adelaide and I am glad that—(Time expired)

Cyclone George

Mr HAASE (Kalgoorlie) (7.35 pm)—Shortly after midnight on Thursday, 8 March—that is, in the early hours of Friday morning—Cyclone George crossed the coast of Western Australia just to the north-east of Port Hedland. The weather bureau described it as the most powerful system to hit the Port Hedland area in the last 30 years. The result was winds of 275 kilometres an hour and widespread flooding. That natural disaster claimed the life of three people—two people died immediately and a third person died later in hospital—and 28 other people were injured. My thoughts go out to the families and friends of the victims. We are all grateful that there was not a much higher human toll.

We praise the work of the emergency services and the Pilbara community generally. Before the cyclone hit, extensive preparation was carried out, and that action by emergency services workers greatly reduced the injury to people and the damage to houses and infrastructure generally. SES workers had the task of informing those living in low-lying areas of the problem of storm surge. Many people were moved to emergency shelter or asked to go to family and friends residing on higher ground. South Hedland was the major location for that emergency services shelter. Down the road, in Karratha, hundreds of people were advised to stay indoors or move to higher ground or to designated shelters. Schools were closed the previous day, flights into the area were cancelled and mining operations ceased, as the entire population moved to batten down.

The people of the Pilbara are not strangers to cyclones, but it must be said that every incident is a disruption to routine, and on this occasion the cyclone had a fatal effect on three lives, and up to 50 properties were badly damaged in the Port Hedland area. The cyclones never go unnoticed. Thank goodness the federal government, in cooperation with the state government, has been able to provide substantial assistance, especially the $1,000 per adult and $400 per child for those that suffered serious injury or found themselves confronted with an uninhabitable dwelling.

This evening I wish to underline the services of the volunteers. The local recovery coordination committee comprised Jim Cahill from FESA, Derek Jones from SES, Bob Circle from Horizon Power, George Jones from the Water Corporation, CEO Chris Adams and Councillor Arnold Carter from the Town of Port Hedland, Senior Sergeant Phil Gors from the Pilbara police and Andrew Geddes from the Department for Community Development as well as representatives from state and federal government agencies, including Centrelink.

Port Hedland’s hospital emergency department was damaged in the cyclone, but the outpatient area was able to continue treating casualties. An emergency medical team from Perth, including surgeons, doctors and critical-care nurses, flew into Port Hedland to help with the injured people. The Royal Flying Doctor Service sent a number of aircraft and crews to take the injured to Perth for medical treatment.

The Water Corporation very quickly moved into action after the red alert was lifted and worked tirelessly to restore that commodity. Horizon Power, who are in charge of power distribution in the area, worked around the clock. I saw them on the Monday, and some of them were almost like walking zombies—they had been working tirelessly to restore services to the homes around Port Hedland and South Hedland. The clean-up crews from the Town of Port
Hedland worked around the clock to clear fallen trees and allow SES workers to get their powerlines back up.

It was generally a mighty collective effort. It was a great show of community strength and the willingness of volunteers to put their shoulders to the wheel to prove that, regardless of the natural adversity that is thrown at Pilbara towns, they will still rally to the cause. (Time expired)

Broadband

Mr WILKIE (Swan) (7.40 pm)—I rise this evening to support the important new nation-building initiative announced today by the Leader of the Opposition regarding the future of Australia’s broadband infrastructure. This initiative will be nothing short of a revolution in Australia’s lagging broadband services. It will ensure that our businesses will no longer be hindered by sub-standard services, it will ensure that all Australians, including our students, have access to the very best of information and it will help guarantee Australia’s continued economic prosperity. This initiative will drag Australia out of the broadband stone age and into the modern telecommunications era.

The current state of broadband infrastructure in my electorate and in Australia generally is a disgrace—stuck in the slow lane of the information superhighway. This is another stunning example of this government’s neglect of capital infrastructure investment. The simple fact is that, in this rapidly globalising world of ever-increasing interconnectedness, state-of-the-art telecommunications infrastructure is vital for continued dynamic economic growth.

Every day, the internet continues to change the way we go about our everyday business. It changes the way in which we communicate with each other, the way commerce is conducted, the way we learn and educate and the way we enjoy entertainment. It is fair to say that, in the relatively short time frame in which the internet has existed, it has revolutionised almost every aspect of our lives. How the internet will change our lives in the future is anybody’s guess, but we must be prepared to meet those changes head-on.

While other nations, such as Japan, South Korea, the US and Canada, have moved forward with a rapid acceleration in the deployment of fibre based networks, Australia continues to lag far behind. This is a totally unacceptable situation. As one of Australia’s leading business figures, Rupert Murdoch, recently stated:

We’re being left behind and we’ll pay for it.

Currently, Australia is ranked a measly 17th in the world in broadband take-up rates, a position that is likely to slide further in the coming years unless we act quickly and decisively. And this is precisely what Labor’s initiative is all about: decisive action to shift the Australian economy into the 21st century. If Australia is to remain a globally competitive player in the 21st century, this sorry state of affairs cannot continue. We simply must invest the necessary resources to bring Australia up to speed. We must ensure that this vital area of economic infrastructure is at a world standard and we must ensure that Australia’s national interests in this technological age are secured. And this is what Labor will do.

By investing up to $4.7 billion over a five-year period to establish the national broadband network in partnership with the private sector, Labor’s plan will deliver the internet services needed for our future vitality. No longer will businesses from my electorate of Swan be forced to relocate their premises simply to have the ‘privilege’ of access to a decent broadband network. No longer will residents from my electorate be told that if they wish to have broadband access all they
have to do is go out and buy a satellite dish or move to another street or suburb.

With Labor’s plan, 98 per cent of Australians will have access to state-of-the-art telecommunications services 40 times faster than current speeds. That is a win for the people of Swan and a win for all Australians. Rather than the clapped-out jalopy that the government so haphazardly steers down the slow lane of the information superhighway, Labor’s plan is to head down that highway in the latest energy-efficient supercar of the future.

And yet, on an issue that will fundamentally determine the future economic prospects of this nation, we continually hear the Prime Minister harp on about taking money from the Future Fund, about not wanting to make life harder for future generations. What the Prime Minister has failed to recognise is that high-speed broadband is the future and, by underinvesting in our telecommunications infrastructure, that is precisely what he is doing: making life harder for future generations. The Prime Minister sometimes reminds me of the advert where the father tells his son that the Chinese built their Great Wall to keep the rabbits out because he is uneducated and does not know any better.

Not so long ago, I am sure, the Prime Minister would have used an abacus. He may have by now upgraded to a slide rule, perhaps even a calculator, but I doubt very much that he has moved steadfastly into the computer age. And so, like the carrier pigeon before him, the Prime Minister’s utility in this technological age is over. It is high time that he either gets out of the way or adapts himself to the modern era and starts thinking strategically about this nation’s future needs. Currently we are falling ever behind other developed nations in broadband take-up and internet speeds, and we will fall even further behind if this sorry state of affairs is not fixed. Fortunately Labor has a plan for the future, a plan that will elevate Australia from a world dinosaur in telecommunications to a world leader. *(Time expired)*

**New South Wales State Election**

*Miss Jackie Kelly* (Lindsay) *(7.45 pm)*—It is quite extraordinary the diatribe that has gone before me, given that 10 years ago we had one monolithic, monopolistic company driving telecommunications in this country. There was no competition whatsoever. There were some bright sparks in the Labor Party who thought, ‘Oh, competition might be good,’ and they allowed competition in, which we have kept going, and in all circumstances have backed other players in this area. And the Labor Party has the hide to come in here and even mention communications! The unions that dominate Telstra and have dominated them for years have kept it uncompetitive. Now I find, with the New South Wales state election this Saturday, Telstra joining the campaign along with the ACTU’s Your Rights At Work campaign. The CFMEU is handing out literature in my electorate, the PSA is handing out material and, look, there is the member for Grayndler handing out literature in my electorate.

The election this Saturday is about the incompetence of this state Labor government. If they had any integrity at all, they would be delivering for the people of New South Wales rather than relying on the unions to run around with a vote 1 campaign and hope that their local candidates with large name recognition may get first past the post, when in a preferential system they would be put last by 50 per cent of New South Wales voters.

Then we have all the local candidates going out trying to explain what they are doing for the electorate on trade schools and after hours GP clinics. This government delivered both. It was our idea. It was my election
promise. It took me two years battling the Nepean Hospital to finally find the space. I said, ‘It has to be near emergency.’ ‘Oh, no, we can’t give it near emergency.’ ‘But there is a room available.’ ‘No, you can’t have that room. We need that for something else.’ Do you think the local member, Karen Paluzzano, helped out? I would like to see one letter that that woman wrote in support of the GP clinic for Nepean Hospital prior to inside information she received, which said: ‘Look, quick, we are finally doing this deal with the federal government after two years and two rounds of negotiations. We’re going to do a deal. Quick, Karen, run out there and claim it before the federal member can say anything.’

You have that kind of skulduggery in politics happening. You have a massive union campaign and, now, guess what? Telstra is joining the campaign. Telstra is coming in, thinking it knows a single thing about politics! It had better stick to telecommunications. This government has the wherewithal and the policies to deliver broadband services to Australians; it is not the Labor Party and it is not an uncompetitive Telstra that feels it needs special care from the regulators. There is plenty of other competition in the market that feels that the ACCC’s regulation of the telecommunications industry is valid and robust, and one of the best in the world and enhances competition. Where does Telstra get off?

Not only did the New South Wales government go hand in hand with this union; they are actually helping them. Bernie Riordan, the secretary of the New South Wales branch of the Electrical Trades Union, wrote a letter during an election at a company that was training apprentices. The ETU set up a shopfront outside my office. They are actually running an even bigger campaign. You can read it on their website: ‘Here are the 20 most targeted seats.’ And guess what? The seat of Lindsay happens to be one of them. The New South Wales government leaked to the ETU an entire list of apprentices and their home addresses so Bernie Riordan, their old union mate, could send them a letter saying: ‘Don’t vote for the AWA. We might be worse off.’ I am happy to say that universally the AWAs went through and those apprentices are better off. That does not stop the unions’ misinformation with incredible lies. The Your Rights At Work campaign is complete lies. Our Work Choices works. It has been fantastic in the retail sector. You are seeing extraordinary growth in productivity and you are seeing the ability of employers to stay open for the hours— (Time expired)

Broadband

Mr GEORGANAS (Hindmarsh) (7.50 pm)—I am pleased by and welcome today’s announcement and visionary commitments in relation to Australia’s next generation of broadband and communications technology—in particular, because I know so many of the electors in my electorate of Hindmarsh will be relieved that there is a major party vying for government that can actually see the deplorable circumstances that people have been made to endure for many years.

Every week, either in person, by telephone, by letter or out on the street when I am having a street corner meeting, people show their despair at the lack of service that they are forced to endure at locations well within a radius of 10 kilometres of Adelaide’s CBD. We have whole streets of constituents dotted around the electorate—the two most recent being Douglas Street and Mercurio Drive, Flinders Park—being told that it is not worth Telstra’s infrastructure funds to bother to give them access. These are suburbs within six kilometres of the Adelaide CBD in a metropolitan city in the inner western suburbs of Adelaide. This is not out in the rural areas; this is in inner city seats.
This is ridiculous in this day and age. The government attempts to discredit state governments on a regular basis on the basis of their not spending enough of their water rates on infrastructure, but they cannot bite the bullet and build our nation’s broadband infrastructure themselves.

Labor will because, like the rest of the population, including industry, we know we need to. This is yet another area where industry—whom this government says it represents—have been active in the development of and the support for plans to bring Australia into the 21st century. Labor support these plans both conceptually and economically, and we support these plans because the last thing we want is the continuation of a do-nothing, backward looking government that has for far too long relied on clever conjuring and cheap tricks instead of working towards Australia’s future prosperity and the education, technology and infrastructure on which our economic future increasingly depends.

This government has no excuses for allowing broadband infrastructure, service deliverers and consumers to suffer year after year in a spiralling state of malaise. Labor’s proposal is to connect 98 per cent of Australians to broadband services with a speed more than 40 times faster than most current speeds. I seriously doubt whether 98 per cent of households in my electorate of Hindmarsh have access to broadband. Seriously, in the year 2007, we hear from constituent after constituent complaining that they cannot get broadband. I have to say, once again, that my electorate is an inner city electorate; it is not a rural electorate. If we cannot get the infrastructure up and running in an inner city seat like Hindmarsh, God knows what it must be like in rural areas. We are told that our telecommunications system is a reconstructed antique, that it is not worth much. It is not collectable. It is not even quaint or charming. It upsets people that in inner suburban Adelaide they cannot get access to broadband.

I have repeatedly sent letters to the minister outlining these issues and my electors are repeatedly told that the government will not invest in the infrastructure required to overcome the antiquated pair-gain systems that are dotted all over the electorate because it is simply not economically viable to spend the money. They will not deliver the access people crave because they are not nation builders any more. They are not charged for driving the nation’s communications any more. They are not charged with leading the country from one century to the next, especially if it does not turn a profit. Where would we be as a nation if this were always the case? What kind of country or backwater would we be without the national drive that comes from institutional leadership such as we saw around the end of the 19th century? What kind of sorry state would we be in if trains, telegraphs and even the Sydney Harbour Bridge or the great Snowy scheme were not seen as economically viable? This distinction between investment rich and investment poor and forward moving versus nostalgia nurturing could not be clearer than the distinction between the policy advanced today by Kevin Rudd of the Australian Labor Party and the history of this sceptical government currently in power. The bottom line is this: if we want our kids to engage in the industries of this century to get the education needed to make a good career for themselves over several decades, we need to invest in our technological infrastructure. (Time expired)

Hasluck Electorate: Orange Grove Primary School

Mr HENRY (Hasluck) (7.55 pm)—It is interesting hearing the speakers on the other side talking about the next generation and their proposal for broadband services. The
real next generation are the kids like those at Orange Grove Primary School. There is something unique and exciting happening at the Orange Grove Primary School in my electorate of Hasluck. Orange Grove is a local, community based school that is doing things on a global stage. Podcasting is not a term that most parents would even be aware of. At Orange Grove Primary School it has captured the imaginations of not just the students but the teachers as well.

It all started with Mr Paul Fuller, who is the year 4/5 teacher at the school. As a result of his work and inspiration, supported by the principal, Pat Nottle, Orange Grove Primary School is now one of the leaders in the world of podcasting, using new technology such as MP3 players, which enables broadcasting on the internet. As the member for Hasluck, I was among the first to be interviewed by the students. The class released their first episode of their internet radio show Podkids Australia last year. They now have 10 episodes on the web. Orange Grove primary was the first school in Western Australia to use this exciting new technology called podcasting. For students who cannot access the internet at home, they can still share their knowledge and experiences with their parents and siblings. Students can have the information downloaded or copied onto an MP3 player so that they can take it home and share it with their families. It is vital that teachers inspire children and that is exactly what is happening at Orange Grove Primary School. The flicker of a flame that occurred in the initial stages of podcasting has now caught abaze.

Leading educators from Tokyo and Lancashire in England visited the school last year to learn more about how literacy is taught in Western Australian schools. They too had the privilege of taking part in interviews conducted by students at the school. Only last month, Senator the Hon. Helen Coonan, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, visited the school and was interviewed. She was clearly impressed with the students, their knowledge of IT applications and the very exciting ways in which the students are applying them. The effect of what Mr Fuller has achieved is like watching ripples spread when you cast a stone into a pond. Principal Pat Nottle has been very supportive of his project. His colleagues have also been captivated by its possibilities and its applications for learning. Currently all teachers are looking at ways in which a better understanding of new communication technologies can assist in the classroom. It is a very exciting time for students and teachers.

Through the Investing in Our Schools program funding, Orange Grove will be able to extend the opportunity to more classes over the coming year, allowing more teachers and students to learn and have the opportunity to be involved with more school activities. Podcasting is not only giving a hands-on approach to new and exciting technologies; it is providing so much more. It has increased reading, writing and, importantly, listening skills. It has opened the world to the students. They receive emails from around the world providing them with the opportunity to not only become more aware of people in other countries but also communicate and engage with them through this wonderful learning medium. It is so much easier to be interested in other parts of the world once you have had a conversation with someone from a different culture. That is just the start. You then want to learn where they come from, their traditions, and their cultures, how different their lives are from ours and how many things are the same. These questions are questions that Orange Grove Primary School students now find themselves thinking about and asking. I am very pleased that students are being challenged to learn in such
a wonderful learning environment provided by the Orange Grove Primary School and to be inspired by the endless possibilities in life and our world. By embracing modern technology, the principal and teachers at Orange Grove Primary school have provided the students with an authentic and highly motivating purpose for all of their schoolwork. They are to be congratulated. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—Order! It being 8 pm, the debate is interrupted.

House adjourned at 8.00 pm

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Mr Ruddock to present a Bill for an Act to amend the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995, and for related purposes. (Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Amendment (Advertising and Other Matters) Bill 2007)

Mr Robb to present a Bill for an Act to amend the law relating to the provision of education services to overseas students, and for related purposes. (Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2007)

Mr Bartlett to move:

That the House:

(1) recognises that climate change poses real threats to Australia and that there is an urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions;
(2) congratulates the organisers of Earth Hour 2007, which encourages Sydneysiders—businesses and individuals—to turn off their lights at 7.30 p.m. on 31 March for one hour;
(3) urges Members of this House to support Earth Hour in their electorates; and
(4) calls on the Howard Government to participate in Earth Hour 2007 by turning off the lights of all unoccupied Commonwealth Government buildings for one hour at 7.30 p.m. on 31 March 2007.

Ms Roxon to move:

That the House:

(1) expresses concern at:
   (a) recent reports of unlawful killing and detention of Oromo refugees by Ethiopian and Somali security forces in Somalia; and
   (b) ongoing reports of human rights violations and persecution of ethnic groups in Ethiopia; and
(2) calls on the Australian Government to:
   (a) urge the international community to secure the rights of Oromo refugees in Somalia and elsewhere; and
   (b) request that the Ethiopian Government allow its citizens to peacefully exercise their rights to freedom of association and assembly and investigate fully reports of human rights violations by police and security forces.

Mr Johnson to move:

That the House:

(1) recognise the tragic loss of 1,605 lives on our roads in 2006, including 336 in Queensland;
(2) recognise that road crashes remain the biggest killer of young Australians aged 16 to 25 and that in any given year, people aged between 18 and 24 are twice as likely to die in road smashes than other drivers;
(3) also recognise that researchers at the University of Queensland have calculated that the death and injury from road accidents costs the national economy some $17 billion a year, or the equivalent of 2.3 per cent of Australia's gross national income; and
(4) commend the Government for extending the AusLink Black Spot program, which has already eliminated some 700 dangerous crash sites in Queensland alone, for a further two years, from 2006-07 to 2007-08, at a cost of $90 million.
The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley) took the chair at 9.30 am.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (9.30 am)—Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. On 21 March 1960, dozens of people died in Sharpeville in South Africa when police fired at a peaceful demonstration against the apartheid ‘pass laws’. In 1966 the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the day to commemorate the Sharpeville massacre. Only a year later, in 1967, Australia had its own watershed moment: more than 90 per cent of Australians voted in a referendum to acknowledge Indigenous Australians as citizens and to give the Commonwealth government power to make laws regarding Indigenous people.

It was a monumental step towards reconciliation with our first Australians; as a nation we acknowledged almost 200 years of troubled history, and that is why Harmony Day, which is also today, is so important. It is a celebration of the strong and diverse society that we have built together, and an acknowledgement that more must be done. For me, our Indigenous people cannot be on an equal footing without meaningful employment and a decent education. If you do not have a good education, you cannot get a decent job; if you do not have a decent job, you cannot get ahead in life, you cannot give your children the best start in life—and so it goes on until disadvantage becomes the only thing passed down the generations.

I can only imagine how difficult it must be to respect yourself if you live like a second-class citizen. Mutual respect and recognition are not possible without self-respect. My focus is on real results for Indigenous Australians and I will certainly focus on the things that are working to deliver Indigenous people from disadvantage. I have just returned from an extraordinary road trip around Australia looking at the things that are working in Aboriginal communities. I believe that we have a continuing national responsibility—and have had since 1967—to do our best by Indigenous people. Today is yet another opportunity for us to recognise our mutual responsibilities to keep up hope and to work for real and lasting equality.

Water

Mr LINDSAY (Herbert—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence) (9.32 am)—One of the hallmarks of the Howard government has been the government’s ability to tackle very big-picture items in the country for the benefit of Australians. We have been able to do that initially in the face of some community opposition—and, of course, a lot of opposition from the opposition—and we have done it because we know that it is right, and right for the country.

I am reminded of things that generally people do not talk about: the big changes in Centrelink, for example. Many of us will remember what the old Department of Social Security used to be like. Centrelink is now a better customer service organisation than even private business in the way that it looks after its customers. Also in areas like taxation and industrial relations
there have been massive changes for the benefit of the country, and the Howard government will go down in history as being a reformist government in the interests of our nation.

One thing that we are presently engaged in is addressing the serious problems of water in the country. We have taken on the states and we have clearly signalled to the nation that we are going to fix the water mess that exists in the Murray-Darling Basin. We have promised an investment of $10 billion in that particular program and we are determined to do what needs to be done to make sure that we have a proper and sustainable water supply. But we are also looking at Northern Queensland, and that excites me because John Howard has appointed Bill Heffernan to look at those issues in the North. We currently have massive amounts of water that flow down the tropical rivers and out to sea. There is an opportunity to use that water and there is a whole range of ways in which that water might be used.

One of the possibilities is to raise the height of the existing Burdekin Dam by just a metre. That would increase its storage capacity by some 83 per cent. It currently holds 16 times the volume of Sydney Harbour—that gives you an idea of how much water we are talking about. Quite often these days we see water levels of more than a metre over the spillway of the dam, so there is an opportunity to collect that water. It may be used for further agriculture in Northern Australia. It could also be used for the people in the south-east corner of the state. I am currently involved in an investigation into getting that water to where it needs to go. I certainly encourage Bill Heffernan to talk with the people I have been talking to so that we can manage water better for our state, for our local region and for our country.

World Police and Fire Games

Ms KATE ELLIS (Adelaide) (9.35 am)—Today I would like to take the opportunity to share with the House a remarkably exciting event which is currently taking place in my electorate of Adelaide, that being the 2007 World Police and Fire Games. It began on 16 March and will last through until 25 March. I have been amazed by the excitement that has been generated by this event. This is only the second time that these games have been staged in Australia. The World Police and Fire Games were previously held in Melbourne back in 1995.

To give you some idea of the size of this event, in Adelaide this week we have some 8,000 competitors and some 4,000 visitors from almost 60 countries around the world. I would like to give particular credit to the thousands of South Australians who have put their names forward to be volunteers. We have a proud tradition of volunteers. They are the backbone of our community. This has once again been shown with the 2007 World Police and Fire Games, where some 2,300 volunteers are helping to make the games an absolute success.

I would also like to give credit to some of the organisers. Whilst I do not have time here today to go through all of the people who have played a role, I would like to congratulate the chairperson of the 2007 World Police and Fire Games Board, Mr Bill Spurr, from the South Australian Tourism Commission. I would also like to give credit to the South Australian police commissioner, Mal Hyde, as well as the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service chief fire officer, Grant Lupton.

There is a huge amount of excitement in Adelaide. Everybody is being a part of it. The 79 sporting events are all free for the public. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the organisers, to give credit to the thousands of volunteers and also to welcome all of the
overseas visitors to the city of Adelaide. We trust that you will have a fantastic time. And, of course, I also wish the Australian competitors the very best of luck.

**Queensland Air Museum**

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (9.38 am)—I am very pleased rise in the chamber today to laud the successes and achievements of the Queensland Air Museum, situated at Caloundra on the Sunshine Coast. It is a wonderful establishment that has helped to preserve a wide range of interesting memorabilia relating to Australia’s aviation history. Items on display at the museum include some 40 aircraft and various hangars. Interestingly, the Air Museum was originally established in Brisbane in the early 1970s and then relocated to a two-hectare site on land at Caloundra’s aerodrome in 1986. Since then, it has continued to expand and to grow.

It has been fortunate to enjoy the enthusiastic support of many local people and also people from other parts of the state. This is an attraction that has operated on a shoestring, with some 160 volunteers, predominantly former RAAF and RAF service men and women, and civilians who have been involved in the aviation industry. The Air Museum has proven to be of significant importance to those who have an interest in Australia’s unique past and in particular aviation history.

Some 12,000 visitors pass through the doors of the Queensland Air Museum each year. As is often the case with attractions that are operated mainly through the love and enthusiasm of members, these sorts of attractions can sometimes become the victims of events occurring around them. Growth and expansion often mean that these facilities become vulnerable to outside forces and they often do not have the resources to help them deal with the associated problems. Airports are always constructed well away from built-up areas, but, as is commonly the case, the town grows and expands, and eventually engulfs the aerodrome so that, in due course, it is out of place in its location.

The future of Caloundra Aerodrome is under a cloud. There are proposals to redevelop the airstrip, which would mean that tenants at the site, such as aircraft engineering, flight training schools and charter businesses, would need to relocate to a new aerodrome. Unfortunately, the cost of relocating the Queensland Air Museum would be prohibitive. An estimate by the museum’s operations manager, Bill Coulter, which was mentioned in the local newspaper put the cost of dismantling and trucking the many aircraft to a new location somewhere in the vicinity of $5 million; it could even be more.

The truth of the matter is that, if the land on which the Air Museum stands is to be developed for other purposes, it is highly likely that this attraction will simply be forced to close up shop. This is something that I know would cause great distress to museum volunteers and local residents; it is also something I greatly oppose. This unique facility, which houses a special array of aviation artefacts, has taken some 37 years to accumulate. It would be a tragedy to lose it. It really is important that the Air Museum continues to ensure that our aviation history is appropriately recorded and that it continues to bear witness to the unique aviation history of this nation. I commend the Air Museum to the House.

**Phillip Island Vietnam Veterans Museum**

Mr GRIFFIN (Bruce) (9.41 am)—I rise today to speak about the recent official opening of the Vietnam Veterans Museum on Phillip Island in Victoria. A crowd of over a thousand people was there. It was a great day and an opportunity for many members of the Vietnam veter-
ans community to get together and to celebrate a real achievement, an achievement they can all be very proud of. I would like to particularly mention John Methven and his wife as leading lights with respect to what has been done there. I would also stress that what has been achieved has been a group effort, which many people associated with the exercise can be very proud of.

The museum is a work in progress, but it is something that I would urge all members to visit if the opportunity presents itself. I would certainly urge members of the public to take the opportunity, if they are down near Phillip Island, to have a good look at something which showcases a range of very important memorabilia from a very important part of our history.

The museum is great to walk around. I spent several hours there trying to get around it, but I will need to go back again to have a proper look. Some of the more interesting artefacts are the wooden marbles that were used by the government of the day for the draw of birth dates, which decided who would be a national service inductee. There is a Centurion tank, a 105-millimetre Howitzer gun, Land Rovers, a ‘Huey’ Cobra AH-1F helicopter complete with a 20-millimetre Gatling gun, and a holographic light and sound display that outlines the history of Australia’s involvement in the war.

Not only that; there is also a range of other, smaller artefacts, including lots of pictures from the time. It was intriguing to walk around and to see photographs of people that I have dealt with in the Vietnam veterans community over the last couple of years in particular—seeing them looking much younger and serving their country so many years ago.

It was clear that this is something that they can all be very proud of. It is something which the community should get behind. The fundraising efforts that were undertaken to get this far have been very impressive and have involved the Vietnamese community as well as various ESOs, the community in general and also, for example, the Vietnam Veterans Motor Cycle Club in Victoria. They can all be very proud of what they have done. They stressed that it is all about working together; it is all about recognising the fact that there are, as they say on their website, no second-class citizens in our community. It is something that I would certainly urge members of parliament to go along and see. I was very proud to be there—very proud to be associated with the opening on the day and very proud of all those involved in achieving a very worthwhile museum.

**Stirling Electorate: Crime**

Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (9.44 am)—I rise to talk about what is a very important issue in my electorate of Stirling—the issue of crime. Whilst policing and community safety is primarily the responsibility of the state Labor government, I am pleased to report that the federal government is playing a role in ensuring that people in Stirling live in the safest community that is possible.

In Stirling we have received $410,000, which has gone through to the City of Stirling for its Reel Connections program. That is an important step forward in crime prevention and focuses on local youth and people in the northern suburbs surrounding Mirrabooka. Mirrabooka is an area in my electorate that is traditionally extraordinarily diverse. It has always been a focus for new arrivals in Western Australia and waves of immigrants have moved through there since the end of World War II—southern Europeans in the fifties and Vietnamese arri-
vals in the seventies; now we are getting new waves of immigrants passing through Mirrabooka primarily from Africa but also from the Middle East.

The Reel Connections program is an important grassroots approach to dealing with crime prevention, and it will make a real difference to the lives of many of our young people as well as local residents and families. It is, unfortunately, a fact of life that some of our local young people are getting themselves into serious trouble and engaging in antisocial activity. Sadly, this includes acts of violence between young migrants and Indigenous youth. The Reel Connections project will help to bridge these cultural gaps, provide understanding and improve the personal safety not only of our young people but also of the wider community. The project aims to reduce the level of antisocial behaviour and crime in and around the Mirrabooka regional centre by using a unique multimedia information and training program. During this project it is estimated that up to 120 young people will gain experience through a 10-week multimedia course, recording their own experiences and stories. These works will then be distributed throughout the entire community to educate people, both young and old, about tolerance and about how we can learn to accept people from different backgrounds. Many of these youths, their creativity and talent having been positively directed, will then be able to go on to further training or to other job opportunities with immediate accreditation and skills they have acquired through this program.

Another part of the project will be to work to disseminate safety information and information on certain aspects of the law and citizenship to provide further life skills training. It will assist young migrants and Indigenous youth to understand their legal rights and responsibilities and ultimately improve their personal safety, and, by doing so, it will improve the safety of all my constituents in the electorate of Stirling.

Gorton Electorate: Caroline Springs

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Gorton) (9.47 am)—Three weeks ago in the Age, there was an article that referred to Caroline Springs, a suburb in the electorate of Gorton. The article indicated that Caroline Springs did not exist eight years ago, but now it is at the heart of the fastest-growing area in Australia’s most rapidly expanding city, Melbourne. The article said:

Caroline Springs, 800 hectares next to the Western Highway, is home to more than 12,000 people, mostly young families breaking into the property market.

Along with development in neighbouring Taylors Hill and Burnside—
it went on to say—

this planned community 22 kilometres west of the CBD has helped turn once-sleepy Melton Shire into the city’s growth hub.

This is in fact the case. It is one of the fastest-growing areas of Australia—the fastest growing area of Melbourne—and there is much need for services to be provided to the community in that area. In fact, as has been said in articles published in newspapers in Melbourne, Caroline Springs ‘has parks, a man-made lake’—in fact, two man-made lakes—‘and six schools’, and the town centre includes ‘a supermarket, police station, pharmacy, newsagent and several food shops’.

Unfortunately, Caroline Springs, or any other suburb in the electorate of Gorton, does not have a Medicare office. I have been taking complaints from constituents concerned that there is no Medicare office within my electorate. That is a problem that existed prior to the creation

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of Caroline Springs, and it is now compounded by what has been an exponential population growth in the region. The three offices that are probably closest to the constituents include Melton Central, Airport West and Highpoint. However, there is much need for constituents to visit a Medicare office.

In my view, the best place for a Medicare office would be Water Gardens Shopping Centre. It is a very large shopping complex right in the middle of Sydenham and Taylors Lakes, and very close to Taylors Hill and Hillside, and, indeed, to Caroline Springs. That would provide people wanting to obtain services from a Medicare office with the opportunity to do so. We will be petitioning the Commonwealth to make a decision to have an office in place as soon as possible. If Medicare office locations are based on merit, I think that decision will be made in our favour in due course.

La Trobe Electorate: Upwey-Tecoma Bowls Club

Mr WOOD (La Trobe) (9.50 am)—On Wednesday, 21 February I was absolutely delighted to attend the official reopening of the Bob Griffiths green at the Upwey-Tecoma Bowls Club. I first acknowledge the great work of the following committee members: Mr Robin Southern, President of the Upwey-Tecoma Bowls Club; Mr Max Frost, Vice-President; Michael Walker, Secretary; and Colin Benson, Kim Walters, Jim Patterson, David West; Tas Boyce, Geoff Bell, Paul Hutchison and Neil Thurling. On that night there were some awards handed out which I would also like to mention: Bob Griffiths was the recipient of the Royal Victorian Bowls Association Medal of Merit; Jim Miller and Bob Griffiths, once again, received super veteran badges; and Robin Southern, Trevor Robertson and Ken Williams all received coaches badges.

For several years this must have been the unluckiest bowls club in Australia. Who would have thought that, when we are in the midst of having some of the driest years on record, the Upwey-Tecoma Bowls Club would have managed to have been flooded out not once but twice, destroying the greens and the possible future viability of the club. Given the disastrous impact the loss of a green had on the club’s finances, it is no exaggeration to say that, while things were looking fairly grim for the club, they never gave up and always wanted to make sure that they stayed alive to provide support for the local community. In April last year, I attended a crisis meeting, at which things looked fairly grim. Considering that this club has been in operation since 1929 and is one of the few clubs in the area, it would have been an absolute tragedy for all people, whether young or old, had the club not survived. I know that Upwey High School has students there undertaking bowls training. It is just a fantastic club.

The Australian government, under the Regional Partnerships Program, has made a contribution of $40,000 to complement funding and in-kind support from the Shire of Yarra Ranges, the Bendigo Bank, Belgrave Taxation Services, Robin Southern Coaching and the Victorian state government. The Australian government funding went specifically to replacing the lights and to drainage works.

I would like to congratulate the club president, Robin Southern, for his tireless work in getting it all together. I would also like to congratulate the following committee members in particular for their efforts: Mr Ken Walters, Mr Max Frost and Mr Michael Walker. It was a fantastic project. I would also like to mention both Sofia and Maya from the Melbourne East Area Consultative Committee who worked tirelessly with the club to get their application up to speed. Once again, the opening was a fantastic night. My bowling has not improved over
time, but I am sure, if I keep going there, my game will get there. I congratulate the club and wish them a long-term future.

**Chifley Electorate: Community Groups**

Mr PRICE (Chifley) (9.53 am)—I want to mention two clubs in my electorate that I recently visited. They are both funded by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. The Governor King Day Club is a new addition to the family. It meets at the St Marys RSL and I place on record my appreciation of the St Marys RSL, and particularly the sub-branch, for the way they support the Governor King Day Club. They provide facilities through which veterans and the families of veterans, particularly their spouses and/or widows, are able to meet once a week and go on outings. It is really important that, given the service these good people have given to our country, they should be able to avail themselves of membership of such clubs. So congratulations to Governor King Day Club—two years old and going strong.

Secondly, I refer to the Blacktown Bungarriebee Day Club, whose coordinator, Beverly Fayle, I think has been the coordinator since its inception. What an outstanding lady she is. This club meets at the Blacktown RSL and has been serving the community for 22 years. It was opened on 15 July 1985 by the then state president of the RSL, Sir Colin Hines. The club is perhaps not as strong as it once was but, again, it provides an important opportunity for veterans, their spouses and widows to meet once a week. When I was talking to members of the club they told me how important it is for them, and that it is the one outing they particularly look forward to each week.

Lastly, we celebrated a St Patrick’s Day mass and blessing at the Jubilee Hall, Patrician Brothers College. I did not ever own St Pat’s College, but under the new boundaries I do and I am very excited about that. I was particularly pleased to see Brother Pat Lovegrove and Brother Bernard, two former distinguished principals of the school, and also the current principal, Santo Passarello. The Patrician Brothers have served Blacktown and its surrounding areas very well. In fact a Liberal Party member of parliament, Alex Somlyay, the member for Fairfax, is a former student. Congratulations to the Patrician Brothers. Next year the Patrician Brothers will celebrate their centenary. *(Time expired)*

**Casey Electorate: Mount Evelyn Primary School**

Mr ANTHONY SMITH (Casey—Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister) (9.56 am)—I rise today to pay tribute to one of the great primary schools in the heart of the electorate of Casey, the Mount Evelyn Primary School. One of the great aspects of being a member of parliament, and I know all members in this place will agree, is having the opportunity to visit primary schools to see first-hand the great work being done not just by teachers but also by parents in a partnership to build a school community and to see the students involved in a wonderful education process.

On the evening of Thursday, 15 March, I had the pleasure of attending a twilight school assembly at the Mount Evelyn Primary School, where they spoke about important values of the school community and presented leadership badges and certificates to the school leaders. The school had been through a significant consultation process with parents, teachers and students to develop an important values booklet, which was funded by the Australian government. It took a great deal of commitment from the parents, the teachers and the students to ensure that
everyone had an input into the values booklet, and the values determined will be abiding principles of the school.

The parents from the school council participated in a weekend retreat to discuss what they thought were important values, together with the teachers and the students. The values that the school has decided upon include: respect, responsibility, care, integrity, enjoyment, sense of community, excellence and sustainability.

As I mentioned earlier, I had the pleasure of presenting badges and certificates to the school captains and vice captains, who will undertake an important role in implementing these principles throughout the year. I give particular credit to the chosen school captains, Joshua Dobson and Nikki Bedwell, as well as to vice captains Marcus Crew and Holly Bedyn. Their parents, and in one case grandparents, were there and I could see they were very proud that their sons and daughters had been chosen for leadership roles. I wish them all the best for the school year. I pay tribute to the principal, Mr Phil Comport, and to the many parents who took the time to turn up to the school assembly and show their dedication in building in Mount Evelyn not just a great primary school but a great community.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—Order! In accordance with standing order 193 the time for members’ statements has concluded.

CONDOLENCES
Hon. Sir Robert Carrington Cotton KCMG, AO
Hon. Sir Denis James Killen AC, KCMG
Debate resumed from 28 February, on motion by Mr Howard:
That the House record its deep regret at the deaths of the Honourable Sir Robert Carrington Cotton KCMG AO, former Federal Minister and Senator for New South Wales and Ambassador to the United States of America and the Honourable Sir Denis James Killen AC KCMG, former Federal Minister and Member for Moreton, Queensland; and place on record its appreciation of their long and meritorious service and tenders its profound sympathy to their families in their bereavement.

Ordered that further proceedings be conducted in the House.

AUSTRALIAN ENERGY MARKET AMENDMENT (GAS LEGISLATION) BILL 2006
Second Reading
Debate resumed from 1 March, on motion by Mr Macfarlane:
That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (10.00 am)—I rise this morning to address the Australian Energy Market Amendment (Gas Legislation) Bill 2006. The purpose of the bill is to bring about an agreement of all Australian jurisdictions committed to bringing the regulation of the electricity and gas markets under a new national governance arrangement. This is important because the national gas laws will reduce the regulatory burden on industry. It will improve service provisions, it will bring about certainty and it will protect the long-term interests of consumers. That is extremely important.

This national governance arrangement will be important to the energy industry. It will be particularly important in my electorate because of the jobs that are associated with the gas industry; the generation of electricity from gas is an important job generator in my electorate.
One of the important aspects of this legislation is that it recognises the fact that gas, like electricity, is not just confined to a market within a state. Energy now flows across borders—both electricity and gas—to provide an energy source in other states. That is never more apparent than in the south-west corner of my electorate in the Cooper Basin, where there is a Santos investment at the Ballera gas field which flows to Moomba in South Australia. Santos also provides a gas pipeline to New South Wales. That gas also flows through a network of pipelines to Brisbane, Mount Isa and Gladstone. This is a clear demonstration of how the gas that comes out of the Cooper Basin in Queensland is transported through those pipelines into other states and into those energy markets.

This bill will give great confidence to companies that invest in exploration in the gas industry and will also aid in the development of markets flowing from the gas that they find. It also will ensure that there is national competition in the marketplace—which we all want to see. I know consumers will benefit from that. It gives certainty to those investment companies and their shareholders that there is a competitive market out there. This bill will give them the confidence of knowing that there is a market and that there is regime that will encourage competition and further exploration.

The Surat Basin is an underdeveloped coal basin in my electorate. It has great potential, not only for the extraction of coal but also in the production of coal seam methane. Coal seam methane is a very clean form of energy. It is a technology that, in the last 10 to 15 years, has been refined and developed largely by Australian companies. I think we are going to see more and more coal seam methane extracted from coal fields. This is important in that, should those coal seams one day be exploited, they will be a safer mine to operate, because the coal seam methane has been extracted from the coal bed, making it a less dangerous environment in which to operate underground coal extraction.

Origin Energy is the company in my electorate that is involved in the extraction of coal seam methane. It plans to build two power stations at the site where it is extracting this coal seam methane. One will be at Spring Gully. I hoped the company would put in a second one there, but there is some debate at the moment about whether that will proceed or whether it will be located at what is known as the Braemar interconnection site for the electricity grid that is being established in these fields to feed electricity into the national electricity market.

I recently had a briefing in my home town of Roma, and Santos, BHP, General Electric and Energex have been the recipients of some $75 million from the Commonwealth government to bring together a range of technologies that will see them build a 100-megawatt power station utilising coal seam methane as its energy source. The $75 million is important because it will assist in the construction of that power station, a zero emissions power station.

With the debate about climate change and emissions, not only here in Australia but also world wide, it is important that we are able to prove and to see proven these known technologies, and it will be this power station at Fairview, north-east of Injune in my electorate, that will be the first in the world to bring together all those known technologies with the support of government money to build that power station. Importantly, the power that is generated from that power station will then be fed into a power link grid to take it into the national power grid, which then obviously feeds into the national electricity market. It is a very important project, once again demonstrating this federal government’s commitment to investing in new and clean technologies that reduce emissions. In this case, it is the generation of power.
from coal seam methane gas, and it is another example of the federal government’s commitment to addressing the issue of emissions within Australia.

The investment will see the coal seam methane extracted and used to generate electricity, but the carbon dioxide that is produced when that coal seam methane is burnt in those turbines will be extracted at the exhaust level and then returned underground, whence it came. This coal seam methane area is something like 700 to 800 metres below the ground, and when the carbon dioxide is returned to the coal bed it actually attaches to the coal. Unlike the methane before it is extracted, which is quite volatile and mobile, the carbon dioxide that is returned to the coal bed actually attaches to the coal. It actually makes the coal seam much safer should it ever be extracted. Being such a deep deposit, it is probably unlikely that we will see it extracted in our lifetime. But we should never say never in life. Should it ever be extracted at some time in the future, it will be a much safer deposit because it will not be as volatile as it currently is with the coal seam methane in the coal bed.

The other important thing is that the water that is extracted as part of the process of extracting coal seam methane will be used for the cooling of the power station. So we will have a power plant, in situ, that is using coal seam methane technology to generate power and the water that comes up with the coal seam methane will be used to cool the power plant. That is a tremendous step forward, given that water is such a valuable commodity in Australia today. We know just how valuable it is wherever we live in Australia—whether it is in the outback or in an urban situation. The water that is currently in many of these extraction sites is evaporating into the atmosphere and will now be used in a productive way to cool the power plant, rather than evaporating into the atmosphere and being wasted. The power generated feeds into the national grid, which provides an opportunity for the investment company to sell power into the national power market, thereby creating an enormous number of jobs.

I am quite excited about this project because it is the very first not only in Australia but also in the world. This project uses the known technology of extraction of coal seam methane. It generates power at the site, strips off the water and uses it for cooling the power plant. But, importantly, the carbon dioxide created by the power that is generated will not be emitted into the atmosphere as the emissions are pumped back down the hole and will ultimately rest in a carbon sink. Once this technology is further developed it will afford the opportunity for other power plants, such as coal-fired power plants, to utilise it and bury the carbon dioxide that they would otherwise emit into the atmosphere. I am not quite sure whether that will come about. We have to prove the first step of the technology and get it to work. We will then have an opportunity to return the carbon dioxide which comes from coal-fired power stations to the coal bed and have zero emission power stations. It is a win all round. This amendment bill will, I am sure, bring about greater security for the generation of power in Australia and will give security and confidence not only to companies that invest in the exploration of gas but also to the investors who invest in pipelines across Australia. The regulatory regime is constant across state borders and I believe that will help to further develop the industry. I support the legislation.

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith) (10.13 am)—I am grateful to have the opportunity to welcome the Australian Energy Market Amendment (Gas Legislation) Bill 2006 today. The proposed national regime will replace the nine different regulatory regimes operating across the country and streamline access to gas pipelines. That is certainly long overdue and wel-
come. The amendments contained within the bill confer the powers of regulation and management of the proposed national gas regime to Commonwealth agencies and to the federal minister. I note that the bill’s provisions reflect the agreement undertaken by Commonwealth, state and territory governments at the Ministerial Council on Energy. The regulatory framework proposed in this bill, of necessity, now relies on the states and territories passing complementary laws. That is something which, in due course, ought to happen to enable a regulatory framework of this scope to be enacted. The timing of this bill, designed as it is to allow for the establishment of a national framework to regulate access to gas pipelines, could not come at a more crucial moment, because gas has come in for a hard time in the parliament and in public debate over the last couple of weeks.

As debate has raged over how we should deal with the threat of climate change, with the spectre of a potential four-degree increase in temperature hovering and the creation of a world described by NASA scientist Jim Hansen as ‘practically a different planet’, the Howard government has taken a surprising and disappointing stance and, at times, seems to almost completely discount the contribution gas is capable of making to address climate change. Given the consequences of even a two-degree increase in temperature, it is extraordinary that the government would be dismissive of such a vital source of energy—yet that is exactly what it has been doing.

Whenever the issue of baseload power provision has been raised by anyone in parliament, on television, radio or in print, the federal government has fallen over itself time and time again to say that only coal or nuclear power have the capacity to provide baseload power in Australia. It is the case that the Prime Minister and other ministers mention gas on a couple of occasions here and there, but the general thrust of the government’s position and comments, including statements made by the Prime Minister in question time, is that it will fall upon coal or nuclear power to provide baseload power in the future.

That is just not correct. Consider the international experience. The truth is that, in 2000, gas provided 54 per cent of Russia’s energy needs, 52 per cent of the Middle East’s energy needs and 16 per cent of North America’s energy mix. Gas is more than capable of providing a share of Australia’s baseload power and, importantly, it is also extremely flexible.

The fact is that most of the growth in our energy consumption is in demand for intermediate and peak power. That is really where the demand for energy comes from and that is where the demand for energy must be met—in intermediate and peak power. It is on those hot summer afternoons, when everyone turns up their air conditioning full blast—that kind of demand—where gas and also solar power are particularly well suited. In fact, gas is such a flexible source of power that it can be used to provide baseload power, the power that is needed to keep everything quietly ticking over during the night and, with the flick of a switch, it can be used to provide a couple of minutes of peak power or 12 hours of intermediate power.

Apart from its flexibility, gas also has between 30 per cent and 50 per cent less carbon emissions than coal. That is quite a significant reduction. Furthermore, all the work that has been done to develop clean coal technologies, such as geosequestration, could also potentially advantage gas, as many of the same principles can apply to bearing the carbon load from gas as apply to bearing the carbon load from coal.
Traditionally, we have not used gas to provide baseload power in Australia because the price of coal has been so low. The price of coal-fired baseload is around $30 per megawatt hour, compared to around $38 per megawatt hour for gas-fired generation. This has meant that, whilst domestic gas prices in Australia are amongst the lowest in the OECD and the lowest in the world, gas is still more expensive than coal under existing policy settings. Despite its flexibility and availability, Australia has gas reserves of more than 110 years worth at current rates of production, and this does not include the large volumes of Queensland and New South Wales coal seam gas.

Yet just last week the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources, Mr Turnbull, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that it would be ‘short-sighted and selfish for Australia to use its large gas reserves to cut emissions in Australia, because the rest of the world did not have that luxury’. That is an extraordinary position to take, particularly as Australia’s greenhouse pollution is expected to soar by some 27 per cent by 2020. If we wish to avoid this kind of emissions expansion—and the need for us to reduce emissions is indeed urgent—then we clearly need to invest in gas and other clean energy sources here in Australia.

It is difficult, I think, for people to understand why the Howard government is so keen to perpetuate the myth that only coal or nuclear power can provide baseload energy demand. I believe the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources needs to stop talking down Australia’s gas and renewable energy sectors and start doing his job. This is not about the gas industry’s technological inadequacies—and the bill before us clearly shows what the potential for gas is—but the minister for the environment’s indifferent approach on climate change is seriously to be regretted.

We argue that any government that takes the risks inherent in climate change seriously must also take the role of gas in the country’s energy provision very seriously. Federal Labor certainly does, as does the industry itself. Just two days ago AGL announced its decision to join the Chicago Climate Exchange. This is further compelling evidence of the lost economic opportunities created by 11 years of climate change denial and complacency under the Howard government.

AGL’s historic announcement demonstrates the company’s commitment to tackling climate change but also highlights Australia’s isolation from global efforts to cut greenhouse pollution. As it turns out, clean energy companies are continuing to seek opportunities outside of Australia. AGL’s move to the Chicago Climate Exchange shows how many golden opportunities are being missed. The fact is that Australia should and could be the regional hub for emissions trading and clean energy but, instead of a hub, there is a hole. Nothing can happen. Australian financial institutions are blocked until Australia ratifies the Kyoto protocol and establishes a national emissions trading scheme.

AGL’s Managing Director, Paul Anthony, has stated that his company’s membership of the Chicago Climate Exchange allows it to ‘trade allowances with other companies around the globe seeking to reduce their own carbon footprint and access the global buyers for its many carbon offset projects’. It is clear the government’s failure to act is costing jobs and threatening our precious environment. A discussion paper released almost five years ago by the gas to liquids task force recognised the potential for gas to liquids technology. It stated:

There is a significant potential market for ultra clean diesel, and this provides an opportunity in the future for GTL—
gas to liquids—
diesel.

So what is preventing the gas industry from taking a more substantial role in Australia’s energy mix? Firstly, investment in energy infrastructure requires very long lead times and certainty. The Howard government’s failure to provide the security of a carbon signal has resulted in both the coal and gas industries being frustrated in making investment in the provision of new power plants because, while the government may pretend that climate change is not real—or, at least, not very urgent—the gas and coal industries know that a carbon signal is coming. They know they are moving into a carbon-constrained economy, and they are not willing to commit substantial sums of money—indeed, as much as billions of dollars in assets—that may become stranded in this new environment. That is why, secondly, the gas industry needs a carbon price signal and a carbon emissions trading scheme to trade the carbon in. That is why on 7 February this year Grant King, Origin Energy’s Managing Director, told ABC radio that his industry wants to see a carbon trading scheme. He said:

We’d like to see a commitment to introduce an effective carbon-pricing regime. We believe that that needs to be sooner rather than later. That’s necessary to ensure that companies who are making major capital investments which have 20, 30, 40-year lives can make decisions knowledgeable of the future regime in relation to carbon-pricing.

This is also why on 22 February 2007 the CEO of the Petroleum Producers Association, Belinda Robinson, told her Australian Oil and Gas Conference that she was bewildered by the federal government response to climate change. She said:

We do need to explore all options for all energy supplies that are cleaner and greener than we’ve had in the past but they’re out there; they’re 10, 20 years away. The bewildering part has been that we’ve got gas now, there’s no new technology that has to be advanced to be able to deliver on greenhouse gas emission reductions with gas.

I think that says it very clearly. While the Howard government has continued to marginalise the gas industry by refusing to recognise its capacity to provide baseload, intermediate and peak power demands, and has refused to acknowledge its lighter carbon load, Mr Howard has simply continued to talk up the prospect of a future nuclear powered Australia. In this future—and it is a distant future that arrives only in the 2030s or later—Australia has dozens of nuclear reactors dotted along the eastern seaboard. According to Dr Switkowski, they will meet one-third of Australia’s energy needs.

It is unclear how Australia will manage the tonnes of nuclear waste produced by such an intensive nuclear industry, nor is it clear where the waste will be stored, nor do we know where the reactors will be, and the cost involved in producing that power remains very expensive—and then, of course, the issues of risk around nuclear non-proliferation have somehow resolved themselves overnight, although we are not told how. Although all of these issues remain in abeyance, gas, which has the capacity to provide us with energy right now, is underrated and maligned.

Of course, it is a fact that Australia’s emissions have been rising exponentially, but apparently that also is not a problem. If you believe the Prime Minister, nuclear power in the future will answer all of our energy needs. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, pursuing this nuclear future will not only drive up our carbon emissions through inaction on multiple fronts necessary—and the mining, milling and building of nuclear power plants will create
emissions—but will also radically increase the risk of accidents and proliferation and open up the prospects of terrorism on Australian soil. That is why this Labor Party under Kevin Rudd resolutely rejects nuclear power.

When we look at the Australian Energy Market Amendment (Gas Legislation) Bill, we recognise that the replacement of nine different regulatory regimes operating across the country with one proposed national regime to streamline access to gas pipelines is necessary and welcome. But when we examine the potential and clear role that gas could play in assisting us to meet our greenhouse gas emissions in Australia at a time when climate change is an issue of significant importance, we can see very clearly the failures inherent in the Howard government’s approach.

The Labor Party would ratify the Kyoto protocol. We would give Australian businesses and farmers access to income streams that flow from ratification and we would give Australians access to the international negotiations that are about to begin—negotiations that will determine how we move forward as an international community in our fight against climate change. This legislation is important, and it also emphasises why Australia’s gas industry has to be brought in from the cold and counted as a part of the solution to Australia’s spiralling carbon emissions.

Mr BALDWIN (Paterson—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources) (10.26 am)—Minister Macfarlane brought the Australian Energy Market Amendment (Gas Legislation) Bill 2006 to the parliament with the support of our colleagues on the Ministerial Council on Energy to continue our progress towards an efficient and effective national regime for the regulation of gas pipeline infrastructure. By passing the bill, the Commonwealth parliament will play a lead role in facilitating the Ministerial Council on Energy’s cooperative gas access regime. This regime will be underpinned by lead legislation enacted in the South Australian parliament to which the National Gas Law will be a schedule. The National Gas Law will then be applied by all remaining jurisdictions, including the Commonwealth, but excluding Western Australia, through legislation known as applications acts. Western Australia will pass mirror legislation with content similar to the National Gas Law rather than applying the National Gas Law established by South Australian law.

This bill amends the Australian Energy Market Act 2004 to apply the National Gas Law in the Commonwealth’s jurisdiction, including the offshore area and external territories. It also amends that act and the Trade Practices Act 1974 to allow three key Commonwealth bodies—the Australian Energy Regulator, the National Competition Council and the Australian Competition Tribunal—to take on key roles within the regime.

Except in Western Australia, the Australian Energy Regulator will take on the role of regulator within the regime, in place of various regulatory bodies that are currently undertaking this role in different jurisdictions. This will lead to more efficient and consistent regulatory decision making. The National Competition Council and the Australian Competition Tribunal will also have important roles in overseeing and reviewing the proper operation of this scheme to ensure economically efficient, competitive outcomes in the gas market to protect the long-term interests of the consumers of gas. The involvement of these Commonwealth bodies is an essential part of this cooperative scheme, and the Commonwealth must provide groundwork for the passage of the National Gas Law in the South Australian parliament by legislating for these functions and powers to be exercised.
The National Gas Law is currently the subject of a rigorous consultation process engaging all relevant stakeholders. The Ministerial Council on Energy Standing Committee of Officials have released their policy response to issues raised during consultation on the exposure draft of the National Gas Law and they will be finalising the legislation, taking into account issues raised by stakeholders. The member for Prospect has raised industry’s concerns about the powers conferred on the Australian Energy Regulator by the National Gas Law, and particularly the Australian Energy Regulator’s ability to investigate matters of competition. These issues have been the subject of detailed discussions over some time, and the government will continue to work with the states through the Ministerial Council on Energy process to address stakeholder concerns and to ensure that the National Gas Law delivers an effective national gas regime.

The National Gas Law is designed to reduce the regulatory burden on industry and to facilitate investment in gas pipeline infrastructure. The National Gas Law will introduce a new, light-handed form of regulation that allows gas market participants to negotiate economically efficient outcomes without the direct involvement of the regulator, whilst creating a fair and effective access regime. The National Gas Law will also continue the greenfields pipeline incentives established by the Ministerial Council on Energy in June 2006, incentives which create certainty for investors undertaking risky greenfield and international pipeline projects.

In summary, passage of this bill will represent a significant legislative step towards a truly national gas access regime. The cooperative national gas law regime will ensure that Australia enjoys the benefits of a competitive and efficient gas market whilst minimising the regulatory burden on industry. This bill has the full support of Minister Macfarlane’s state and territory colleagues on the Ministerial Council on Energy; therefore, I commend the bill to the chamber.

Question agreed to.
Bill read a second time.
Ordered that the bill be reported to the House without amendment.

TOURISM AUSTRALIA AMENDMENT BILL 2007
Second Reading

Debate resumed from 14 February, on motion by Fran Bailey:

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (10.33 am)—On behalf of the opposition and as the shadow minister for transport, I advise that Labor supports the Tourism Australia Amendment Bill 2007. We support it because it implements the recommendations resulting from the 2006 Uhrig review relating to corporate governance arrangements for Tourism Australia. We all understand that tourism is vital to Australia. This goes to the framework and the national responsibility to work with state and territory governments and local communities to do everything to maintain tourism as a viable industry in Australia that creates jobs and export opportunities, whilst also enabling Australians a wonderful opportunity to have a holiday.

When you think about it, it is hard to imagine life without tourism in Australia, the so-called ‘land of the long weekend’. Bustling city centres, vacant white-sand beaches, lush tropical rainforests and sunburnt sweeping plains—that is the international understanding of
what is available in Australia but, unfortunately, statistics now indicate that too few Australians are taking a holiday. One of the challenges to business in Australia is to better manage their business and to facilitate people to take holidays on a regular basis. This would also be smart for business, because as wages go up their own liabilities in terms of accumulation of annual leave and long service leave go through the roof.

So in addressing this bill today, I also challenge Australian industry to start managing their businesses better. They can reduce their liabilities whilst also facilitating their employees to have a better opportunity to perform their duties at work by actually having a break from work. That is a challenge to the Australian community for the foreseeable future.

I also note that, posed in historic terms, officially tourism is a relatively new industry. The terms ‘tourism’ and ‘tourist’ were first coined globally about 70 years ago, in 1937, by the League of Nations and referred to the act of people travelling abroad for more than 24 hours. They had not heard of domestic tourism in those days. Historically, however, we know that for centuries the wealthy in our societies have always travelled. The reason is that they sought to explore distant parts of the world, to see great buildings, experience new cultures and to taste new cuisine. Since the time of the Roman republic, places such as the luxurious and fashionable resort of Baiae were popular with the rich.

In Australia, the history is perhaps even more recent. The industry finally gained formal recognition in 1966 when the Holt government appointed the late Don Chipp as the first minister for tourism activities. A year later the Australian Tourism Commission was established through the allocation of $1.5 million of funding. If only it was so cheap these days in terms of the call on the taxpayer’s purse.

More seriously, in just over 40 years the industry has grown substantially in every conceivable sense. The advent of technological developments, particularly in transport, has made it easier than ever for people to move from one destination to the next and the emergence of low-cost carriers in the aviation industry in particular have removed financial barriers that previously limited tourism to the wealthy. More recently, with the advent of e-commerce, tourism products have become one of the most traded items on the internet—and that is where Tourism Australia has concentrated its activities, with a current advertising campaign internationally trying to attract hits on the net to encourage people to come to Australia.

Further, every year more and more destination choices are presented to the global traveller as countries recognise the huge economic and social benefit of a robust tourism sector. It has become an extremely popular global activity and each year, according to the World Tourism Organisation, almost 700 million tourists travel the globe. That is a huge number of people travelling around the globe at any point in time. Others peg the number of annual tourism travellers as high as 803 million a year.

While the size of the growth may be in dispute, what is not is that the sector is rapidly growing. Estimates predict that by 2020, which is only a decade away, the number of people travelling each year through tourism will reach a huge 1.6 billion people—this is almost the entire current population of China—who will be more than ever on the move looking for new experiences. It also, unfortunately, represents a huge challenge to Australia, because recent indications are that we are going backwards in some of these key markets, such as Japan. We have to try to make sure that we have a program in place which enables us to get our share of that burgeoning growth in tourism. I say that because, of these 1.6 billion travellers, 378 mil-
lion will be long-haul travellers, which is of significant note to Australia, a country considered globally as a long-haul destination.

It also raises huge challenges in handling the debate about climate change, because there are some who want to impose huge penalties on the airline industry for greenhouse emissions and who would require the industry to pay more with respect to their operations. These things have to be handled very sensitively and in a pragmatic and proper way because, if this debate goes wrong for aviation, Australia will be the big loser because of our need to encourage and attract long-haul fliers. It is about time that some of these people paid more attention to the responsibilities of Airservices Australia to manage flight paths and the departures and arrivals at airports, because you can do more in the climate change fight by introducing greater efficiencies there.

I also note that the aviation industry has started to respond to the huge cost impost of recent increases in the price of oil with better management and technological change. So there is potentially a multifaceted approach to resolving this climate change debate for the viability of the aviation industry, rather than simply imposing new costs on the industry as part of the greenhouse debate. I think that is important. Global tourists have traditionally held back on long-haul travel as it can prove cost prohibitive but also requires more time. The last thing we need is to unnecessarily burden the industry with huge cost difficulties arising from the greenhouse debate. You cannot just duck over to Australia from London the way you can to Paris or to Amsterdam. It is, therefore, pleasing to see forecasts for long-haul travel growing slightly faster than intraregional travel. It is estimated its share will increase from 18 per cent in 1995 to 24 per cent by 2020.

Global forecasts present further positive news for Australia. The South-East Asia and the Pacific region, which encompasses Australia, will be the second largest receiving region with growth forecast to increase by over five per cent, compared to the world average of 4.1 per cent. The growth opportunities are there, but we as a nation have to grab hold of them. This growth is largely due to two reasons: the emergence of new markets in Asia and particularly in South-East Asia; and, more importantly, the fall in Europe’s popularity from 60 per cent to 46 per cent of the market.

These technological and transport advances have kept pace with rapidly changing consumer tastes. There are more tourists now than ever before and they have the levels of disposable income that mean they can travel. They are better educated and have more sophisticated demands. The old ‘sun, sea and sand’ mass market has fragmented as travellers seek out active experiences that engage with local culture. It is a far more sophisticated and demanding market that Australia has to confront. This effectively means that there has been a growth in niche markets catering for special interests or activities, including growth in destination hotels, as people seize upon opportunities to do something unique that is off the tourism track. This has led to a change in the way nations and regions market their tourism. Previously held notions have been abandoned that boxed travellers into the categories of countries of origin, mode of travel and style, whether it be backpackers, organised tours or self-drive. The traveller’s motivation and their travel lifestyle are now the key defining characteristics—attributes that cross national borders and create new marketing segments. Sometimes the attributes are universal, but not always. Some travellers cannot help but be influenced by their own cultural habits.
This is perhaps what we have seen with Tourism Australia’s $180 million global campaign ‘Where the Bloody Hell Are You?’ launched in February of last year—the campaign that, incidentally, appears to have undergone an unannounced name change to become a ‘Uniquely Australian Invitation’ in the light of criticism of such a controversial tag line.

Mr Ciobo interjecting—

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Yes, I am very partial to the coal industry. It is a bit like the tourism industry—good for jobs and exports for Australia. The Tourism Australia campaign seeks to attract people who are avid users of technology, shun traditional media outlets, listen and value their peers’ travel experiences, want their travel experience to enhance them as a person and, perhaps most importantly, are high-yield tourists. They are commonly known in marketing as ‘experience seekers’. The campaign approach based on this model of defining people by their motivation to travel works to a point, as the $6 million spent by Tourism Australia on tourism research and polling tells us. In some markets, the tag line built on the existing goodwill towards Australia and cut through in a fiercely competitive global community. Yet it failed to cut through and inspire experience seekers in some critical markets, including that of Japan, which due to cultural differences meant the tag line simply did not translate.

There were further problems in other key markets, and I do not wish to dwell on them today as that is not my purpose in speaking to the bill. I simply note that the opposition, federal Labor, has given bipartisan support to the campaign as it supports a viable and vital tourism industry, and a global campaign was desperately needed. It is about actually getting that campaign right rather than wasting money. I raise this point because it highlights a simple fact: while there is immense credit in the approach of segmenting a campaign according to lifestyle habits and motivation rather than just country of origin, any single theme campaign will not enable the industry to realise its full potential. Cultural differences that can be defined by our global origin have a significant impact on lifestyle choices. This factor that influences our purchasing decisions should not be overlooked as merely an outdated marketing model, particularly when $180 million of taxpayer funded money is put on the table. Taxpayers actually expect value in terms of the return on that investment to try and guarantee the future of the tourism industry.

As the shadow minister for tourism, I therefore say on behalf of the opposition that I am concerned by the fact that $180 million was spent on an international campaign that relied perhaps too much on a single theme. This is a risky approach. Tourism Australia knew before the campaign was launched that there were translation problems in Japan as well as cultural differences of major significance in other key markets. From the opposition’s point of view this does not suggest that the campaign should be scrapped and that Tourism Australia should go back to the drawing board and develop a new Brand Australia campaign. We are not suggesting that as it would be a step back for tourism in Australia and we need to move forward. There are faults with the campaign. The industry and Tourism Australia accept that it is not perfect, and we have to look forward in trying to actually improve the campaign and learn from some of our past mistakes. It is about modifying the campaign as necessary and aiming towards building a brand that realises the enormous potential that is actually out there.

The year 2005 was anything but a great year for tourism, and 2006 mercifully saw the industry gain back some ground, thanks largely to the Ashes cricket tour that attracted British tourists here in droves, even if it was to watch their team lose to the Aussies. The fact is that
there was an increase of 5.8 per cent in British tourists; however, otherwise it was a flat period for tourism, with overall tourism numbers increasing by only 0.6 per cent. Where would we have been without the Ashes tour in terms of our performance over the last 12 months?

Although the downward trend in tourist numbers from Japan continued, thankfully it has somewhat abated. The figures were interpreted by the government as good news as tourist spending was up but, as the head of Tourism Council Australia commented, while the aim of attracting higher spending, longer staying visitors was paying off, the lack of growth in market share was a huge concern to Australia. I argue that it is a real concern. As I outlined earlier today, global tourism is booming and the international industry has never been stronger. Why aren’t we as a nation grasping our share of that growth? I say that because, despite this growth, we have not actually increased our market share. New and highly lucrative markets are emerging and they are there for the taking.

Mr Ciobo—Mr Deputy Speaker, I seek to intervene.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hatton)—Is the member for Batman willing to give way?

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—Yes.

Mr Ciobo—Would the shadow minister perhaps elaborate on this point, with regard to cuts to tourism spending by state Labor governments, most particularly by Sandra Nori in New South Wales, but also the lack of real funding increases by the Queensland state Labor government and other state Labor governments?

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—The truth of the matter is that it is a mixed bag around Australia. One of the huge successes is the work of the Queensland Minister for Tourism, Margaret Keech, who is well recognised in the industry and by Tourism Australia for doing the right thing by tourism in Queensland. She is not only seeking to promote domestic tourism but is also going out of her way to open up new opportunities internationally, in places such as Asia. She is also pursuing major new opportunities in the Middle East, which is exceptionally important to the member’s own seat on the Gold Coast of Queensland. I commend the activities of a range of tourism ministers in Australia, including Western Australia, where there have been substantial increases in tourism dollars, and the terrific campaign being put together by Jane Lomax-Smith, the South Australian tourism minister.

I also noticed at Tourism Australia’s recent awards in Sydney that Victoria, through the work of the previous minister, John Pandazopoulos, dominated the awards on that evening. With respect to the issue of New South Wales, obviously New South Wales rested on its laurels in the aftermath of the Sydney Olympics. It represented a failure by government and industry to actually grab opportunities that should have arisen as a result of the Sydney Olympics.

Irrespective of who wins the election this Saturday—and I am confident that the New South Wales Labor Party will win—it is a huge challenge to the new incoming minister and the tourism industry itself to review the structures that surround the operation of tourism in New South Wales and also put together a new funding package which is about not just the promotion of major events but also doing the right thing by key regional areas of tourism in New South Wales. I acknowledge that in Australia at a federal and state level there have been mixed results, but on balance the state Labor governments have actually done the right thing
by tourism—that is, they have recognised, respected and supported the tourism industry Australia wide.

If anything is a huge question mark in the minds of a lot of people in the tourism industry, it would be the performance of the federal Minister for Small Business and Tourism, Fran Bailey, and weaknesses in respect of the Tourism Australia campaign. I think it is about time that we actually fronted up to the facts concerning the sluggishness of the tourism industry both domestically and internationally under the so-called leadership of the minister for tourism, Fran Bailey. Having said that, I welcome the opportunity to take questions from honourable members because the facts speak for themselves. The real question is the lack of leadership at a federal level from the minister and member for McEwen, Fran Bailey.

That takes me back to the issue of new and lucrative markets which are emerging. Let us take the issue of the Middle East market. That is not yet considered a key market for Tourism Australia. Certainly, it meets the criterion of high yield. Increasingly, tourist hubs across the world are welcoming large travelling groups from the Middle East which are cashed up and ready to spend up on quality tourism products. The number of Chinese tourists has also soared in recent years thanks to a relaxing of travel restrictions and a growing middle class that has a disposable income. Some parts of the industry consider China’s export tourism to be one of the most exciting opportunities of our times. China is fast consolidating its status as Asia’s largest outbound tourism market, with 30.5 million Chinese travelling abroad in 2006—a rise of 11 per cent on the 2005 figures.

I believe this presents Australia with enormous tourism potential, particularly as we are essentially on their back doorstep and can offer a tourism product that is unique when compared with other countries in South-East Asia. The latest tourism raw figures show that Australia attracted around 30,000 Chinese tourists to our shores, indicating vast opportunity for growth. Australia is positioned to be in the right place at the right time if we actually had some leadership at a government level and also a willingness on the part of industry to get more aggressive about their responsibilities to go out and grasp the opportunity that is in Asia.

The question is whether the minister for tourism will ensure that the Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern markets do not become a lost opportunity. To ensure that this opportunity is realised, current barriers need to be overcome. There has been industry concern that rogue operators—and it is the Queensland government Minister Margaret Keech who has actually led the attack on rogue operators—are specifically undermining the industry. This is of special concern to the South Korean and Chinese markets because, unfortunately, they see their people being exploited through a scam known as rentou. Queensland recently brought in an accreditation scheme to eliminate rentou operations as it saw it as such a serious threat to its $18 billion tourist industry. Amid revelations in the media of the presence of rogue tour operators ripping off Korean tourists visiting Australia, the opposition is calling on the government for stronger leadership in helping ministers such as the Queensland minister to clean up the industry.

Federal Labor has repeatedly called on greater federal leadership to address this serious issue that poses a real threat to our industry and to the 550,000 people employed in the industry. The industry’s integrity is placed on the line when media headlines, particularly in the international press, tell tales of unscrupulous tourist operators that take advantage of tourists on our shores, and the lack of federal government action in association with state ministers and the
industry on this front is a serious concern. Rather than doing nothing, the federal government
Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources—

Mr Ciobo interjecting—

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON—It is a long wait to become a minister if you represent the
Gold Coast. You have missed out yet again, my friend, despite a Queensland vacancy, so I
will take the smile off your face if you keep intervening. I would like to remind you of your
failures, despite your intense lobbying, to actually gain that front bench opportunity. More
seriously, I think it is about time the minister for tourism hounded these rogue operators out. I
know the member himself has serious concerns as he goes around the industry about the per-
formance of the minister, whispering in their ears.

There has been more than the odd media report of dishonest schemes. One of the worst I
have heard of involved a group of four South Korean tourists who were charged a total of
$440 for the privilege of walking on the Surfers Paradise beach, a pleasure that Australians
and all international visitors normally would have a right to enjoy free of charge—and I am
sure the honourable member would have done it at half the price.

These claims, if true, are outrageous and are the last thing the industry needs when it is ex-
periencing underperforming international visitor numbers. I believe a solution to the problem
has been identified by the Queensland government, and it is about time that we had better co-
operation at state and federal levels to pursue some of those realistic policy options. There are
obvious efficiencies in having a national system of accreditation so that we demand a quality
performance by those involved in what is a very important industry for Australia from the
point of view of jobs and export earnings.

I call on the federal government, in association with the ministers through the ministerial
council, to actually get serious about maintaining the integrity of the industry. It is important,
as Australia needs to build a quality brand. Tourism Australia has had a challenge in the past
on this front. If we are to develop a new product with new experiences then we have to make
sure it is a quality product based on integrity and not on unsuspecting tourists being ripped off
by rogue operators. This effectively means that we cannot take the ball off the industry with
domestic tourism either. It is the mainstay of the industry, and in many cases regional Austra-
ilia depends on it, especially given the recent drought and bushfires in many areas of regional
Australia.

Despite increases in domestic tourism yield, the goal of getting more Aussies to take a
break and travel in their backyard has proven troublesome, a matter that I raised at the com-
 mencement of this speech. The latest industry figures show a slightly healthier domestic tour-
 ism industry when compared with the same time last year, but the unfortunate fact is that 2005
was one of the worst years on record. So there is obviously room for improvement off a low
base.

There is still a long way to go to actually develop a robust domestic industry. I refer to the
December 2006 national visitors survey, which showed a four per cent increase in the number
of nights Australians spent away from home compared with those in December 2005, when
numbers dropped to the second lowest since reporting started. It is perhaps a sign of busier
lifestyles, the availability of cheap international airfares, a reluctance to take annual leave, a
failure to actually manage a business and a trend towards purchasing home entertainment sys-

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tems that people are not taking holidays. They are the challenges that confront domestic tourism in Australia. Unfortunately, they have also encouraged some of our operators who were previously strongly focused on domestic tourism to turn their attention to the international market and direct their attention away from pursuing an increased slice of the domestic market.

I simply say that tourism is important to Australia. It is a complex and challenging industry, and it is the responsibility of government to actually work with the private sector in all aspects of tourism—from aviation to the bus and coach industry and to the tourism providers and the theme park operators—to actually make sure we try to fix the difficulties that confront the industry in Australia at the moment and to guarantee proper commercial focus and flexibility in a complex environment.

I note that the Uhrig review did suggest some operational amendments that will bring Tourism Australia’s governance arrangements more closely in line with best practice. Those amendments included the removal of the position of the government member on the board and a requirement for ministerial endorsement of the cooperative and operational plans rather than ministerial approval. These are sensible amendments, particularly the removal of the government member from the board, as it eliminates the potential for any conflict of interest for the government member while ensuring that the monitoring of Tourism Australia’s operations remains at arms length. More worrying are the amendments that allow the minister to terminate appointed board members and the reduction in the threshold for ministerial approval of contracts from $5 million to $3 million.

You do not have to cast your mind back far to remember the numerous media reports surrounding the sudden departure of Tourism Australia’s general manager, Scott Morrison, in August last year. Media reports hinted at a personality clash between the minister and Mr Morrison—whatever the reason, Mr Morrison was not talking and the whole episode cost taxpayers $500,000, the staff at Tourism Australia four months without a boss and a completely unnecessary interruption to operations at the statutory authority at a critical time of the launch of its global campaign. The only saving grace is that the amendment does necessitate that the minister provide established reason for sacking a board member, to avoid any further capricious terminations. For that reason, I move:

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 expresses its concern at:

(1) the industry’s current poor health;
(2) the need for greater collaboration between Federal and State Government; and
(3) the need to heed caution in accepting a broadening of the Ministerial powers regarding the termination of Board members”,

This amendment highlights the need to heed caution in accepting a broadening of the ministerial powers regarding the termination of board members while also highlighting the industry’s current static growth and the need for greater collaboration between federal and state ministers.

I ask that the government seriously take on board some of our criticisms. It is a very important industry, as our representatives from Queensland know, not only the south-eastern division of Queensland but also the whole state of Queensland. We have to make sure that we get
the Tourism Australia advertising campaign right. We have to refine it, learn from some of our past mistakes and try to do whatever we can to work in association with industry to grab a better share, a growing share, of a burgeoning international capacity and also to try to encourage Australians to take a holiday. I commend the bill to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Is the amendment seconded?

Mr Danby—I second the amendment and reserve my right to speak.

Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (11.02 am)—I am pleased to rise in support of the Tourism Australia Amendment Bill 2007 and to acknowledge the amendment that has been put forward by the shadow minister, the member for Batman. Whilst I am not supportive of the amendment that he has put forward, it is very clear that tourism certainly is an exceptionally important industry to the Australian economy. I share some of the sentiments of not only the member for Batman but also a large number of government MPs. As someone who has the pleasure of representing Australia’s premier tourism destination—the fabulous Gold Coast—I am pleased to be a strong advocate for the needs of the Australian tourism industry. We know that across the country tourism employs over 550,000 people and accounts for $17 billion to $18 billion of export income, in addition to the domestic tourism spend—all of which means that the tourism industry is a most significant player in the Australian economy.

I have been very proud of the Howard government’s track record when it comes to tourism. Under the Howard government we saw the introduction of the tourism white paper, a monumental and significant step forward, ensuring that the tourism industry went from almost being a cottage industry of sorts to an even more progressive, functional, sophisticated and efficient industry in an Australian context.

When it comes to marketing Australia abroad, we know that Tourism Australia is the key driver of our success in making sure not only that we create and develop perceptions about what Australia is in the eyes of foreigners but also that we convert the aspirations of many people around the world to visit Australia into reality and that they come along and visit this great nation. We as Australians have a right to feel justifiably proud of this great country we live in. We as Australians have a right to feel justifiably proud of our Australian culture. If tourism is distilled to its most basic elements, we know that it is the desire of those who live abroad to travel to Australia and experience what it is like to be in Australia and to be an Australian, albeit for a short period.

This bill ensures that Tourism Australia is brought into line more closely with the recommendations of the Uhrig report. The Uhrig report looked at corporate governance with respect to agencies such as Tourism Australia. I do not intend to dwell on the recommendations, but clearly this bill incorporates a number of those. Most particularly, it does two key things—that is, it removes from the board of Tourism Australia a government representative and thereby prevents as much as possible conflicts of interest, and instils greater independence in the Tourism Australia board. It also makes some changes with respect to the threshold for reporting to the tourism minister the approval of contracts that Tourism Australia enters into. In both of these respects, these are smart steps forward that are consistent with the Uhrig report and are also consistent with the industry’s desire for best practice.

Having said all of these things, I must now focus for a short while on comments that have been made by the shadow tourism minister. The only response that I can make on the position
that has been put forward by the Australian Labor Party is: where have they been? Where have the Australian Labor Party been when it comes to tourism? I have been sitting in the House of Representatives for about 5½ years and I think I could count on one hand the number of times that the Australian Labor Party have stood up to ask a question of the tourism minister about the tourism industry. In the life of this particular parliament, the member for Batman has been missing in action. I cannot recall the member for Batman having ever asked a question of the tourism minister.

Mr Danby—Mr Deputy Speaker, I seek to intervene.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—is the member for Moncrieff willing to give way?

Mr CIOBO—Yes.

Mr Danby—I have two questions. How many times has the minister for tourism spoken on tourism in the House in the last year and why has the focus of the advertising program overseas—the national advertising program featuring Ms Laura Bingle—changed?

Mr CIOBO—I will respond to the second question first. It would be advantageous if the member for Melbourne Ports had the name of the spokesperson, or spokeswoman in this case, correct. It is not Laura Bingle; it is Lara Bingle. But I will accept that the member for Melbourne Ports is perhaps not as across the tourism industry as he would like to be. I would certainly be happy to give him time to catch up and get some of the names of the key players in our advertising campaign right. Apart from that small oversight, with regard to the first question about how many times the tourism minister has spoken in the parliament, I simply say that I am sure the tourism minister would treat that question seriously and appropriately and come back to the member with the number of times she has spoken. Despite my reputation in this place for having a clear focus on trivia, I do not recall the exact number of times that the tourism minister has spoken in the chamber. Nonetheless, one thing I can be sure of is that, even if, on a worst-case scenario, the tourism minister had only spoken once in the chamber, I know that would be one more time than we have heard from the member for Batman on the tourism industry who, as I said, time and time again goes missing in action when it comes to Australian tourism.

The simple fact is that not only does the member for Batman underscore the fact that the Australian Labor Party does not take seriously the Australian tourism industry by his lack of action in the area, but we see even further proof of the Australian Labor Party’s shoddy treatment of the Australian tourism industry by virtue of the fact that state Labor governments around the country have either not increased tourism spending in real terms or, even worse, have slashed tourism spending in real terms. That is what we have seen from the New South Wales Labor government. That is what we have seen from a Labor government that is actually coming to an election this very Saturday. Labor’s track record at a state level is one of looking at the tourism industry, one of our key industries in this country, and turning its back on the tourism industry.

In the great state of Queensland, which has such a significant reliance on the tourism industry, what we have seen from Margaret Kech, the state Labor tourism minister, is a lack of increased funding in real terms. The Commonwealth government has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in additional spending on tourism and the result of that has been that state Labor governments have walked away. That is Labor’s track record. That is what the member
for Batman needs to account for. Despite the rhetoric in here and despite all of this faux concern about the Australian tourism industry, Labor’s policy on tourism is a repugnance to the tourism industry, and justifiably so, because its concern is nothing other than faux concern.

If it were real concern, we would not see ministers like Sandra Nori turning her back, slashing, burning and cutting tourism spending in the state of New South Wales. We would not see the Queensland state minister failing to increase, in real terms, spending on tourism. These will be the anchors around the neck of the Australian Labor Party, and that is why I am very pleased to highlight Labor’s faux concern to the constituents of my electorate.

In my electorate of Moncrieff, the tourism industry accounts for some 33 per cent of our local economy. That makes it exceptionally important and the single biggest driver of our local economy—some 33 per cent of it is connected to the tourism industry. It would be a very bad day indeed if the Australian Labor Party ever got their hands on the coffers of the Treasury, because we know that they would walk away from the tourism industry. The consequence would be that many Gold Coasters’ jobs and livelihoods and passion for the tourism industry would go straight out the back door. That would be the consequence of Labor in government.

Let us be clear about this: Labor would walk away from the tourism industry in the same way that they have walked away from it in New South Wales and Queensland. As a consequence, we would see jobs going out the door on the Gold Coast. So I say to all my local residents and tourism operators—many of whom engage in world’s best practice when it comes to tourism—that they should be fearful of just how savage an Australian Labor Party government would be if they ever got their hands on the Treasury coffers, because they do not take tourism seriously.

I turn now to the issue of climate change, because the member for Batman had a few comments to make on climate change, and in this regard I also have to raise my concern. The member for Batman said in his speech that there are some who would like to apply stringent safeguards and try to turn away international tourists who use, for example, jet aircraft to get to Australia—and justifiably so given the distance involved. What I would like to clearly hear from the Australian Labor Party is: who is actually pushing this hard left agenda when it comes to climate change? I am willing to give the member for Batman the benefit of the doubt. The member for Batman has made a number of comments in the past which seem to me to make some commonsense, but they stand in stark contrast to some of the loony left ideas that I have heard coming out of the Australian Labor Party.

I know that there are a number of Labor members who push very seriously, and with a straight face, an agenda that would have a significant consequence on the Australian tourism industry. I would ask whether the member for Kingsford Smith, for example, supports the notion that people should have to offset carbon emissions from flying in jet aircraft. I would not be surprised if the member for Kingsford Smith believed, as part of his personal policy platform, that those people who fly internationally on jet aircraft should have to buy carbon credits to offset their carbon emissions. I ask the Australian Labor Party: are there members of the ALP who support and believe in that? We have seen a push from the hard left of the Australian Labor Party—through the trade union movement, at an organisational level—for some of these crazy ideas for carbon offsets. This would have dire consequences for Australia’s tourism industry.
We know that there is a strong green left agenda coming out of Europe, and we know that that strong green left agenda is being picked up by elements of the Australian Labor Party. What I want to hear from the Australian Labor Party with regard to the tourism industry is: who in the Australian Labor Party is signing up to that, and what will the consequences be for Australia’s tourism industry? It is all bad news. That is very clear, because if the Australian Labor Party have the opportunity to put their hard green left agenda into policy, we would see inbound tourism numbers into this country fall, including the numbers of high-yielding tourists—the kinds of tourists that employ Gold Coasters and Australians all around this country and account for some $17 billion of exports. A very large proportion of the jobs of the 550,000 people who work in the tourism industry, and a large proportion of that export income, would be at risk if the Australian Labor Party had the opportunity to implement their hard green left agenda when it comes to climate change. In that respect, the tourism industry should be very concerned about the secret agenda that I know the Australian Labor Party have.

I now turn to the issue of rogue operators. I do share the member for Batman’s concern over some nefarious elements of the Australian tourism industry—that is, those who are engaged in rogue tour operations. In fact, I do not necessarily think that they are Australian operators. The market in which they operate is Australia, but I have reason to believe that a large number of these operators are in fact not Australian citizens. My concern is that there can be no doubt that tourists who come into Australia from overseas and are fleeced by going to the shops of rogue tour operators, perhaps paying exorbitant prices for so-called duty-free goods, will walk away with a bad taste in their mouths. They will walk away from this country thinking that it is not the great country that we know it to be. They will return home and tell their friends, their family and their work colleagues that Australia is an expensive destination and not one they should travel to.

Of particular concern to me are some anecdotal reports that I have heard that indicate that there are some elements of our source markets that travel to Australia and are told that Australia is a very dangerous country and that they should not get off the tour bus and that they should not walk away from their hotel lest they face the great and serious danger of being assaulted or something like that. These kinds of stories do irreparable harm to our international reputation. In this respect I certainly reinforce the minister’s desire and the desire of all government members of parliament for a significant clampdown on these kinds of rogue tour operators.

I welcome the proactive way in which the federal Minister for Small Business and Tourism, Fran Bailey, the member for McEwen, has worked closely with and tried to pull together her state Labor ministers—ragtag bunch that some of them are—to work together in a proactive way to ensure that we are clamping down on rogue operators. I congratulate the federal tourism minister for her great work in bringing together a task force that embraces the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, members of the ATO and members of the department of immigration, all of whom work closely with the various state police forces—and, as I believe is the case in Queensland, with the Queensland state based tourism bureaucracy—to look at the issue of rogue operators and to ensure that there is a clampdown on them. This is an important measure and it will ensure that there is a sustainable basis for the tourism indus-
try to go forward and, most importantly, will ensure that we address the issue of rogue operators and the irreparable damage that they do.

Finally, I would like to touch on and pay tribute to a number of key individuals that I turn to on a regular basis for advice on the tourism industry—Kerry Watson; Peter Doggett and Pavan Bhatia from Gold Coast Tourism; Matt Hingerty from the Australian Tourism Export Council; and Chris Brown and Owen Johnstone Donnett from TTF. All of these individuals talk to me on a regular basis and I am grateful for their input with respect to Australia’s tourism industry.

I take tourism very seriously. The people of the Gold Coast take tourism very seriously. It is little wonder why when this services industry is generating some $17 billion worth of export income. I believe this is just the beginning. It is my sincere belief that, through a collaborative approach with the various tourism ministers and through some of these state based tourism ministers stepping up to the plate and increasing their tourism spending in the same way that the federal government has increased its tourism spending, Australia can bat well above its weight when it comes to attracting our share of inbound international tourists.

This is not to disregard our domestic tourism industry, a very important industry, and on the Gold Coast 60 per cent of our tourism comes from the drive market. But the really high-yielding tourism, the tourism that is ultimately going to generate significant export income for Australia, is of course our international tourism. In that regard, if we all work collaboratively to ensure that the state based tourism ministers and groups like Tourism Australia, the Australian Tourism Export Council and TTF develop a clear plan going forward which we can continue to build on, Australia can increase not only its share of the international market, of international tourists, but also our repeat visitor rate. All of these things will mean there are more jobs for Australians and that our export income increases from $17 billion or $18 billion to even higher amounts, and that is good news for the people of Australia.

In January, I had the unique privilege of travelling to Las Vegas. I must say that Las Vegas is an interesting city to be in, even for someone from the Gold Coast. There is one thing that is crystal clear to me: the tourism authorities in Las Vegas understand what it is that they sell and they sell it very well. In Australia, we certainly are not lacklustre when it comes to blowing our own trumpet, when it comes to the professionalism of the individuals that work in the tourism industry, especially in the upper echelon, but it is also clear to me that there are some things we can learn from a city like Las Vegas. There are some decisions that they have taken across the city that have ultimately meant that Las Vegas as a brand is in the top five brands in the world, similar to Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and those kinds of brands. That is the power of destination marketing that has been achieved by the city of Las Vegas and I believe it is the kind of aspiration that we should have for the tourism industry in Australia. I truly believe that if we remain focused on this goal, and that if we get the very best people working collaboratively, we can ensure that Australia takes its place in the world.

We must be mindful of threats to this. As I said, one of the most significant and rapidly emerging threats appearing on the horizon when it comes to the tourism industry in Australia is the climate change debate and some of the hard green left agendas being pursued within it. Make no mistake: there are elements within Europe, the United States and, unfortunately, the Australian Labor Party who would like to ensure that people do not use jet aircraft to travel. They say this is because it increases greenhouse gas emissions. I say to those people: get real,
get serious, wake up and recognise that international tourists flying on jet aircraft make only a very tiny contribution to carbon emissions. The very worst thing that we could do is swallow hook, line and sinker this hard green left agenda because it would threaten to the core the viability and sustainability of Australia’s tourism industry. Having said all of that, I commend this bill to the House for the significant steps it will take to implement the recommendations of the Uhrig report. I certainly believe that the industry, and Tourism Australia as an agency, will prosper as a result of this bill being passed.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hatton)—I thank the member for Moncrieff. Just before calling the member for Moreton I will just note—not being able to speak on the bill because I am in the chair—that I flew to the Gold Coast on Friday and stayed there Friday, Saturday and Sunday with my wife, daughter and two grandchildren at Main Beach. It was a magnificent experience, as it always is, and Gold Coast tourism is alive and well.

Mr HARDGRAVE (Moreton) (11.22 am)—I live only 40 minutes from Surfers Paradise and I never go there! The member for Moncrieff made a fantastic contribution. The passion, expertise and honesty that he brings to any discussion about tourism are appreciated by me. The member for Moncrieff has left the building, and his contribution made me think that if only Elvis had sung ‘Viva Australia’ maybe we would be on the map in the way Las Vegas is. It is the 30th anniversary of Elvis’s passing on 15 August this year. I am afraid that being an old rock and roll disc jockey never dies! I blame my years at MacGregor State High School, which got me started on that track.

I will now turn to the Tourism Australia Amendment Bill 2007. Like the member for Moncrieff, I want to begin by saying that the Minister for Small Business and Tourism is ideally placed. Her virtue of understanding that tourism in this country is essentially a small business enterprise is a very important element in this discussion. It is very important to know therefore that tourism is enormously disorganised. This bill is dealing with recommendations from John Uhrig’s report to do with members of the board of Tourism Australia, ministerial power, reducing the threshold of ministerial approval for contracts and so forth. It is important that there be a greater sense of accountability for the enormous amount of money that government pours into assisting the tourism industry.

There is nothing wrong with tourism being essentially a small business sector by any measure. Because of the initiative that individual small business owners bring to it and the energy and the vitality of the sector, it is important that it maintains its dynamism, but the disorganised structure of tourism does make it hard, as the member for Moncrieff said, to get consistency in the brand. Moreover, because of the marketing credentials—I will not say expertise—that I gained from Griffith University in my electorate, I know it is important that not only do we sell what Australia promises to be but we deliver and exceed expectations.

As Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Workforce Participation, which is currently inquiring into labour shortages in the tourism sector—it is all on the Hansard—there is no difficulty in my saying that I am concerned about the long-term possibilities of tourism meeting the expectations we are creating in the market. We are fundamentally short of people who can make beds, can clean toilets in hotel rooms or can serve in restaurants. It is a point of reckoning that Tourism Australia have to get their heads around. There has to be enormously strong and organised lobbying of government to change some of the approaches we have with regard to the styles of migration
to this country. There is going to be a need for us to get real about this. There is going to be a need for us to look very closely at the simple fact that when the full effects of the ‘So where the bloody hell are you?’ campaign—that is the first time I have sworn in the parliament—kick in, potentially, the tourism industry in this country will fail to cope with the extra visitor numbers. Why? Because in so many of these small businesses they are unable to attract and retain staff while the mining sector and the resources sector are sucking the tourism industry dry.

In Western Australia we have just been through Broome and Perth conducting the committee’s inquiry. We heard about the Chicken Treat store in Broome having to shut down because Cable Beach Resort opened a new restaurant and all the staff at Chicken Treat left. But it gets far worse than that. When you find entrepreneurial private business operators, who previously were trying to grow their businesses and start new opportunities, now having to go back to making beds, cooking meals and literally cleaning toilets—obviously washing their hands in between—you realise that we have a problem in that this sector may not be able to sustain itself. So the work of Tourism Australia is fundamentally important. It is absolutely vital that it is not separated too far from the whole-of-government strategies needed to accommodate the tourism industry.

I note that my very good friend and very capable colleague the member for Blair is here, and the member for Moncrieff would understand too that another fundamental potential failure in the tourism sector is not investing properly in infrastructure. Three times a week Qantas flies direct from LA to Brisbane. When people arrive here, they hit the Gateway Arterial Road and a traffic jam—which they would not put up with in southern California—trying to get to Dreamworld, Movie World and Wet ‘n Wild, all the great things located about a 30-minute drive south of Brisbane. It is a fantastic road once they get past the Gateway Arterial Road at Springwood. I do not think that is a very good start for their time in Australia.

Mr Cameron Thompson—Abysmal.

Mr HARDGRAVE—It is absolutely abysmal. The member for Blair is right. We have enormous earning capacity in tourism—$19.1 billion in 2005, increasing to some $31.6 billion by 2015—as a result of the proactive efforts of this government to invest wisely in good economic management and to encourage individuals to start businesses. If we are serious about encouraging people to take the opportunity to show off their wares in their local communities, unless we back those people with proper investment in adequate infrastructure, we are going to have a fundamental failure in meeting people’s reasonable expectations.

The Gold Coast is a complete basket case when it comes to infrastructure. The Pacific Highway at the back of the coast is in gridlock from four o’clock in the afternoon, and this is a city of a couple of hundred thousand people which swells to probably one million people more weeks of the year than not because of all the visitors. I do not think that is a very clever introduction to Australia or indeed a very clever introduction to south-east Queensland. The failure of state governments to invest in this way is a problem.

Equally, people arriving in Brisbane are going to be told, ‘You’re going to have your shower timed.’ We are going to get to a stage in Brisbane where, because of the shortage of water, there is going to be a push-button tap or a meter for the number of minutes you can run a shower in a hotel room. That is where it is going to get to.
Mr Cameron Thompson—It’s not tourism.

Mr HARDGRAVE—It is not tourism, the member for Blair is right. That is because of the failure of the Goss government to build the Wolffdene dam in the early nineties. The chief adviser to Premier Goss is now the Leader of the Opposition in this place. The member for Griffith, Mr Rudd, said to Wayne Goss, the then opposition leader in Queensland, in 1989: ‘Let’s get our green credentials right. We’ll oppose the Wolffdene dam, in the foothills of Mount Tamborine. We won’t allow this water storage plan that apparently has been on the books for decades to go ahead. We’ll create a political environment where we can say that there’s plenty of water in Queensland, we don’t need it, there’ll be no problem.’

Tourists now arriving in south-east Queensland are facing the prospect of having every drop of water they consume being metered. That is the sort of circumstance we are facing in Brisbane and the Gold Coast. The Gold Coast, of course, is slightly more fortunate than Brisbane in one sense, because the Hinze Dam is overflowing. But again, it was a failure on the part of the Goss government to put in place a water strategy to share around the water resources of south-east Queensland. It is being hastily cobbled together by the Beattie government.

Six years after the Beattie government were told water was going to be short in south-east Queensland, six years after they failed to tell the people of south-east Queensland, ‘Let’s start restricting your water usage now so we can make it last for longer,’ the mad panic is on. And what is that going to do to the tourism industry? Queensland—not the Smart State, not the Sunshine State; the dried-up state. That is where tourism is going to go in south-east Queensland. The reality is a big difference from the slogans and the marketing.

There is this dumb approach by the Queensland government, which is saying, ‘All these people moving up from down south are stealing our water because they’re drinking it, using our power because they’re switching on lights, driving on our roads and causing traffic jams.’ The ‘Bombay express’, which is the Gold Coast to Brisbane train—literally missing are the seats on the roof of this train—only starts at Robina. It does not service all of the tourist strip anyway; it is just a joke.

Every part of the basic infrastructure problem is being blamed on people coming up from other states, and yet the Beattie government are going to their mates at Virgin and saying, ‘Paint up your plane and put “Head to Queensland” on the plane.’ They are advertising in every part of Australia: ‘Move to Queensland.’ Fifteen hundred people a week are moving to Queensland, and they are wondering why the traffic jams are getting worse, why the water supply is getting worse, why the power system is about to fail and why the Bombay express is getting stacked with people every day. When you add it all up, the failure of state Labor governments, starting with the Goss-Rudd government through 1989—

Mr Slipper—Mr Deputy Speaker—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH Adams)—Does the honourable member have a point of order?

Mr Slipper—It is not a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Under the standing orders, I was going to ask the honourable member for Moreton whether he would be prepared to answer a question.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Is the honourable member prepared to give way?
Mr HARDGRAVE—I am intimidated by the expertise of the member for Fisher, but of course I would.

Mr Slipper—I was wondering whether the honourable member might advise the House why the Beattie government has failed to use the GST revenue it receives from the Australian government for Queensland infrastructure.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The member for Fisher raises a question that is difficult to answer in the sense that the only suspicion you have got, apart from the generic mismanagement and misprioritisation of the expenditure of the record amounts of money the state government in Queensland are getting, is that their first priority is very simple—that is, to build a big bureaucracy filled with card-carrying members of the Australian Labor Party and pay them lots of money. So we find $1 out of every $4 that goes from the Australian government to the Queensland government for things like education goes to the bureaucracy, first and foremost.

So my suspicion is that a failure to invest in infrastructure is because their priority is about paying a small number of people a lot of money instead of fixing up the services that need to be maintained. You would think that the state of Queensland would see investment in the basics like roads, rail, water and power—to make a trip to Queensland a fantastic experience, without any of the restrictions that are about to be applied to tourists—as a priority for the Queensland government.

Mr Slipper—How can they defend that?

Mr HARDGRAVE—The Queensland government cannot defend it, Member for Fisher. They just say, ‘Send us more money.’ They keep blaming the feds. I am sick to death of this state-federal blame game thing. I want those people who are responsible for dealing with the task of building infrastructure to actually build that infrastructure—people who are responsible to meet their—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Order! I ask the honourable member to resume his seat. Is the honourable member for Parramatta seeking to intervene?

Ms Owens—I am seeking to ask a question.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Will the honourable member receive a question?

Mr HARDGRAVE—I am happy to take a question. These are more questions than I ever got in question time!

Ms Owens—If the member is so concerned about the blame game and seeks to end it, why has he just spent 15 minutes blaming the state government?

Mr HARDGRAVE—The member for Parramatta must visit Queensland and see for herself just how short of water we are because of the failure of the Queensland government to invest. She needs to understand why we are short on road traffic space—because of the failure of the Queensland government to expend. She must understand that the Bombay express travels through my electorate, stacked with people. I have people from Salisbury to Kuraby who currently have to put up with a third rail track being put in, who have huge mullock heaps of leftover dirt being placed behind their homes, who are putting up with road crossings of rail not working, because the Queensland government is in complete panic mode.

So it is not about the blame game; it is about demanding of the Queensland government: ‘We’ve played our part; you play yours.’ Not only that, they cannot escape and they cannot
hide from the simple fact that, when the opportunity came to invest in important infrastructure to back the tourism industry—which was the Wolffdene Dam at the back of the Gold Coast—Peter Beattie’s predecessor, Wayne Goss, and his lieutenant, the current member for Griffith, shoulder to shoulder said to the people of Queensland, ‘You don’t need the water.’ Guess what? We do, and we do now. We are absolutely, by every possible measure, being failed by a series of bad decisions by state governments of Queensland.

Mr Martin Ferguson—I seek to ask the honourable member for Moreton a question.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Will the honourable member for Moreton accept a question?

Mr HARDGRAVE—Yes.

Mr Martin Ferguson—Given the need for cooperation between all tiers of government to facilitate the growth and development of the tourism industry, can the member for Moreton advise the House as to whether he supports the proposal by his good friend the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Campbell Newman, to require the Queensland and Australian governments not only to fund the infrastructure costs in the Brisbane City Council area but also to meet the cost of rolling stock such as the bus fleet? Should this be a Commonwealth and state government responsibility?

Mr HARDGRAVE—The key thing is that everything the Brisbane City Council do is in fact administered by Queensland government laws and regulations, and the Queensland government again is prioritising expenditure on bureaucracies despite the record amounts of money that are being sent. In fact, I have to say that I would prefer to quarantine a whole slice of the GST money going to Queensland and to give it to local authorities because Brisbane City, Gold Coast City, the Sunshine Coast councils, Paul Pisasale in Ipswich City, Beaudesert, Boonah, Logan, Don Seccombe in Redlands, and all of the other shires have a far better idea—

Mr Slipper—Boonah.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I have mentioned Boonah—John Brent. South-east Queensland mayors all have a far better idea about what to do and, moreover, are more prepared to do it. Campbell Newman, the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, is in a position where he is trying to get something done that should have been done by state governments in the past. So the member for Batman can go his hardest, but I am not going to answer any more questions, so do not even waste your breath.

Mr Martin Ferguson—Mr Deputy Speaker, I seek to ask the member for Moreton a question. Going to his good friendship with the mayor of Brisbane, does he support the mayor’s proposal to build the Ipswich Motorway?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—is the member for Moreton willing to take a question?

Mr HARDGRAVE—Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not want to take a question because I want to complete my two minutes on the subject. But on the question of the Ipswich Motorway, the Australian government’s plan will ensure that B-doubles do not mix with Barinas. Federal Labor’s plan—the member for Batman’s plan and indeed the state government’s plan—is about keeping trucks forever running along Kessels Road. It is great to see that the member for Batman has outed yet again that a vote for Labor in Moreton at the next federal election will be all about putting more B-doubles down Kessels Road, so I thank the member for Batman.
Mr Slipper—It sounds like Batman and Robin.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Batman and ‘robin’ the taxpayers—that is what it is all about, Member for Fisher. In my electorate I have an enormous number of people who come from places like Taiwan and China, and the family visits that come into our part of south-east Queensland add an enormous amount to our local economy. Sure, they go off to Australia Zoo and Lone Pine but they spend a lot of time in local restaurants around Sunnybank and in spending a lot of money building our local economy. Thirty years ago we had the Oasis and the Acacia Gardens at Station Road in Sunnybank. They were the beginnings of a lot of the great theme parks we now enjoy at the top end of the Gold Coast. They have gone now, and we no longer have busloads of people from all over south-east Queensland visiting those wonderful old swimming pools. There are all houses in those areas now. But one thing is for sure: what has not changed has been the quality of the infrastructure, and what has not been improved has been the quality of the facilities for visitors.

If we get further big athletic events at the QEII stadium, the Queensland Sport and Athletic Centre at Nathan, the infrastructure in my area will not cope. Tens of thousands of people will come to Australia and they will see all the failings of state governments, in particular, to invest properly in these sorts of things. That is the sort of message that I think Tourism Australia have to deal with, no matter who is on the board and no matter what other tasks they may happen to have at hand.

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (11.42 am)—I am pleased to be able to make a contribution on the Tourism Australia Amendment Bill 2007. I think most honourable members would recognise that the tourism industry is one of the most vital industries in Australia and produces an incredible number of dollars towards benefiting our Australian economy and creating jobs.

The area I am privileged to represent in the Australian parliament, the central and southern Sunshine Coast, has tourism as one of its key industries. We welcome people from right around the country and right around the world who come to spend their dollars on the Sunshine Coast. One of our great challenges is the need for infrastructure and, with the population of the areas likely to double over the next 10 to 15 years, we always struggle to get the infrastructure to meet the needs of our rapidly growing population. That is why I am so pleased that the Australian government recognises the importance of growth areas like the Sunshine Coast and, I suppose you would also say, sea change communities.

Sea change communities are those communities that have a permanent population of a certain figure. We might have, say, 250,000 people living on the Sunshine Coast, but on any night of the year there might well be 350,000 heads on beds. Often the challenge for sea change communities is to attract government funded infrastructure to represent their actual populations rather than their permanent populations. The coast councils—the sea change community councils—have to provide infrastructure for the number of people who are in their communities at any one time, and I realise that that is an ongoing challenge for all members representing sea change communities. I think that Mr Neville, who is at the table, also represents a sea change community. Members on both sides of the House represent these communities, and obviously adequate funding for these communities will be a challenge regardless of which party is in the parliament. Tourism is a key driver for the Australian economy, not just for those economies in sea change communities, and contributes dramatically to Australia’s exports and gross domestic product.
The Tourism Australia Amendment Bill 2007 seeks to implement recommendations arising from the review of corporate governance arrangements of Tourism Australia. These amendments are part of the response by the government to Mr John Uhrig’s review of corporate governance of statutory authorities and office holders, which, as the explanatory memorandum points out, examined and reported on improving the structures and governance practices of such entities. I suppose that it is simply a fact of life these days that everyone expects government bureaucracy to be open and transparent and to follow best practice, and that is why this bill is doing a number of things to improve best practice for the tourism industry in Australia and for the organisation known as Tourism Australia.

We need proper corporate governance for Tourism Australia because of the absolutely vital role that tourism is playing in Australia and the important role that Tourism Australia is playing in encouraging people from right around the world—who have the right to choose where they visit—to visit this wonderful country, Australia. Earnings from tourism happen to be at record levels. International tourists spent $1.4 billion over 12 months in the year ending September 2006. I hate to think what situation the Australian economy would be in were this dominant industry absent.

International tourists are staying in Australia for longer periods. Given the geographic location of Australia it is understandable that tourists are staying longer, with the average length of a stay increasing by close to 12½ per cent or 3.3 days in the year ending September 2006. The longer that tourists stay in our country, the more dollars they spend, the more jobs are created and the more the economy is boosted.

Latest forecasts released by the Tourism Forecasting Committee estimate that total inbound economic value will grow at an average annual rate of 5.2 per cent, from $19.1 billion in 2005 to $31.6 billion in 2015. The strategy of the Minister for Small Business and Tourism and more generally of the government is to attract the high-yielding, long-staying experience seeker, and this is paying dividends—and I suspect that some of those might even find their way to your state of Tasmania, Mr Deputy Speaker Adams. When the results of the new international campaign are realised over the next 12 to 18 months, the outlook for tourism will be even brighter.

I think it is instructive for us to pause for a moment and look at the job creation opportunities resulting from the tourism industry. Over half a million Australians—550,100 Australians—are employed by the tourism industry. That represents one person in 18 in the Australian workforce. Nationally, tourism provides much higher direct employment than the mining industry and more than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined. It is also a very important employer of younger Australians. Of course, any industry that gives young Australians employment opportunities ought to be fostered and encouraged.

Studies by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that in March 2005 more than 35 per cent of employees in the accommodation, cafes and restaurants, and retail trade sectors were aged between 15 and 24, and that is more than double the all-industry average. Part-time positions in the tourism industry record even higher rates of young workers aged less than 25 years, with a high proportion of female employees. Overall the tourism industry accounts for about 10 to 11 per cent of total national employment in the 15- to 24-year-old age group, double its share of total employment of 5.6 per cent.
A lot of people ask: ‘How long has Tourism Australia been around? Does it do a good job? Why was it established?’ It was established as a key strategy in the tourism white paper, coupled with the biggest ever funding package for tourism of close to a quarter of a billion dollars—in fact, $235 million. The former minister, the honourable member for North Sydney, played a fairly key role in relation to this.

Tourism Australia is our window to the world. It is responsible for increasing the awareness, knowledge and desire of both local travellers and travellers from abroad to travel to and to travel throughout this wonderful nation of Australia. Research is conducted. In fact Tourism Australia likes to report on trends in international and domestic travel. It is pretty much the key player in the Australian tourism industry. It is the solid link that brings the tourism industry together. It encourages people to travel domestically from within Australia and it encourages people who make holiday choices from right around the world to choose to come to Australia. Mr Deputy Speaker, you may have seen some of the wonderful advertising campaigns that Tourism Australia runs overseas. Running a good campaign encourages people to travel to this country, and when they travel to this country as tourists they open their wallets and our economy is boosted and jobs are created.

I mentioned at the outset that the purpose of the Tourism Australia Amendment Bill 2007 is to improve the governance arrangements for Tourism Australia. That is not to say that Tourism Australia was not appropriately governed before, but of course we always need to be at the cutting edge of world’s best practice and this is why the government is responding, as far as Tourism Australia is concerned, to the recommendations of Mr John Uhrig. Tourism Australia really has done a wonderful job during the period since its inception. With the changes mentioned in this bill to improve the governance of Tourism Australia, this effective organisation will become even more effective.

Other honourable members have outlined the detailed amendments, but essentially the bill will remove the position of government member from the board; broaden ministerial power to terminate the appointment of board members; replace the process of ministerial approval of the corporate plan and operational plan with one of endorsement, while maintaining that the plans do not come into force until ministerial endorsement is received; and reduce the threshold for ministerial approval of contracts from $5 million to $3 million. I think that is important. Given the importance of this industry, I think it is vital that the minister does have the capacity to become more involved when a lower dollar figure is indeed the figure that is relevant.

The amendments will improve the governance arrangements. The changes do not in any way, shape or form alter the general structure, the general function or the general objectives of Tourism Australia or the delivery of excellent service it provides both to Australia and abroad. As you would expect, Mr Deputy Speaker, the bill also includes some transitional arrangements just to make sure that when these changes provided for in this bill are actually implemented there is not any disruption to the operations of Tourism Australia. This is an important bill that seeks to make a wonderful Australian organisation even better. Any bill that will help Tourism Australia attract more people to this country and encourage more people to holiday within Australia is an important bill, and I am very pleased to be able to commend it to the Main Committee in the debate today.
Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (11.53 pm)—I rise this morning to speak on the Tourism Australia Amendment Bill 2007. I welcome the changes that will be brought about as a result of this bill’s passage. The changes to the governance of Tourism Australia are very important. Since much of the money that is appropriated to run Tourism Australia is obviously taxpayers’ money—up to 80 per cent of that money—it is important that we have good governance arrangements that are in line with best practice as identified by the Uhrig recommendations.

Tourism is a very important industry for Australia. I think we often talk of the more traditional industries such as education, agriculture and mining as being important to Australia. But so often we do not necessarily talk in the same way of the importance of tourism to the economy of Australia. It is a very important industry. In fact, in my own electorate and across many parts of regional Australia, tourism plays a significant part in generating jobs in those rural and regional communities. Tourism Australia I think has done a remarkable job. It is responsible for international and domestic marketing of Australia. Wherever you see those ads promoting Australia overseas, I am sure that those who see them see Australia as a great tourism destination. It is something to be commended.

It is a very competitive market out there internationally. We have to compete with the other countries of the world to gain those tourism dollars from those tourists who seek a holiday, business tourism or ecotourism destination. So the advertising done by Tourism Australia internationally is of vital importance. If we get that wrong—if Tourism Australia gets that wrong—it will certainly have an impact on the economy of Australia, given that it is now such an integral part of the economy overall in Australia.

I said a moment ago that tourism has many forms. We have ecotourism, business tourism and holiday tourism. In my own electorate a very important element of it is fly-drive tourism, particularly for those coming from overseas. I just want to place on the record the importance to my constituency of tourism in the outback. In central western Queensland they have an outback tourism association, made up of the local councils and representatives who are an integral part of this outback tourism destination region.

I often describe that part of my electorate as the cradle in which the national identity of Australia was born. There is no doubt, and I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, you would agree, that the song Waltzing Matilda is part of our national identity. I often describe it as our unofficial national anthem. I know that wherever Australians are, whether they are touring Australia or overseas, when a few bars of Waltzing Matilda are played you will see Australians from all walks of life gathering to join in the singing of Waltzing Matilda.

People who are seeking a tourism destination in the outback of Queensland can in fact go to Winton, which is the birthplace of Waltzing Matilda. It was not far from there, on the Diamantina, that Banjo Paterson was inspired to write that now famous song. Winton, with the Matilda Centre, is a great tourism destination. Of course, more recently there has been the discovery of the remains of dinosaurs, which is of fascination to people of all ages. That presents another opportunity for tourists to visit that region. They can hear the story of the dinosaurs and of many millions of years of history and what that can tell us about the times of this prehistoric creature.

Winton is where the very first board meeting of Qantas was held. Now we have the home of Qantas and the founders museum in Longreach, right at the airport. That includes the original hangar where they in fact made their own aircraft in those very early days. It is a great
tourist attraction not just for Australians but also for people who are coming from overseas seeking a tourism destination. I would recommend that they visit places like Winton and Longreach. The Stockman’s Hall of Fame and the Royal Flying Doctor Service are iconic in terms of Australia’s outback and its early development. All of these can be seen out in central western Queensland.

I am sure of interest to you, Mr Deputy Speaker Adams, is the Australian Workers Heritage Centre in Barcaldine. It is a great tourist attraction. Unfortunately, we had some very irresponsible people, as yet unidentified, who poisoned this great iconic tree last year.

Mr Neville—Shameful!

Mr BRUCE SCOTT—I was there only last week to see this great structure of a ghost gum, with all its gnarled sides, standing there now dead. It is tragic, and those who would perpetrate such an act must be brought to justice, if only we could get some leads on those who poisoned that iconic tree. It is iconic as the birthplace of the Labor Party because it was from that meeting, where the fuhrers first met in Barcaldine to discuss political representation in the parliament, that the workers, as they united, identified someone whom they wanted to get into the state parliament of Queensland—and they did just that. I am sure our Whip, the member for Hinkler, would agree with me.

You might be wondering what all this has to do with the bill, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is all about tourism and the iconic places that tourists can visit. Born out of that same conflict were the meetings of the pastoralists and graziers, who then also sought political representation in the parliaments of Australia, and thus the Country Party. So in many ways two great political parties were born out of hardship and struggle in western Queensland. That story can be told and seen in Barcaldine—another great tourist destination not only for people of Australia but for people from overseas who are seeking to retrace the history of the early development of Australia—at the Australian Workers Heritage Centre.

One thing that is important if we are to see the growth of international tourism into central western Queensland is the Longreach airport. The Longreach airport, as it stands now, is run by the local council, the Longreach Shire Council, which does a magnificent job. That whole region of central western Queensland, the area that I have partly described in relation to the tourist attractions out there, is under what we call the Sustainable Regions Program. The Longreach Shire Council is working through the processes, with the support of the other local councils in that region, to get a commercial operator interested in taking over the management of that airport. It is seeking sustainable regional money from the government to assist with the upgrade of that airport to enable jet aircraft, rather than turboprops, to fly into that airport, which will bring tourism growth and tourists from many parts of Australia and overseas to that region.

That airport is integral to the growth of international tourism in that part of Queensland. It would bring many benefits if we were able to get final approval through the due diligence which it is going through at the moment agreed and get that money into that airport. It would become a hub for the region for those fly-in fly-out tourists, whether they are from Australia or overseas. We have only got to look at places like the Gold Coast, Cairns or Hobart in Tasmania to see that you need to rely on good airport infrastructure if you are to maximise the opportunities that are out there for attracting tourists to your region. People seeking a tourist destination today do not have a great deal of time for their holidays and they want to see as
much as they can in the shortest possible time. I believe that that is why air travel is, in many areas of Australia, replacing the drive-in market. It maximises the time that they can spend in their tourist destination.

Other parts of my electorate that have great tourism destinations which are promoted, I know, by Tourism Australia are Roma and Charleville. Charleville, of course, is the home of the bilby. It will be Easter very shortly. I encourage all Australians to buy an Easter bilby rather than an Easter egg, because the money that is raised through that process will go to preserving the bilbies in Australia. The bilby is an endangered species, quite a wonderful little mammal that is found in very few parts of Australia and that has almost been decimated by the wild cat population and other pests, including foxes. It is important that we are able to make sure that our bilby will survive, and we should all be encouraged to buy those Easter bilbies this Easter. Charleville is the home where that is being preserved.

Another tourism destination for people seeking an ecotourism destination is the Darling Downs, in the granite belt of my area, where there are great tourism opportunities. Historic Jimbour House, outside Dalby, is becoming a very important tourism destination for special events. Very near there you can see the great Dingo Barrier Fence, parts of which are being preserved. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, from your early days in western Queensland, involved in the wool industry, that was the great barrier that—nearly always—separated dingoes from the cattle country and from the sheep country so that the sheep industry could thrive and prosper and create the jobs that were important to so many regional towns and rural communities.

I did perhaps stray a little from the original intention of the bill, but I thought it was important to cover some of the important tourism destinations which are in my electorate and highlight their importance to the jobs and the wealth of those communities. Tourism Australia do a magnificent job in promoting Australia as a tourism destination internationally and also domestically. I want to make sure that they continue that work and that they continue promoting not only our coastal and major capital cities but also our regional cities and the outback of Australia, which has so much to offer.

I support the bill and look forward to its passage, because it will mean that the governance arrangements will be improved. That is important, given that Tourism Australia is a statutory authority that requires federal taxpayers’ money for its operations. I commend the bill to the House.

FRAN BAILEY (McEwen—Minister for Small Business and Tourism) (12.07 pm)—I would firstly like to thank the members who have participated in this debate on the Tourism Australia Amendment Bill 2007—our tourism industry is a very important industry—but I understand that the opposition spokesperson wants to move an amendment. I have to say that this is very disappointing, given the undertaking that I had from the opposition that this was non-controversial legislation and could have been expedited in this chamber.

I will just deal very quickly with the three points. The opposition spokesperson has mentioned the industry’s ‘current poor health’. There could be nothing further from the truth. This is now a $75 billion industry. In the last 12 months, we have had the highest number of international visitors coming to Australia. Most importantly, the yield in the last 12 months was $1.8 billion more than in any other year—that is right, Mr Deputy Speaker Adams: $1.8 billion more—bringing the total of export earnings for this industry to $19½ billion.
In areas like yours in Tasmania, Mr Deputy Speaker Adams, this is very important. In fact, your own state is one state that has been improving its numbers. One of the reasons it has been improving its numbers is that there is greater collaboration between Tourism Australia and all of the state and regional tourist authorities. The Commonwealth has now put $2.15 billion dollars into research. This is not research that we keep locked up in a vault within Tourism Australia. This research is shared with the states on an ongoing basis. There probably has never before been greater cooperation between state and regional tourist authorities and Tourism Australia.

One state sticks out and that is the state of New South Wales. The reason it is not performing as well as and is not showing the level of growth as your own state of Tasmania, Mr Deputy Speaker, is simply that the New South Wales government is spending less today in marketing tourism than it was spending five years ago. It is not rocket science to know that you simply have to put funding in if you are going to get results. I take my hat off to the Tasmanian government. I believe in giving credit where it is due and I think the states around Australia have recognised the value of tourism. The domestic market has been flat for some time but, because of the level of cooperation and work that the Commonwealth is showing through its leadership, the latest figures show that our domestic market has started to turn around. So when I am informed by the opposition spokesperson, the member for Batman, that there needs to be greater collaboration between federal and state governments, I do not know how on earth he could say that.

In a press release put out by all of the state tourism ministers, they agreed to closer ties and they took advantage of the new intergovernmental arrangements which formally set out principles for cooperation and agreement. At a meeting of tourism ministers chaired by the South Australian Labor Minister for Tourism, Jane Lomax-Smith, issues discussed were based on sharing of market intelligence, tourism quality, international promotion, regional tourism, destination marketing plans, tourism and conservation issues and matters relating to the understanding of the real economic value of tourism. That is a pretty fair list on which all of the state tourism ministers agree that there is a very good cooperative working relationship between them and the federal government. When the member for Batman makes the point that there needs to be greater collaboration between federal and state governments, I think he should come back here and tell us what he is referring to. He should come back here now and tell us exactly what he is referring to. I tell you what, Mr Deputy Speaker: it will be the first time that the member for Batman has actually spoken about tourism in this place.

He has also raised a point about broadening ministerial powers regarding the termination of board members. Do you know what he has done? He has taken one line out of a whole document which enshrines the flexibility of Tourism Australia and gives the board additional authority. Why would a government not want the ability, if a board member was performing in a most unsatisfactory manner, to get rid of a non-performing board member in the interests of a $75 billion industry? More than half a million Australians depend on this industry for their jobs and the government is really looking after the men and women and their family members who work in this great industry.

I have to say that I am very disappointed in this pathetic political point-scoring by the member for Batman. I actually thought better of him. I can see that my trust was misplaced, and I think that it is shame on his head for trying to politically point-score about an issue
backed by the whole of the tourism industry, Tourism Australia, the state tourist authorities and the regional tourist authorities. I say again: there is still some time left; why doesn’t the member for Batman come back into this chamber? If he wants to put these points forward as an amendment, he should be prepared to come into this chamber to debate them with me, because I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the points he has raised are nonsense. Let me just reaffirm those points again. Despite what the member for Batman says, the industry is in very good shape. Every industry can do better, and this government has provided unprecedented levels of funding to ensure that this industry gets every opportunity to do better. There has never been a greater level of cooperation between the federal government and the state governments for the simple fact that we all realise this is an industry that spans territorial boundaries. It is an industry that we all understand employs more than half a million Australians. Most significantly, it employs more than 200,000 people in regional areas of Australia, which of course is why the Australian government, the Howard government, is so keen and so prepared, as it always has been, not just to stand and talk mere rhetoric about this great industry but also to get in and back it with unprecedented levels of funding.

The third point is about trying to point-score about one sentence in a 100-plus-page document that everybody in the industry supports. Many have acknowledged that the Australian government has taken a real leadership role on behalf of the industry in this matter; this of course follows the Uhrig review. The bottom line is that any government, no matter what level of government it is, is responsible for the taxpayer funds that are being used. As a marketing organisation, Tourism Australia gets more than 80 per cent of its funding directly from the Australian government. The board of Tourism Australia, charged with the responsibility of overseeing the expenditure of that money, must be accountable. It must also be accountable for the actions it takes. Once again, I will not—and this government will not—shy away from saying that if in the unlikely situation a board member is performing in an unsatisfactory manner then the government providing the funding to that organisation, the level of government that appoints the members of that board, has the right to say, in the interests of the more than half a million Australians dependent on this industry for their jobs, that the board has to do its job. As I said, I have given the member for Batman as much time as I can to get his skates on and get up here to try to justify this absolutely pathetic political point-scoring—the three points I have just dismissed.

I have nothing further to add other than to say once again that there are members on both sides of this parliament who have a genuine interest in and commitment to ensuring that our great tourism industry continues to be one of the fastest growth sectors in our economy and, importantly, provides jobs and training and the delivery of real benefits not just to our national economy but to state, regional and local economies. I commend this legislation to the House.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH Adams)**—The original question was that the bill be now read a second time. To this the honourable member for Batman 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 the bill be reported to the House without amendment.
Debate resumed from 20 March, on motion by Mr Howard:

That the House:

(a) record its deep regret at the tragic loss of life and serious injuries that resulted from the aircraft accident in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 7 March 2007;

(b) note that amongst the 21 people killed were 5 Australians serving their nation, working for:
the Australian Federal Police—Mark Scott and Brice Steele;
the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade—Liz O’Neill;
AusAid—Alison Sudradjat;
and the Fairfax Press—Morgan Mellish;
and record its deep appreciation of their meritorious public service;

(c) tender its profound sympathy to the Government and people of Indonesia, and to the families of all the people killed and injured in the accident; and

(d) extend its best wishes to all those injured for a speedy recovery, recalling particularly Cynthia Banham, Michael Hatton, Kyle Quinlan and Roger Tallboys,

Mr EDWARDS (Cowan) (12.21 pm)—I want to convey my deepest condolences to all who lost their lives and for those who suffered in the dreadful crash of the Garuda 737 plane. I particularly want to make some comments about Cynthia Banham, a crash survivor. The week before the crash, Cynthia was in my office discussing veterans and defence issues. As we were reminded yesterday by the member for Barton, Cynthia had sat through the Sea King crash inquiry and had clearly supported those involved in that tragic crash, and their families. Cynthia, a Sydney Morning Herald journalist, had also written a piece on a speech given by the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, Bruce Billson. In response to the veterans’ anger sparked by that speech, the minister suggested she had misquoted him, but Cynthia Banham strongly denied getting it wrong. Yesterday, all speakers, both government and opposition, remarked on what a wonderful and professional journalist she is. Mr Robert McClelland, the member for Barton, stated:

I will return in my comments to Cynthia Banham. Interestingly, and perhaps profoundly, I became quite close to Cynthia during her reporting of the Sea King accident. I know that during that investigation she became quite an advocate for the families who had suffered loss in that accident. Cynthia covered a broad range of views, but I think that in her writings we can see—more than with any other journalist in Australia, I think it is fair to say—a real passion for those who have suffered injustice. I note the Minister for Defence nodding in appreciation. Cynthia really was an advocate for those who perhaps had been afforded less justice than we as a community and a parliament would expect. She will forever have our respect in that regard.

Cynthia is receiving strong support from her partner, Mike Harvey. Mike is the journalist who was involved in the leaked document which exposed the government’s response to the Clark review. He is still enduring the ramifications of that issue. I had the opportunity to speak to Mike the other day; he is without doubt a man’s man. I know he is closely and strongly supporting Cynthia in the struggle she is going through.

Cynthia is currently being treated in Royal Perth Hospital. I make a plea to the veterans community in Australia. Here we have two champions of the veterans and defence community. Cynthia is lucky to be alive but has suffered incredible injuries, including lower limb
amputation. She fights a daily challenge with an immense courage and spirit. She has the love and support of her partner, Michael Harvey.

My plea to the veteran community is to get behind Cynthia. Offer her all of your support, encouragement, prayers and positive thoughts. Indeed, the veteran community in Australia should adopt Cynthia. I think the love and support of the veteran community will go a long way to helping her on the difficult road to recovery that she confronts. It is a road of marathon proportions and challenges. I call on the veteran community to make sure Cynthia does not walk that road alone.

Mr HUNT (Flinders—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs) (12.25 pm)—In rising to speak on the motion of condolence in relation to the Yogyakarta air crash of March 2007, I do so from a particular perspective—that is, as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs with specific responsibility for the activities of AusAID and also for the work of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Two of the members of those agencies perished in this crash. I refer here to Allison Sudradjat, who was the head of AusAID’s Indonesia office, which has a staff of approximately 100 people, and to Liz O’Neill, who was the head of public affairs at the Australian Embassy in Indonesia. In addition to those two fine Australians, three other fine Australians lost their lives: two Federal Police officers—Mark Scott and Brice Steele—both of whom had distinguished careers; and Morgan Mellish, a Walkley award winning journalist from the Australian Financial Review. In addition to them, of course, another five Australians were involved in the crash, four of whom suffered injuries. In fact, Cynthia Banham and Roger Tallboys suffered significant injuries. I will return to them later.

I wish to offer my sympathy to the families of all 21 people—five Australians and 16 other souls—who perished on board the Garuda flight. However, I wish to speak in particular about Allison and Liz. Allison was, first and foremost, a wife and a mother. She leaves behind a husband, Ris, and four children, Jamila, Imran, Zaini and Yasmin. Our understanding of their loss and their grief can never be complete, but it is sufficient for everyone in this chamber simply to say that she was a wife and a mother. To Ris and the four beautiful children, whom I met on the day of the return of the bodies to Australia, we simply give you our support and our thanks.

To those at AusAID who worked with Allison, you have lost a real and valued friend, and a profoundly important colleague. Your work, Allison, was of great merit and meaning. It was the work of a humanitarian who served Australia but who also more importantly served the developing world at a time when she was in a position to make real change. She was at AusAID for 18 years after joining the agency in 1989. She worked in Indonesia from 1992 to 1995, in Papua New Guinea from 1996 to 2001 and again in Indonesia, as I mentioned, as head of Australia’s aid work there from February 2005.

Allison was in Papua New Guinea at a time of major development and humanitarian challenges. She managed Australian assistance during the crippling 1997-98 drought and contributed to the Bougainville peace process. That was an action of profound importance. She made a major contribution to long-term assistance to health programs, assisted survivors of the tsunami that hit Artape in 1998 and helped lead Australia’s response in Indonesia to the Asian tsunami similarly. Within Indonesia she was responsible for the implementation of the Australia Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development, managing a program of $1
billion over a five-year period. She also played an important role in the lead-up to the visit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs to the work on the ground in Indonesia of helping to build 2,000 schools for Indonesian students. There could rarely be a more important developmental project than the building of 2,000 schools in a country that has had a desperate need to provide opportunities for its young people. That legacy of helping to oversee the creation of these schools for young people will perhaps be the most important thing she leaves as an aid worker.

Allison worked on many fronts. She was an inspirational leader, she was a humanitarian and she was a warm friend to so many people. But first and foremost, more than any of these things—and I say this on behalf of AusAID, on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and on behalf of her friends and colleagues in the Australian government—Allison was a wife and a mother, and nothing can replace her loss.

Similarly I want to speak about Liz O’Neill. Liz O’Neill was an amazing character, as is said by everybody who knew her. She was a person who had a belief in Australia and a belief in Australia’s role. She believed in our capacity for good and our capacity to have an impact on our region and the world and on the lives and futures of so many people. She was involved in Indonesia as Australia’s Counsellor for Public Affairs in the Jakarta embassy. She helped with some incredibly difficult challenges, including the embassy bombing in September 2004 and the effects of the Asian tsunami, which commenced on Boxing Day 2004. She was a member of the emergency response team sent to Bali following the first Bali bombing in October 2002, and she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for her service to Australians in that period. During her career with Foreign Affairs, she served with the Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville and at the embassy in Tokyo. But, as with Allison, whilst she will be missed by her colleagues and whilst her professional work will be missed, she was a wife and a mother first and foremost.

I met Liz’s husband, Wayne, last Wednesday at RAAF Fairbairn and I met her beautiful little daughter, Lucinda, who is nine months old and has no comprehension of what has happened. Liz will be missed, and her loss will be felt much more greatly by her young daughter over time. To Wayne and to Lucinda: you have our deepest sympathy.

Much has been said about the others who were lost. To the families of Morgan Mellish, Mark Scott, Brice Steele and all of those Indonesians who were lost: we cannot understand fully the extent of your loss but you have our complete sympathy.

What this showed ultimately was the strength of cooperation between Australia and Indonesia, and the response of the Australian and Indonesian governments and the people who helped. This is indicative of the desire to do real things. Lives were saved. Cynthia Banham, I suspect, would not have been alive today but for the cooperation between people on both sides, and I think that their work deserves recognition. Cynthia and Michael Harvey: you have our support. You are good people, you will get through this and you will come back.

To all of the people involved, I say thank you for your work. To the wonderful officers in the Australian Consular Response Group and consular crisis centre, led by Rod Smith, Simeon Gilding and Bassim Blasey, and to everybody who has helped: we thank you. But to those who have passed away—Liz, Allison, Morgan, Mark and Brice—you will be missed.
Ms ANNETTE ELLIS (Canberra) (12.35 pm)—I rise to speak on a motion that I do not think any of us would really want the opportunity to speak on—that is, when such a tremendous disaster hits so many people and affects so many people close to and far from this place. As we know, the Yogyakarta air crash on 7 March claimed 21 lives, five of them Australian. Much has been said both here and in the other place in the last 24 hours with regard to those five Australians. The reason for my participating in this condolence motion is that, as the member for Canberra—and I am sure my colleague the member for Fraser would agree with me—whilst I personally did not know all these people and may have regarded some of them only in passing, there is a connection for each one of them and their families to my community. It is on behalf of my community that I am here speaking today. I want to represent the many people from my community who would have known many of these sadly deceased Australians.

Federal Agent Mark Scott and Federal Agent Brice Steele, both of the AFP, will have had very close connections. I know that Mark, in particular, began his policing career down in my patch of the world, in Tuggeranong, where he undertook community policing in the early part of his career. His career brought him back to Canberra on several occasions in the years to follow. I was able to attend the very moving service for him yesterday at St Andrews church here in Canberra. It is fair to say that his colleagues within the AFP are devastated by the loss of Mark and equally by the loss of Federal Agent Brice Steele.

Mark is survived by his wife, Sally, and by their children, James, Stephanie and Emily. On behalf of my community, I wish to most sincerely convey condolences and sympathies to that family and to thank them for the fact that Mark Scott was able to perform the duties in his policing career that he did so well on behalf of our community. A similar comment could be made about Brice Steele, although I do not know quite as much about him—but again, a tragic loss. Both of these gentlemen were very experienced, Brice in particular. We heard many things said in relation to his capabilities and the work that he undertook in the AFP. To his wife Kellie, again, I convey our very sincere condolences and sympathies.

Liz O’Neill, the DFAT officer who sadly perished in this crash, is survived by Wayne Adams, her husband, and their baby daughter, Lucinda. Allison Sudradjat, the AusAID officer, is survived by her husband Ris and their children Jamila, Imran, Zaini and Yasmin. In both cases, these people will have had many friends, colleagues and acquaintances within this community here in the ACT. We all bring different things to these particular motions, and when I hear of the work undertaken by Liz and Allison I have a particularly close understanding. Even though it is some decades ago now, I did have the honour of serving in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and in the role that I now have I have seen from both sides the effort undertaken in our foreign missions by people who are posted to them. It is definitely not the cocktail circuit, I can assure everybody, and I think the evidence of the past few years has brought a finality to that particular argument. But having worked overseas in our foreign missions in the past and having now visited overseas as a parliamentarian with the assistance of the people within our foreign missions, I know and understand very clearly the sort of work undertaken by these people. It is dedication at the public level that many Australians really need to understand and appreciate. I think we are now beginning to do that.

I wish to pay due regard to the accolades that have been laid upon both Liz and Allison. I know that in both cases, with families, friends and colleagues, there is going to be a long pe-
period of mourning and a long period of remembering. I hope that during that period—for colleagues, in particular—there will be a period of celebration of two particularly impressive lives.

I did not know Morgan Mellish, the journalist from the Australian Financial Review, but many people in my community will have known him. It was moving for me to hear the speeches made about Morgan. He is said to have had two really strong ambitions in life: one was to become a foreign correspondent and the other was to win a Walkley award. He has done both in a very short life. I am impressed with that: while some young boys might wish to become fighter pilots or foreign correspondents—there is a certain romance attached to that from youth—wishing for a Walkley award is a different thing. Not very many people even think about winning one of those, and they are a cherished award in the world of journalism. Morgan’s family, friends and colleagues would be most impressed, as am I, with his ability to do that and to be held in the regard that he was held in.

I also want to send once again, on behalf of my community, our best wishes to Cynthia Banham and her partner, Michael Harvey. Again, they are two people who will be known very broadly within my community here in Canberra. The previous speakers have remarked upon Cynthia’s survival, and I have to agree that it is a bit of a miracle. But from what I have heard of her it should not be a surprise, given her strength, her fitness and her determination to achieve. To Cynthia and Michael, I send my very warmest wishes, and I join with my colleagues who yesterday in the main chamber made a very strong point of looking forward very much to the return of both of them—in particular of Cynthia—to their journalism roles here in the building. I am sure that all of the friends, colleagues and family of Cynthia and Michael have that in their hearts as well. I join them in looking forward to hearing of the continued progress that she is making and to knowing that she is going to re-enter this building as an active journalist with a good career ahead of her.

I conclude by saying that we must also recall the other people who perished or who were injured, including Indonesians and people of other nationalities. We hope and pray that they can reach the end of this tragedy successfully and get on with their lives as best they can. In remembering our five Australians, I would like to also pay regard to the other people who perished and to the large number of people who suffered injuries in this terrible tragedy.

Mr BILLSON (Dunkley—Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence) (12.43 pm)—I would like to express my sincerest condolences to the families and friends of the five Australians who have gone all too soon, tragically killed in the Garuda plane crash on 7 March in Indonesia: Morgan Mellish, Elizabeth O’Neill, Mark Scott, Brice Steele and Allison Sudradjat. I also offer my thoughts, prayers and encouragement to those who have suffered severe injuries in the crash, including Defence Force personnel, the many civilians from different parts of the world—particularly the Indonesian people on board—and especially the Fairfax journalist, Cynthia Banham.

Prior to my current roles as Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and the Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, I had the honour and good fortune to be the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs for a year and a half. I speak today, as his former parliamentary secretary, about the dealings that I had during that time with some of the Australians who have lost their lives or were injured. I travelled to Indonesia twice and had the privilege of working directly and closely with Allison Sudradjat. In June 2005 I led an eight-member par-
liamentary delegation to Jakarta and to Aceh, in northern Sumatra, to inspect the devastation caused by the Boxing Day tsunami and to discuss with officials, led by and greatly supported by Allison, Australia’s aid effort to help Indonesia recover from the tragedy.

I remember marvelling at Allison’s fluency in the Indonesian language. She translated for me in our meetings with senior officials in Aceh and accompanied us to our meetings with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and also Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda. Despite the enormity of the recovery process, the very deep sense of personal connectedness with hardship and grief that so many were feeling, the direct-hand experience of the immense devastation in the region and the strain that it placed on Australian officials, particularly AusAID officials, Allison was simply outstanding in the way she responded to the disaster not only as an AusAID official and an aid worker but as a remarkably compassionate human being who was valued and respected, and who moved very freely and easily and in a welcoming way amongst the Indonesian communities she was working with.

In a vastly different working environment from Aceh, I again had the honour of working closely with Allison during another trip to Indonesia. Together, in August 2005, we put forward the Australian view at the ministerial meeting in Jakarta to discuss the Asia-Pacific region’s approach to the millennium development goals. Again, Allison, with great ease and professionalism, provided exceptional advice and support not only as a diplomat but as a very experienced and highly regarded aid policy adviser, with grounded practical experience that meant so much to that process. Although she was there with me representing our country, she was clearly incredibly committed to the outcomes that we were all aiming to achieve for communities in the region, to build better futures for their children and to share and develop some of the prosperity that everyone was reaching for.

Perhaps Allison’s work is best described in her AusAID testimony. She was a distinguished diplomat, one of Australia’s most capable and dedicated aid workers. She was able to meet the demands of responding to some of the region’s worst disasters, as well as understanding the complexities of trying to support improvements in governance, health and education services for the desperately poor people of the Asia-Pacific region. It was a privilege to meet Allison. She was a remarkable human being and it was an honour to experience firsthand the way she had devoted her life and her skills and, above all, her seemingly boundless and genuine compassion to those in need.

My heartfelt condolences are with Allison’s family and the friends of Allison for the great sadness and sense of loss they must now be feeling. Indeed, her tragic passing as a committed aid worker and a person of great compassion is a loss for the entire region. However, with all the different cultures, religions and backgrounds that she helped both here at home and abroad we can truly say that the world is a better place because of her life.

I also convey my admiration to the team at AusAID. Bruce Davis’s terrific obituary captured Allison and her work, Annemarie O’Keefe’s dignified account of the great loss that Allison represented was a fitting tribute to her. AusAID brings so much support to others in their darkest times. It is now our turn to bring some sunshine to AusAID and their people, because they are hurting and they have lost a wonderful member of their team.

I would also like to pay my respects to Liz O’Neill and express my condolences to her family and her friends. The loss of Liz O’Neill as a wife, a mother, a friend and an outstanding government official is very tragic. Again, in my previous role as Parliamentary Secretary to
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the Minister for Foreign Affairs, I had the privilege of receiving public affairs support from Liz on my trips to Indonesia and benefiting from her insights. Although the working relationship between my office and Liz was brief, her assistance was exceptional. I am aware of the great number of tributes she, as the spokesperson in Jakarta, has deservedly received as her work is remembered by the Australian embassy there, and also for the Order of Australia that she earned so commendably for her tireless efforts after the Bali bombs and for what a wonderful person she was.

My thoughts are also with Cynthia Banham. We have heard much about Cynthia. I had the good fortune of working with Cynthia, and I have been interviewed by her on a number of occasions in my current and previous roles. It is a true testament to her courage and tenacity that she survived this tragedy, and my thoughts are very much with her and her partner Michael Harvey, whom I also know well. To their family and friends: a new kind of marathon faces this delightful couple and those dear to them, and we wish them all the very best. May the support of her loved ones and her strength and determination continue to help nourish Cynthia’s recovery.

As a result of this tragedy, these committed Australian embassy officials who were carrying out their role of supporting the democratic process are very much in our thoughts. They may not have been well known but they were enormous in the lives of those who were dear to them. They will be dearly remembered for their commitment to developing the understanding between our two countries and for doing what they believed in. They were proud and dedicated Australians. They were everyday individuals of Indonesia. They were very important to many people. Our thoughts are with them after this terrible tragedy.

Mr McMULLAN (Fraser) (12.51 pm)—I rise, like everyone else who has participated in this debate, to of course support the motion moved by the Prime Minister. I have two capacities in which I wish to do that. To some extent that amalgamates the speeches made by the two previous speakers, because I do it as a member representing the ACT and as the shadow minister for international development assistance. When I come to those remarks, I will refer specifically to Allison Sudradjat, about whom the minister and former parliamentary secretary made such compelling remarks.

This incident struck Canberra very hard. Of course, everybody in Australia was struck by it. It was dramatic; it was sad; it was tragic; and all Australians were affected. But this struck Canberra very hard for two reasons. One is that all the five people either came from Canberra or had very strong connections with Canberra—and I will speak of that in a moment—and the other aspect is that everybody in Canberra knows somebody who does what they were doing. Everybody in Canberra could put themselves in the place of that person or their family. Everybody knows somebody in the media, in the police, in the Public Service or in the Defence Force—in the case of the people who were injured but fortunately not killed—who go to work on behalf of the nation, who travel overseas. I have members of my family who have travelled to Indonesia in the service of the public, not in any dramatic way, in the high-profile way that we as members of parliament might, but as part of Australia’s relationship with Indonesia. I have very dear friends, one of whose family has been living in Indonesia for several months, who have just returned on behalf of the Australian government in different agencies. But I do not know anybody in this community who does not know somebody who does what Mark, Brice, Liz, Morgan and Allison did, even if they do not know those individuals. So that made

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it particularly telling and compelling. People come here to serve their country in the Public Service, in the media, in the AFP, in the military and in a hundred other ways, and their families do not expect them to pay such a high price in the process. But we all know that it is possible, and, when it happens, it strikes home very hard.

It was a very powerful ceremony held last week at Fairbairn for the return of the caskets containing the bodies of the five Australians. You cannot hope to convey in a speech the mood that was there. It was quite a long ceremony, necessarily. There were five areas set aside for the families and one for those of us who had come in an official capacity on behalf of the Australian government, the opposition, the ACT government and the agencies that were represented by the people who had died. One thing struck me: for the whole duration of that ceremony, no-one spoke. Not one person in that area exchanged a word with the person next to them, because you did not know whether you could control your emotions if you spoke. It was too powerful. Of course, our hearts went out. We could not pretend that the suffering we were feeling was in any way comparable with that being endured by all the families whom we could see in front of us trying to cope with their grief. But we all had to nevertheless gear up and have our own strength as we coped, knowing that there but for fortune were people close to us. I join with all my colleagues in extending condolences to the families, friends and colleagues of those who died. Our thoughts are with those who are struggling to overcome the consequences of their injuries—physical and psychological.

In the time available for this debate, I want to turn my particular attention to some remarks in my capacity as shadow minister for international development assistance and speak particularly about Allison Sudradjat and those who go overseas in the service of AusAID. I think the minister has done an excellent job in his communication and support to the colleagues and families of those who died so tragically in this terrible incident. It was not my place to duplicate that; that would have been totally superfluous. I wanted to find a way of communicating, however inadequately, to the staff, many of whom are constituents of mine—probably at least half—and many of whom are friends of mine from my years and years of interest in this issue. I wrote a letter to the Director-General, which I am grateful he communicated to the staff, which makes clear that we support what the government and the minister have said about Allison and the people at AusAID—that it is the bipartisan, unanimous view of this parliament. I welcome this opportunity to expand on that, particularly with regard to Allison.

It is notable that 600 people came to pay tribute to Allison Sudradjat in the Great Hall of the parliament last Friday, while many others watched from Jakarta as the memorial service was streamed live to AusAID offices in Indonesia, in a sad irony, via the IT infrastructure that Allison herself had championed and enabled. Allison was not afraid to try new technologies and new solutions and was supportive of change and innovation. She was described as one of Australia’s most respected and talented development experts and was also an inspirational leader to whom people looked with great respect, admiration and fondness. But, in the words of Allison’s sister, Simone Kerr, could we ever know just how many millions of people Allison touched in her lifetime?

As head of AusAID in Indonesia, Allison’s work impacted on the lives of many, not only in her leadership and her management of Australia’s aid program with Indonesia but also in her compassion, her integrity and her manner. In Indonesian, one colleague told how local staff in Jakarta spoke with pride about the fact that it was Allison who hired them, because being

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handpicked by her was considered to be an honour. Under Allison’s leadership, much effort has gone into improving national roads and there has been a particular focus on junior and secondary education. In Indonesia, as in Australia, this is the investment that opens two doors—the door to economic success and the door to opportunity—for those who might otherwise be denied it without that education. Progress has been made in improving access to education for children, but over 100 million boys and girls around the world are still not in school today. I conclude by saying that I want to pay my respects to Allison’s family and acknowledge with gratitude and admiration the large contribution that Allison made to the Australian aid program and to all those who work in AusAID with her.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—I understand that it is the wish of honourable members to signify at this stage their respect and sympathy by rising in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I thank honourable members.

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (1.00 pm)—I move:
That further proceedings be conducted in the House.
Question agreed to.

Main Committee adjourned at 1.01 pm
Ms Roxon asked the Prime Minister, in writing, on 8 December 2005:

(1) For 2004-2005, what sum did the Minister’s department and portfolio agencies pay to (a) Clayton Utz, (b) Blakes Dawson Waldron, (c) Philips Fox, (d) Sparke Helmore, (e) Freehills, (f) Minter Ellison, (g) Corrs Chambers Westgarth, (h) Mallesons Stephens Jacques, (i) Deacons, and (j) Craddock Murray Neumann Solicitors for legal services.

(2) Which partners or principals of (a) Clayton Utz, (b) Blakes Dawson Waldron, (c) Philips Fox, (d) Sparke Helmore, (e) Freehills, (f) Minter Ellison, (g) Corrs Chambers Westgarth, (h) Mallesons Stephens Jacques, (i) Deacons, and (j) Craddock Murray Neumann Solicitors were responsible for undertaking or supervising legal services supplied by the firm to the department or agency in 2004-2005.

(3) For each partner or principal listed in response to part (3), what was the total amount billed to the department or agency for services undertaken or supervised by that partner or principal in 2004-2005.

(4) What are the details of the legal services provided to the department or portfolio agencies by (a) Clayton Utz, (b) Blakes Dawson Waldron, (c) Philips Fox, (d) Sparke Helmore, (e) Freehills, (f) Minter Ellison, (g) Corrs Chambers Westgarth, (h) Mallesons Stephens Jacques, (i) Deacons, and (j) Craddock Murray Neumann Solicitors in 2004-2005.

Mr Howard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) I am advised that my department and agencies paid the following amounts to the firms listed for work performed in 2004-05 (all figures are GST inclusive):

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<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Total paid to each firm</th>
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<td>Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clayton Utz</td>
<td>Nil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blakes Dawson Waldron</td>
<td>72,867</td>
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<td>Philips Fox</td>
<td>Nil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mallesons Stephens Jacques</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deacons</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craddock Murray Neumann</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Public Service Commission</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Water Commission</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions in Writing

Legal Services

(Question No. 2904)
(2) and (3) I am advised that the following partners and principals of the firms listed undertook or supervised legal services supplied in 2004-05 to my department and agencies and billed my department and agencies for work in 2004-05 as follows:

### Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Relevant Partners and Principals</th>
<th>Amounts Billed by Partners and Principals in 2004-05 (incl GST)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clayton Utz</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakes Dawson Waldron</td>
<td>Rehana Box</td>
<td>605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Clark</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Dawson</td>
<td>14,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Odbert</td>
<td>55,097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Vane-Tempest</td>
<td>619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phillip Wiseman</td>
<td>1,369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philips Fox</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparke Helmore</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freehills</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minter Ellison</td>
<td>Denis O’Brien</td>
<td>4,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrs Chambers Westgarth</td>
<td>Susan McCarthy</td>
<td>3,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alexandra Wedutenko</td>
<td>36,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallesons Stephens Jacques</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deacons</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craddock Murray Neumann</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Australian National Audit Office

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Relevant Partners and Principals</th>
<th>Amounts Billed by Partners and Principals in 2004-05 (incl GST)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clayton Utz</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakes Dawson Waldron</td>
<td>Elizabeth Johnstone</td>
<td>4,417</td>
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<td></td>
<td>John Clark</td>
<td>4,785</td>
</tr>
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<td>Philips Fox</td>
<td>Lex Holcombe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sparke Helmore</td>
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<td>Freehills</td>
<td>Nil</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Paul McGinness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christine Plevey</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Denis O’Brien</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corrs Chambers Westgarth</td>
<td>Anne Cain</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frank Lawson</td>
<td>9,389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tom Brennan</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Questions in Writing

### Firm Relevant Partners and Principals Amounts Billed by Partners and Principals in 2004-05 (incl GST) $

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Relevant Partners and Principals</th>
<th>Amounts Billed by Partners and Principals in 2004-05 (incl GST)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mallesons Stephens Jacques</td>
<td>Adam Bartlett</td>
<td>138,617</td>
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<td></td>
<td>David Briggs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ian Johnson</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stephen Skehill</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Topfer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chris Wheeler</td>
<td>1,008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deacons</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Craddock Murray Neumann</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Public Service Commission</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Water Commission</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
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### Office of National Assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Relevant Partners and Principals</th>
<th>Amounts Billed by Partners and Principals in 2004-05 (incl GST)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clayton Utz</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakes Dawson Waldron</td>
<td>Nil</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philips Fox</td>
<td>Gary Rumble</td>
<td>3,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sparke Helmore</td>
<td>Colin Webeck</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freehills</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minter Ellison</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrs Chambers Westgarth</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallesons Stephens Jacques</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deacons</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craddock Murray Neumann</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General Nil

(4) I am advised that the following legal services were provided to my department and agencies by the firms listed in 2004-05:

### Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Legal Services Provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clayton Utz</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakes Dawson Waldron</td>
<td>Review of lease provisions; Preparation of a grant deed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Firm Legal Services Provided

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Legal Services Provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philips Fox</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparke Helmore</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freehills</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minter Ellison</td>
<td>Legal advice regarding a privacy issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrs Chambers Westgarth</td>
<td>Legal advice regarding construction project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallesons Stephens Jacques</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deacons</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craddock Murray Neumann</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Australian National Audit Office

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Legal Services Provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clayton Utz</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakes Dawson Waldron</td>
<td>Probity advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philips Fox</td>
<td>Performance audit advice; Contract advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparke Helmore</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freehills</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minter Ellison</td>
<td>Performance audit advice; General matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrs Chambers Westgarth</td>
<td>Performance audit advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallesons Stephens Jacques</td>
<td>Procurement and contract advice, work associated with the Hunt Royal Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deacons</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craddock Murray Neumann</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Office of National Assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Legal Services Provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clayton Utz</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakes Dawson Waldron</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philips Fox</td>
<td>Advice on the ONA Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparke Helmore</td>
<td>Probity advice – tender for ONA Analytical Support System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freehills</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minter Ellison</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrs Chambers Westgarth</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallesons Stephens Jacques</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deacons</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craddock Murray Neumann</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Legal Services Provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: All figures are GST inclusive
Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport
(Question No. 3872)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 9 August 2006:

(1) Further to the Minister’s reply to part (1) of question No. 3391 can the Minister say that Camera 2 was not facing a wall before 26 January 2005; if so, why; if not, why not.

(2) On what date was (a) the review into Camera 2’s position and operation undertaken by Customs CCTV control room operators and (b) Camera 2’s “facing wall” fault reported by a Customs officer.

(3) Did (a) Customs CCTV control room operators or (b) some other person conduct a physical inspection of Camera 2 before, during or immediately after the review which discovered Camera 2 was facing a wall; if not, why not; if so, what are the details of that inspection.

(4) Did (a) a Customs officer (b) a baggage handler or (c) some other person alert the Customs CCTV control room operators that Camera 2 was facing a wall before a Customs officer noted that this camera was not functioning properly; if the alert was given by a person other than a Customs officer or a baggage handler, what was the occupation of that person.

(5) Did the Customs officer who identified that Camera 2 was facing a wall follow Customs procedures relevant to a potential crime scene, being the apparent tampering of a Customs CCTV camera; if so, (a) what was the band level of the Customs officer and (b) what action did he or she take; if not, why not.

(6) Will the Minister provide details of the reporting obligations of the Customs officer who observed that Camera 2 was facing a wall, including the details of (a) any written report, (b) any verbal report (c) to whom the reports were made, (d) the dates of the reports and (e) all actions taken by those who received the reports, including the dates those actions were taken; if not, why not.

(7) Did the Customs officer make an entry in his or her note book with the details of the Camera 2 “facing wall” incident; if so, what does that entry say; if not, why not.

(8) Following the reporting that Camera 2 was facing a wall, did a Customs officer follow standard procedures and prepare a further incident report for his or her superiors; if so, what did that report say; if not, why not.

(9) What are the band levels of the Customs Officers who received the further incident report referred to in part (8).

(10) In respect of the Customs officers identified in part (9), (a) what action did they take in relation to the incident report and (b) what band level(s) were the Customs officers associated with the action in relation to the incident report.

(11) What action was taken to rectify the “facing wall” fault of Camera 2 and what band level(s) were the Customs Officers who took corrective action.

(12) In respect of the investigation undertaken in relation to the “facing wall” fault in Camera 2, (a) what was the nature of the investigation, (b) on what date did it commence, (c) on what date did it conclude, (d) what were the findings and (e) what were the recommendations.

(13) On what date was the “facing wall” fault of Camera 2 reported to Bemac Security Pty Ltd and how was the fault brought to the attention of Bemac Security Pty Ltd.

(14) What was the band level of the Customs officer who reported the “facing wall” fault of Camera 2 to Bemac Security Pty Ltd.

(15) Why did it take between 26 January 2005 and 2 February 2005 to fix the “facing wall” fault of Camera 2.
(16) Did Bemac Security Pty Ltd provide a report to Customs following the examination and maintenance of the “facing wall” fault of Camera 2; if so, (a) what did that report say about the nature of the fault and (b) did it indicate how the “facing wall” fault could have occurred; if so, what reason was given; if not, why not.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) Camera 2 was reported as facing a wall on 26 January 2005. Customs does not have any record of Camera 2 being out of place prior to that date. In accordance with normal operating procedures Customs officers carried out a routine maintenance check on 23 January 2005.

(2) (a) Camera 2 was found to be facing the wall on 26 January 2005. (b) The fault was reported to the maintenance service provider on the same day 26 January 2005.

(3) (a) Customs CCTV control room operators followed normal operating procedures to report the fault identified in Camera 2, but this did not include a physical inspection. A written service report was provided for Customs Sydney International Airport maintenance contractor, Bemac Security Pty Ltd. (b) Customs Sydney International Airport maintenance contractor, Bemac Security Pty Ltd undertook a physical inspection of Camera 2 in order to rectify the fault identified. The inspection was undertaken on 2 February 2006.

(4) (a) A Customs officer detected that Camera 2 was facing the wall.

(5) The Customs officer’s response was in accordance with standard operating procedures which are not crime scene procedures. In the normal course of events, the fault with Camera 2 would not constitute a crime scene. (a) Customs Level 1. (b) The Customs officer followed normal operating procedures and reported the fault.

(6) (a) The Customs officer who observed that Camera 2 was facing the wall on 26 January 2005 instigated a written service report on the same day (26 January), in accordance with normal operating procedures. (b) A written service report is provided to the maintenance contractor. (c) The report was forwarded to the Customs Sydney International Airport maintenance contractor, Bemac Security Pty Ltd in accordance with standard operating procedures. (d) 26 January 2006. (e) Bemac Security Pty Ltd undertook a physical inspection of Camera 2 to rectify the fault on 2 February 2005.

(7) The Customs officer followed normal operating procedures to report the fault by lodging a written service report.

(8) The Customs officer followed normal operating procedures and instigated a service report. There was no requirement for a further incident report.

(9) Refer to Question 8 above.

(10) Refer to Question 8 above.

(11) Refer to Question 6 above.

(12) Refer to Question 6 above.

(13) Refer to Question 6 above.

(14) Refer to Question 5 above.

(15) The fault identified in Camera 2 on 26 January 2005 was rectified in accordance with the timeframes specified in the maintenance contract with Bemac Security Pty Ltd.

(16) Yes, Bemac Security Pty Ltd did provide a report to Customs.
Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 9 August 2006:

(1) Further to the Minister’s reply to part (1) of question No. 3391, can the Minister say that Camera 1 was not facing a wall before 30 January 2005; if so, why; if not, why not.

(2) On what date was (a) the review into Camera 1’s position and operation undertaken by Customs CCTV control room operators and (b) Camera 1’s “facing wall” fault reported by a Customs officer.

(3) Did (a) Customs CCTV control room operators or (b) some other person conduct a physical inspection of Camera 1 before, during or immediately after the review which discovered Camera 1 was facing a wall; if not, why not; if so, what are the details of that inspection.

(4) Did (a) a Customs officer (b) a baggage handler or (c) some other person alert the Customs CCTV control room operators that Camera 1 was facing a wall before a Customs officer noted that this camera was not functioning properly; if the alert was given by a person other than a Customs officer or a baggage handler, what was the occupation of that person.

(5) Did the Customs officer who identified that Camera 1 was facing a wall follow Customs procedures relevant to a potential crime scene, being the apparent tampering of a Customs CCTV camera; if so, (a) what was the band level of the Customs officer and (b) what action did he or she take; if not, why not.

(6) Will the Minister provide details of the reporting obligations of the Customs officer who observed that Camera 1 was facing a wall, including the details of (a) any written report, (b) any verbal report (c) to whom the reports were made, (d) the dates of the reports and (e) all actions taken by those who received the reports, including the dates those actions were taken; if not, why not.

(7) Did the Customs officer make an entry in his or her note book with the details of the Camera 1 “facing wall” incident; if so, what does that entry say; if not, why not.

(8) Following the reporting that Camera 1 was facing a wall, did a Customs officer follow standard procedures and prepare a further incident report for his or her superiors; if so, what did that report say; if not, why not.

(9) What are the band levels of the Customs Officers who received the further incident report referred to in part (8).

(10) In respect of the Customs officers identified in part (9), (a) what action did they take in relation to the incident report and (b) what band level(s) were the Customs officers associated with the action in relation to the incident report.

(11) What action was taken to rectify the “facing wall” fault of Camera 1 and what band level(s) were the Customs Officers who took corrective action.

(12) In respect of the investigation undertaken in relation to the “facing wall” fault in Camera 1, (a) what was the nature of the investigation, (b) on what date did it commence, (c) on what date did it conclude, (d) what were the findings and (e) what were the recommendations.

(13) On what date was the “facing wall” fault of Camera 1 reported to Bemac Security Pty Ltd and how was the fault brought to the attention of Bemac Security Pty Ltd.

(14) What was the band level of the Customs officer who reported the “facing wall” fault of Camera 1 to Bemac Security Pty Ltd.

(15) Why did it take between 30 January 2005 and 2 February 2005 to fix the “facing wall” fault of Camera 1.
Did Bemac Security Pty Ltd provide a report to Customs following the examination and maintenance of the “facing wall” fault of Camera 1; if so, (a) what did that report say about the nature of the fault and (b) did it indicate how the “facing wall” fault could have occurred; if so, what reason was given; if not, why not.

Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

1. Camera 1 was reported as facing a wall on 30 January 2005. Customs does not have any record of Camera 1 being out of place prior to that date. In accordance with normal operating procedures Customs officers would have carried out a routine maintenance check on 23 January 2005.

2. (a) Camera 1 was found to be facing the wall on 30 January 2005. (b) The fault was reported to the maintenance service provider on the same day 30 January 2005.

3. (a) Customs CCTV control room operators followed normal operating procedures to report the fault identified in Camera 1, but this did not include a physical inspection. A written service report was provided to the Customs Sydney International Airport maintenance contractor, Bemac Security Pty Ltd. (b) Customs Sydney International Airport maintenance contractor, Bemac Security Pty Ltd undertook a physical inspection of Camera 1 in order to rectify the fault identified. The inspection was undertaken on 2 February 2006.

4. (a) A Customs officer detected that Camera 1 was facing the wall.

5. The Customs officer’s response was in accordance with standard operating procedures which are not crime scene procedures. In the normal course of events, the fault with Camera 1 would not constitute a crime scene. (a) Customs Level 1. (b) The Customs officer followed normal operating procedures and reported the fault.

6. (a) The Customs officer who observed that Camera 1 was facing the wall on 30 January 2005 instigated a written service report on the same day (30 January), in accordance with normal operating procedures. (b) A written service report is provided to the maintenance contractor. (c) The report was forwarded to the Customs Sydney International Airport maintenance contractor, Bemac Security Pty Ltd in accordance with standard operating procedures. (d) 30 January 2006. (e) Bemac Security Pty Ltd undertook a physical inspection of Camera 1 to rectify the fault on 2 February 2005.

7. The Customs officer followed normal operating procedures to report the fault by lodging a written service report.

8. The Customs officer followed normal operating procedures and instigated a service report. There was no requirement for a further incident report.

9. Refer to Question 8 above.

10. Refer to Question 8 above.

11. Refer to Question 6 above.

12. Refer to Question 6 above.

13. Refer to Question 6 above.

14. Refer to Question 5 above.

15. The fault identified in Camera 1 on 30 January 2005 was rectified in accordance with the timeframes specified in the maintenance contract with Bemac Security Pty Ltd.

16. Yes, Bemac Security Pty Ltd did provide a report to Customs.
Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport
(Question No. 3874)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 9 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 area at Sydney International Airport replicated the precise field of view lines of Camera 1; if not, can the Minister explain how full operational effectiveness could be maintained while Camera 1 was out of focus and 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 to recover complete information about that object or person; if not, why not; if so, can the Minister explain how full operational effectiveness could be maintained while Camera 1 was out of focus and facing a wall.

(3) Can the Minister say whether the edges, or any area, within Camera 1’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 1 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 1; if not, can the Minister explain how full operational effectiveness could be maintained while Camera 1 was out of focus and facing a wall.

(5) Can the Minister be certain that all sections of the baggage make-up areas of Sydney International Airport were captured by surveillance cameras at all times between October 2004 and March 2005; if so, why; if not, why not.

(6) Can the Minister be certain that Customs have a complete history of the behaviour or actions of all objects and persons in the baggage make-up area in 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) 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 1’s field of view were covered by other cameras.

(4) Refer to Question 3 above. There is no Customs recorded footage available from the cameras in the baggage make-up area, nor is there any record available to confirm whether the cameras were recording at the times in question.

(5) Refer to Question 1 above. I am unable to answer this question on behalf of other entities at Sydney International Airport.

(6) The cameras have the capacity to cover the entire area should that be required to cover Customs operational requirements, but not all cameras continuously record.
Consultancy Services
(Question No. 3907)
Mr Bowen asked the Prime Minister, 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 Howard—I am advised that the answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
No.

Consultancy Services
(Question No. 3922)
Mr Bowen asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 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 Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Yes, the department has. No other agencies within the portfolio have done so.

Telstra: Payphones
(Question No. 3936)
Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister representing the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, in writing, on 15 August 2006:
(1) Were any Telstra payphones removed from the federal electorate of Wills in the financial year 2005-2006; if so, what were their locations.
(2) Does Telstra intend to remove any payphones from the federal electorate of Wills in the financial years (a) 2006-2007 or (b) 2007-2008; if so, what are their locations.
Mr McGauran—The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:
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 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. In addition, Telstra has identified all of its universal service obligation payphones in towns and cities with a population of less than 50,000, and undertaken to vary its standard marketing plan for payphones to clarify its obligations. 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.
(1) Telstra has advised that one Telstra payphone was removed from the electoral division of Wills in the 2005-2006 financial year. The payphone was removed from Lorenson Avenue, Coburg North.
(2) (a) Telstra has advised that three Telstra payphones are being considered for removal in the electoral division of Wills in the 2006-2007 financial year. These are located at Mascoma Street,
Strathmore, Woodland Street, Strathmore, and outside the Fawkner Crematorium, Sydney Road.

(b) Telstra has advised that it assesses plans to remove payphones on an annual basis. Telstra has therefore advised that it does not have specific data on the number of payphones that will be considered for removal in the electoral division of Wills for the 2007-2008 financial year.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport

(Question No. 3942)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 15 August 2006:

(1) Has the Minister read the article titled “Snore on terror” published in the Daily Telegraph on 7 April 2006; if not, why not.

(2) Can the Minister confirm comments attributed to him in that article, made in relation to CCTV cameras in the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport that were found to be pointing in the wrong direction and/or out of focus, that “in one instance we believe there may have been some human involvement”; if not, why not.

(3) How does the Minister reconcile the apparent conflict between his comments to the Daily Telegraph and his reply to part (4) of question No. 3391 (Hansard, 9 August 2006, page 161) that Customs does not have a record of any impropriety in the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport.

(4) Can the Minister be certain that there was no impropriety in relation to CCTV cameras in the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport that were found to be pointing in the wrong direction and/or out of focus; 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) Yes.

(2) I have nothing further to add.

(3) Refer to Question 2 above.

(4) Refer to Question 2 above.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport

(Question No. 3967)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister representing the Minister for Justice and Customs, in writing, on 17 August 2006:

(1) Can the Minister confirm comments attributed to him in the article “Snore on terror”, which was published in the Daily Telegraph on 7 April 2006, that a Customs inquiry into whether CCTV cameras in the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport had been tampered with was inconclusive; if not, why not.

(2) How does the Minister reconcile the apparent conflict between the comments reported in the Daily Telegraph and the Minister’s reply to part (6) of question No. 3391, that there is no evidence of misconduct in relation to CCTV cameras in the baggage make-up area at Sydney International Airport that were found to be pointing in the wrong direction and/or out of focus.

(3) Can the Minister be certain that there has been no impropriety in relation to cameras that were found to be pointing in the wrong direction and/or out of focus in the baggage make-up areas at Sydney International Airport; if so, why; if not, why not.

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
Mr Ruddock—The Minister for Justice and Customs has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) Refer to my answer to your Question 3942.
(2) Refer to Question 1 above.
(3) Refer to Question 1 above.

Iran
(Question No. 3978)
Mr Danby asked the Prime Minister, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

(1) What is the Government’s position on comments by the Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr Robert Hill, to the effect that Australia would not support United States financial sanctions against Iran if Iran does not accept the United Nations Security Council’s demand that it cease developing nuclear weapons.

(2) Is the Prime Minister aware that at the Islamic Conference in Malaysia, the President of Iran called for a member state of the United Nations to be destroyed; if so, what impact, if any, has this had on the Government’s position in respect of the development of nuclear weapons by Iran.

(3) Can the Prime Minister outline the circumstances under which Australia would support the United States in imposing financial sanctions against Iran.

Mr Howard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) The Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr Robert Hill, said that broadly based sanctions within the United Nations context were more likely to be effective than unilateral sanctions. This is the government’s position.

(2) The Australian Government is aware of and condemns comments made by Iran’s President Ahmadinejad on 3 August 2006. Such comments are reprehensible and unacceptable, and Australia joins the international community in unreservedly denouncing these and other similar remarks made by elements of the Iranian regime. In this context, Australia remains firmly committed to the pursuit of diplomatic efforts to address the concerns surrounding Iran’s nuclear programme and strongly urges Iran to comply with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1737.

(3) The Australian Government is putting in place financial sanctions against Iran as part of its compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1737. The resolution includes financial sanctions on individuals and entities listed by the Security Council or Sanctions Committee for their involvement in Iran’s nuclear activities or the development of nuclear weapons delivery systems.

Mobile Phone Towers
(Question No. 3994)
Ms Kate Ellis asked the Minister for Health and Ageing, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

(1) How much has been spent on the establishment and maintenance of the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency’s Electromagnetic Health Complaints Register.

(2) Does he consider that the Electromagnetic Health Complaints Register has succeeded in “assist[ing] researchers in formulating research hypotheses, and contribu[ing] to public confidence in measures being adopted to minimise health risks associated with EMR”, as recommended by the Senate Environment, Communications and Information Technology and the Arts References Committee.

(3) Can he provide an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Electromagnetic Complaints Register for each year since its establishment in 2003.
What steps have been taken to advertise the Electromagnetic Health Complaints Register to the general public.

What action will he take to ensure that the Register accurately reflects the full extent of health issues arising from electromagnetic energy across the country.

Will he undertake a nation-wide health audit of people living and working near low and high impact mobile telephone base stations across Australia.

Mr Abbott—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

The design of the Electromagnetic Health Complaints Register involved widespread consultation and required approximately 0.2 full-time equivalent (FTE) at the Executive Level 1. The ongoing maintenance requires an annual 0.02 FTE at the same level.

The Government’s response to Recommendation 2.7 was—“The Government is aware of the concerns held by some users of radiofrequency technologies about the possible health effects of such devices. The Government accepts the establishment of a centralised complaints mechanism. It is proposed that ARPANSA will implement and manage a complaints register. The register may identify emerging issues as well as possible activities. This information would be shared with the public and industry (via ARPANSA’s website) as well as other Commonwealth agencies”. ARPANSA has established and maintained the Complaints Register and places an annual analysis on the ARPANSA website. ARPANSA views the complaints register as one component in a program to protect against and to inform the public about potential adverse health effects from exposure to electromagnetic radiation in the environment.

No criteria have been established to judge the effectiveness of the Complaints Register.

The register was launched via an ARPANSA media release on 4 July 2003. The media release was placed on the ARPANSA web site and a direct link to an information page and submission form has been on the ARPANSA home page since 26 September 2003.

The media release was distributed to 168 major daily and major regional newspapers, posted on the Australian Associated Press web site and distributed to the Australian Medical Association, The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Australasian Science Journal. Later in 2003 it was further distributed to: The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Committee of Presidents of Medical Colleges, Australasian Faculty of Occupational Medicine, Australian and New Zealand Society of Occupational Medicine and the Australian Divisions of General Practice.

ARPANSA has contact with various community-based groups with an interest in health effects of EMR and a large number of copies of the media release and complaints submissions form have been distributed to interested persons in the community. Through enquiries to ARPANSA by telephone and e-mail, nearly another 900 submission forms have been sent to interested persons. Links to the ARPANSA web pages concerning the register have appeared or do appear on the web pages of other government agencies and interest groups.

During 2006 the ARPANSA website was viewed on over 900,000 occasions. The Complaints Register was viewed on 2,000 occasions and the submission form was downloaded approximately once per day.

The consensus of scientific opinion in Australia and internationally is that there are no established adverse health effects arising from exposure to electromagnetic energy at levels normally encountered in the environment. The most appropriate action is for ARPANSA to continue to monitor the published scientific literature and to advise government as appropriate.

Having regard for the answer to Question (5) there is no justification to undertake a nation-wide health audit of people living and working near low and high impact mobile telephone base stations across Australia.
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Governor-General
(Question No. 3997)

Mr Murphy asked the Prime Minister, in writing, on 4 September 2006:

(1) Did he see a report in *The Daily Telegraph* of 24 August 2006 titled “A majorly unknown general”.

(2) In respect of that part of the report that reveals that a *Daily Telegraph*’s national survey found that “Up to eighty per cent of Australians have no idea who Governor-General Michael Jeffery is”, what is his response to this finding.

(3) What is his response to that part of the report that states: “The result is good news for Mr Howard, who has taken over many of the Governor-General’s traditional tasks - especially as chief mourner at national events such as the Bali bombing memorials”.

(4) What is his response to that part of the report that states: “The *Daily Telegraph* can also reveal that the Prime Minister’s office reacted angrily when Major-General Jeffrey appeared on Channel 10’s *Meet The Press* program in May last year”.

(5) Can he confirm that part of the report that states: “The Major-General’s staff were told by Mr Howard’s press secretary Tony O’Leary to keep the viceroy off TV - and he has barely appeared since”; if so, what are those details; if not, why not.

(6) Will he now facilitate the Governor-General being present at as many national and sporting events as possible, particularly over the next 15 months; if not, why not.

(7) Will he ensure that, wherever possible, the Governor-General is the chief mourner at national events like the Bali bombing memorials, particularly over the next 15 months; if not, why not.

(8) Are there any protocols, guidelines or conventions which determine when it is appropriate for a Governor-General to be chief guest at national and sporting events; if so, what are the details of those protocols, guidelines or conventions; if not, why not.

(9) Are there any protocols, guidelines or conventions which determine when it is appropriate for a Prime Minister to be the chief guest at national and sporting events; if so, what are the details of those protocols, guidelines or conventions; if not, why not.

(10) Will he facilitate raising the profile of the Governor-General in the media, particularly over the next 15 months; if not, why not.

(11) What is the role of the Governor-General in respect of high-profile, non-ceremonial events, including sporting events, over the next 15 months.

Mr Howard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) to (11) The Governor-General attends a very wide range of events around Australia and overseas consistent with his role, and will continue to do so. The assertion that my office sought to prevent him speaking to the press was corrected in *The Age* on 30 August 2006.

Crosby/Textor Contracts
(Question No. 4045)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister representing the Minister for 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.

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
Mr Abbott—The Minister for Ageing has provided the following response to the honourable member’s question:
The answer to this question is covered in the Minister for Health and Ageing’s response to question 4022.

Builders Collective of Australia
(Question No. 4070)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Prime Minister, in writing, on 4 September 2006:
(1) Did the President of the Builders Collective of Australia, Mr Phil Dwyer, write to him in April concerning builders warranty insurance; if so, (a) did the correspondence contain allegations about Mr. Chris Lamont, Executive Director of Federal and Media Relations at the Housing Industry Association (HIA), and former Chief of Staff to the Minister for Small Business, (b) did the HIA obtain a copy of the letter and write to Mr Dwyer seeking an apology and the payment of $60,000, (c) did Mr Dwyer refuse to pay the $60,000 and (d) did the Prime Minister, or his office, convey Mr Dwyer’s letter to Mr Lamont, or the HIA, without Mr Dwyer’s consent.
(2) In respect of the matter referred to in Part (1), has his attention been drawn to reports that the HIA has commenced legal proceedings against Mr Dwyer in the ACT Supreme Court; if so, can he say whether this action was a result of Mr Dwyer’s correspondence with the Prime Minister.

Mr Howard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(1) (a) to (d) I am advised that the President of the Builders’ Collective of Australia, Mr Phil Dwyer, wrote to me in April 2006.
I am advised that Mr Dwyer’s letter, which was read into the Parliament of Tasmania Hansard on 1 June 2006 and 14 June 2006, referred to Mr Chris Lamont.
Neither I nor my office conveyed Mr Dwyer’s letter to Mr Lamont or to the HIA. Indeed, Mr Dwyer has withdrawn any suggestion that material may have been inappropriately released by the Commonwealth.
(2) I am advised that Mr Lamont has commenced legal proceedings against Mr Dwyer. The conduct of the proceedings are a matter for the parties involved, however, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment upon them.

Freedom of Information
(Question No. 4349)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Prime Minister, in writing, on 14 September 2006:
(1) How many freedom of information applications have the Minister’s department and agencies received in each financial year since 1 July 2000.
(2) In respect of the applications identified in Part (1), how many resulted in documents being released (a) in full, (b) in part and (c) not at all.
(3) Has the Minister’s department issued any conclusive certificates since 1 July 1996; if so, what are those details.
(4) In respect of each of the conclusive certificates identified in Part (3), will the Minister provide (a) the sections of the Freedom of Information Act 1982 to which the certificate relates and (b) the details of any appeal against the certificate lodged with the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, including the outcome of the appeal.

Mr Howard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(1) and (2) Information about the numbers and outcomes of freedom of information applications received in each financial year by my department and those of my portfolio agencies subject to the Freedom of Information Act 1982 is publicly available in annual reports made under that Act.

(3) I am advised that there have been six conclusive certificates issued by my department since 1 July 1996.

(i) The Acting Secretary of my department issued a conclusive certificate on 11 September 1998 in relation to a freedom of information application made to the Australian Taxation Office.

(ii) The Secretary of my department issued a conclusive certificate on 20 February 2001 in relation to freedom of information applications made to the Department of Industry, Science and Resources and to the Department of Finance and Administration.

(iii) The Secretary of my department issued a conclusive certificate on 20 September 2001 in relation to a freedom of information application made to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

(iv) The Secretary of my department issued a conclusive certificate on 22 November 2001 in relation to a freedom of information application made to my department.

(v) The Secretary of my department issued two conclusive certificates (for ease of reference) on 1 August 2006 in relation to a freedom of information application made to my department.

(4) I am advised that the relevant sections of the Freedom of Information Act 1982 and details of appeals lodged with the Administrative Appeals Tribunal in respect of each of the certificates identified in (3) above are as follows:

(i) (a) Section 34.

(b) No appeal against the certificate was lodged with the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

(ii) (a) Section 34.

(b) Sutherland Shire Council v The Department of Industry, Science and Resources (N2000/1637) and Sutherland Shire Council v The Department of Finance and Administration (N2000/1582) – exemptions upheld.

(iii) (a) Section 34.

(b) Toomer v The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (V2001/992) – exemptions upheld.

(iv) (a) Section 34.

(b) Toomer v The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (V2001/1564) – exemption upheld.

(v) (a) Section 36.

(b) The Australian v The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (V2005/1033) – appeal not yet heard.

Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs: Credit Cards

(Question No. 4407)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

(1) How many credit cards have been issued to employees of the Minister’s department and agencies in each financial year since 1 July 2000.

(2) Of the credit cards identified in Part (1): (a) how many have been reported lost; (b) how many have been reported stolen; (c) have any been subject to fraud; if so, what was the cost of each fraud inci-
dent; (d) what is the average credit limit for each financial year; (e) what was the total amount of interest accrued; and (f) have any employees been subject to criminal proceedings as a result of credit card fraud.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2003 - 04</th>
<th>2004 - 05</th>
<th>2005 - 06</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of cards issued –</td>
<td>Number of cards issued –</td>
<td>Number of cards issued –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>407</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) 2</td>
<td>(a) 8</td>
<td>(a) 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) 0</td>
<td>(b) 2</td>
<td>(b) 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) 0</td>
<td>(c) 2; cost - NIL.</td>
<td>(c) 3; cost – $229.90*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) $2,000 per transaction</td>
<td>(d) $2,000 per transaction</td>
<td>(d) $5,000 per transaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 per month</td>
<td>$10,000 per month</td>
<td>$10,000 per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) $0</td>
<td>(e) $0</td>
<td>(e) $0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) No</td>
<td>(f) No</td>
<td>(f) No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Departments credit card provider changed in May 2004. Data for previous financial years is not readily available.

* During the 2005-06 financial year fraudulent activity was identified on 3 corporate credit cards. At the time of preparation of this response the credit card provider has credited all amounts except the sum of $229.90 which is still in dispute while investigations continue. No fraudulent use has been attributed to departmental staff.

Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs: Fuel Costs
(Question No. 4445)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

For each financial year since 1 July 2000, what was the total cost of fuel purchases for all Commonwealth cars operated by the Minister’s department and agencies.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Fuel usage data provided by Fleet Monitoring Body within the Department of Finance is provided by calendar year. In this context, the amount spent on fuel in the years from 2000 is reflected in the following table. The increase in 2006 is a result of the transfer of the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination’s into the Department.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calendar Year</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Not Available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>$ 121,821.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>$ 145,694.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>$ 169,407.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>$ 166,757.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>$ 157,925.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>$ 219,603.39</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs: Gardening and Indoor Plants  
(Question No. 4465)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

For each financial year since 1 July 2000, what was the total cost of (a) gardening and (b) indoor plants for the Minister’s department and agencies.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

The table below provides the identifiable amount spent on gardening and indoor plants for each financial year from July 2000 until 31 December 2006. The figures provided relate to the Families and Community Services Department and its predecessors as Machinery of Government changes have occurred in that time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Sum Expended On Gardening</th>
<th>Sum Expended On Indoor Plants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>$32,739</td>
<td>$1,226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>$42,440</td>
<td>$1,638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>$38,331</td>
<td>$1,392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>$43,743</td>
<td>$1,722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>$40,470</td>
<td>$6,207</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>$53,771</td>
<td>$31,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07 ytd</td>
<td>$55,132</td>
<td>$36,490</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Health and Ageing: Sexual Harassment Claims  
(Question No. 4494)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Health and Ageing, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

For each financial year since 1 July 2000, how many sexual harassment claims have been reported in the Minister’s department and agencies.

Mr Abbott—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

A total of 16 sexual harassment claims have been reported in the Department of Health and Ageing (including the Therapeutic Goods Administration) and its portfolio agencies for the period 1 July 2000 to 30 June 2006, as follows:

1 July 2000 to 30 June 2001: 2
1 July 2001 to 30 June 2002: 1
1 July 2002 to 30 June 2003: 3
1 July 2003 to 30 June 2004: 2
1 July 2004 to 30 June 2005: 2
1 July 2005 to 30 June 2006: 6

Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: Sexual Harassment Claims  
(Question No. 4496)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister representing the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, in writing, on 14 September 2006:
For each financial year since 1 July 2000, how many sexual harassment claims have been reported in the Minister’s department and agencies.

**Mr McGauran**—The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

Neither the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts nor any of the following portfolio agencies have reported any sexual harassment claims for the years in question:

- Australia Business Arts Foundation Limited;
- Australia Council;
- Australian Film Commission;
- Australian Film Television and Radio School;
- Australian National Maritime Museum;
- Bundanon Trust;
- Film Australia Ltd;
- Film Finance Corporation Aust Ltd;
- National Archives of Australia;
- National Gallery of Australia;
- National Library of Australia;
- National Museum of Australia;
- Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority;
- NetAlert Ltd;
- Australian Communications and Media Authority; and
- Telstra Corporation Ltd.

The following agencies have reported sexual harassment claims in one or more of the years in question:

### Australian Sports Commission

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Cases Reported</th>
<th>Employee Base FTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/02</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>689</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FTE = Full Time Equivalent

### Australian Broadcasting Corporation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Cases Reported</th>
<th>Employee Base FTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4,116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4,260</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4,321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4,244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4,298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4,345</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FTE = Full Time Equivalent
Special Broadcasting Service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Cases Reported</th>
<th>Employee Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/02</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>771</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
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<td>788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>795</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Australian Postal Corporation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Cases Reported</th>
<th>Employee Base*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>2001/02</td>
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<td>2005/06</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>40,998</td>
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</table>

* Total number of persons engaged in the provision of postal services. Includes contractors and casual employees.

Human Services: Sexual Harassment Claims

(Question No. 4505)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister representing the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

For each financial year since 1 July 2000, how many sexual harassment claims have been reported in the Minister’s department and agencies.

Mr Hockey—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Core Department
There have been no claims of sexual harassment reported in the core Department of Human Services since its inception in October, 2004.

Child Support Agency
There have been nine reported claims of sexual harassment in the Child Support Agency since 1 July 2000: 1 employee was dismissed, 3 employees were fined, demoted or counselled, 2 employees resigned prior to finalisation of the investigation, 1 investigation is still in progress and 2 matters are before Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC).

CRS Australia
From 1 July 2000, CRS Australia has had the following sexual harassment claims reported:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Number of Cases Reported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>Nil</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>Nil</td>
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<td>2003-04</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
Financial Year | Number of Cases Reported
--- | ---
2004-05 | Nil
2005-06 | Nil

Centrelink
The detailed information required to answer the question is not readily available.

Medicare Australia
From 1 July 2000, Medicare Australia has had the following number of sexual harassment cases reported within the agency:

Financial Year | Number of Cases Reported
--- | ---
2000-01 | Nil
2001-02 | 1
2002-03 | Nil
2003-04 | 1
2004-05 | Nil
2005-06 | 1

Australian Hearing
Australian Hearing has had no sexual harassment claims since 1 July 2000.

Health Services Australia
There have been no sexual harassment claims in HSA since 1 July 2000.

To prepare this response it has taken 13 hours and 30 minutes at an estimated cost of $778.

Recruitment Agencies
(Question No. 4567)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Treasurer (Costello), in writing, on 14 September 2006:

For each financial year since 1 July 2000: (a) which employment agencies has the Minister’s department engaged; (b) what was the total cost of engaging employment agencies; and (c) how many employees were placed by these and, of those, which were employed on (i) an ongoing and (ii) a non-ongoing basis.

Mr Costello—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

2000-2001

(a) Adecco Australian Pty Limited
All Staff
Effective People
Freehills
Informed Sources Pty Ltd
Interim HR Solutions
Kelly Services
Kowalski Consulting
Markham Appointments Pty Ltd
Mastech Asia Pacific Pty Ltd
PCA Pty Ltd – Canberra
Select Appointments
Spherion Recruitment Solutions
TMP Worldwide Eresourcing Ltd
Wizard Personnel & Office Services P/L

(b) $1,810,758.92

(c) Total number – 81
   (i) 0
   (ii) 17

2001-2002

(a) Adecco Australian Pty Limited
   Alliance Recruitment
   Ambition Recruitment Pty Ltd
   Informed Sources Pty Ltd
   Hays Personnel Services (Aust) Pty Ltd
   Kelly Services
   Kowalski Consulting
   Markham Appointments Pty Ltd
   Mastech Asia Pacific Pty Ltd
   PCA Pty Ltd - Canberra
   Professional Careers Australia Pty Ltd
   Select Appointments
   Spherion Recruitment Solutions
   The Green & Green Group
   The One Umbrella
   TMP Worldwide Eresourcing Ltd
   Wizard Personnel & Office Services P/L

(b) $859,871.68

(c) Total number – 47
   (i) 0
   (ii) 11

2002-2003

(a) Acumen Alliance
   Adecco Australian Pty Limited
   Alliance Recruitment
   Effective People
   Hamilton James & Bruce
   Hays Personnel Services (Aust) Pty Ltd
   Informed Sources Pty Ltd
   Mastech Asia Pacific Pty Ltd
Recruitment Management Company
Spherion Recruitment Solutions
The Green & Green Group
TMP Worldwide Eresourcing Ltd
Westaff
Wizard Personnel & Office Services P/L

(b) $1,112,132.07

(c) Total number – 49
(i) 0
(ii) 11

2003-2004
(a) Acumen Alliance
Adecco Australia Pty Ltd
Careers Unlimited
Effective People Pty Ltd
Hays Personnel Services (Aust) Pty Ltd
Hudson Global Resources Australia Pty Ltd
Igate Australia
Informed Sources Pty Ltd
Mastech Asia Pacific Pty Ltd
Professional Careers Australia Pty Ltd
Public Affairs Recruitment Company
Recruitment Management Company
Spherion Recruitment Solutions
The Green & Green Group
Westaff
Wizard Personnel & Office Services P/L

(b) $781,429.72

(c) Total number – 24
(i) 0
(ii) 4

2004-2005
(a) Effective People
Hudson Global Resources Australia Pty Ltd
Information Technology & Engineering Consultants
Informed Sources Pty Ltd
Kowalski Recruitment Pty Ltd
Patriot Alliance Pty Ltd
Recruit Plus

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
Spherion Recruitment Solutions  
The Green & Green Group  
Westaff  
Wizard Personnel & Office Services P/L  

(b) $562,056.65  
(c) Total number – 17  
(i) 0  
(ii) 5  

2005-2006  

(a) Alliance Recruitment  
    Cantlie Recruitment Services  
    Face 2 Face  
    Hays Personnel Services (Aust) Pty Ltd  
    Information Technology & Engineering Consultants  
    Informed Sources Pty Ltd  
    Julia Ross  
    Kowalski Recruitment Pty Ltd  
    Patriot Alliance Pty Ltd  
    Public Affairs Recruitment Company  
    Verossity  
    Westaff  
    Wizard Personnel & Office Services P/L  

(b) $360,352.75  
(c) Total number – 25  
(i) 1  
(ii) 16  

Recruitment Agencies  
(Question No. 4580)  

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 14 September 2006:  
For each financial year since 1 July 2000: (a) which employment agencies has the Minister’s department engaged; (b) what was the total cost of engaging employment agencies; and (c) how many employees were placed by these agencies and, of those, which were employed on (i) an ongoing and (ii) a non-ongoing basis.  

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:  
I consider that the preparation of answers to the questions placed on notice would involve a significant diversion of resources and, in the circumstances, I do not consider that the additional work can be justified.
Recruitment Agencies
(Question No. 4582)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Human Services, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

For each financial year since 1 July 2000: (a) which employment agencies has the Minister’s department engaged; (b) what was the total cost of engaging employment agencies; and (c) how many employees were placed by these agencies and, of those, which were employed on (i) an ongoing and (ii) a non-ongoing basis.

Mr Hockey—The following answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Core Department
(a) and (b) The following table outlines the employment agencies engaged by the core department for each financial year since the Department’s creation on 24 October 2004. The cost shown is the total cost that the department incurred for the service and includes the salary for the employee placed within the department.

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green and Green</td>
<td>$35,595</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kowalski Recruitment</td>
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<td>$151,826</td>
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<td>SOS Recruitment</td>
<td>$629</td>
<td>$28,324</td>
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<tr>
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<td>$15,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hays Personnel Services</td>
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<td>$11,062</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candle Australia Pty Ltd</td>
<td>$542</td>
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<td>Drake Australia</td>
<td>$542</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$125,750</td>
<td>$288,986</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(c) (i) There were 4 non-ongoing and no ongoing employees placed by these agencies in 2004/05.
(ii) There were 8 non-ongoing and no ongoing employees placed by these agencies in 2005/06.

Child Support Agency
(a) and (b) For each financial year since 1 July 2000, the CSA engaged the following employment agencies; and the total cost of engaging employment agencies was as outlined in the following table. Note, the CSA conducts the majority of its recruitment using recruitment agencies.

(c) The table below also shows for each financial year since 1 July 2000 how many employees were estimated to have been placed by these employment agencies and, of those, how many were employed on an ongoing and a non-ongoing basis. Note, the CSA does not as a matter of course record how many people are recruited by each recruitment agency. Consequently, based on normal practice in the CSA, it has been necessary to assume that in:

- the Regions recruitment through recruitment agencies was only conducted for staff at the APS 1 to APS 3 and EL2 and above levels.
- National Office, Canberra, it is assumed that recruitment through recruitment agencies was for staff at APS 1 to APS 3 and SES levels.
This data was collated on 19 December 2006.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Employment Agency</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
<th>Number of Employees</th>
<th>On-going</th>
<th>Non-ongoing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Bev Sweeney &amp; associates</td>
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QUESTIONS IN WRITING
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Diskecho Pty Ltd  
eConnect Solutions  
Frontier Group  
Greythorn Pty Ltd  
Hays Personnel  
Hoban Recruitment  
Hudson Global Resources  
Icon Recruitment Pty Ltd  
IPA Personnel Pty Ltd  
Kaz Technology Services P/L  
Kowalski Recruitment Manpower Australia  
Merit Solutions Pty Ltd  
Paxus Pty Ltd  
Recruitment Solutions Ltd  
Regent Recruitment  
Ron Hogan & Associates  
Select Australasia  
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**CRS Australia**

(a) CRS Australia has engaged the following employment agencies since 1 July 2000:

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(b) The total costs of engaging employment agencies by CRS Australia since 1 July 2000 are:
1 July 2000 – 30 June 2001: $570,816
1 July 2001 – 30 June 2002: $319,300
1 July 2002 – 30 June 2003: $529,642
1 July 2003 – 30 June 2004: $603,396
1 July 2004 – 30 June 2005: $627,034

(c) There were 65 employees placed by these agencies and, of those, there were 6 employed on an ongoing and 59 employed on a non-ongoing basis.
1 July 2000 – 30 June 2001: 11 non-ongoing and 1 ongoing
1 July 2001 – 30 June 2002: 6 non-ongoing and 0 ongoing
1 July 2002 – 30 June 2003: 12 non-ongoing and 2 ongoing
1 July 2003 – 30 June 2004: 10 non-ongoing and 1 ongoing
1 July 2004 – 30 June 2005: 14 non-ongoing and 1 ongoing
1 July 2005 – 30 June 2006: 6 non-ongoing and 1 ongoing

To prepare this answer it has taken approximately 61 hours and 36 minutes at an estimated cost of $3,152.

Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs: Office Space
(Question No. 4599)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

(1) At 12 September 2006, what office space rented by the Minister’s department was vacant.

(2) In respect of vacant office space identified in Part (1), (a) from what date has it been vacant, (b) how long will it remain vacant; (c) what is the monthly rental cost and (c) how long will the department continue to pay rental.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

No office space rented by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs was vacant on 12 September 2006.

Foreign Affairs and Trade: Unauthorised File Access
(Question Nos. 4604 and 4606)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Trade, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

(1) For each financial year since 1 July 2000, on how many occasions have departmental employees accessed files or records without proper authorisation.

(2) In each instance identified in Part (1), (a) what action was taken against the employee and (b) if the unauthorised access involved customer records, in how many instances was the customer notified.

(3) Are employees able to access personal or customer files without (a) being detected, or (b) leaving a record of their access.

(4) What auditing procedures exist to monitor employee access to files and records.

Mr Downer—On behalf of the Minister for Trade and myself, the answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

DFAT

(1) One case was reported where departmental employees accessed files or records without proper authorisation since 1 July 2000.

2000-01 Nil
2001-02 1
2002-03 Nil
2003-04 Nil
2004-05 Nil
2005-06 Nil
2006-07 Nil
(2) (a) the locally engaged staff member was counselled about accessing another staff member’s e-mail without approval.

(b) not applicable.

(3) and (4) DFAT holds a range of personal and customer records, reflecting the scope and operations of the department. Arrangements for access to these records vary according to the type of information involved. Access to staff records, for example, is limited to the relevant work areas with that responsibility. Audit logs are kept of access, printing and for e-mail dispatch. In the case of the information held in our passports database (PICS), individual access to, and use of, personal data is recorded down to the keystroke and is subject to regular audits by the Australian National Audit Office. All activity generated in PICS is monitored by the System Administrator with monthly reports scrutinised by senior management.

In relation to consular records our current consular case management system provides us with good audit trail capabilities on individuals who access the system with the ability to limit access to relevant case officers and supervisors. These capabilities are being further strengthened in the current development of our new system. Consular Operations staff have a strong privacy culture and protecting the privacy of our consular clients is an important focus of the Department’s consular and security training programs.

**Australia-Japan Foundation**

(1) Nil

(2) Nil

(3) There are only two staff in the AJF. Personal files are kept and maintained centrally by Corporate Management Division.

(4) Files are kept in a locked container, access is through keys locked in another location accessible only by the responsible secretariat staff. Records of usage are maintained.

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**Attorney-General’s: Unauthorised File Access**

*(Question No. 4610)*

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Attorney-General, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

(1) For each financial year since 1 July 2000, on how many occasions have departmental employees accessed files or records without proper authorisation.

(2) In each instance identified in Part (1), (a) what action was taken against the employee and (b) if the unauthorised access involved customer records, in how many instances was the customer notified.

(3) Are employees able to access personal or customer files without (a) being detected, or (b) leaving a record of their access.

(4) What auditing procedures exist to monitor employee access to files and records.

Mr Ruddock—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) There is no evidence of departmental employees accessing files or records without proper authorisation for each financial year since 1 July 2000.

(2) To date no action has been necessary.

(3) All records held by the department are compartmentalised, restricting access to staff with a need-to-know and holding appropriate security clearances. Departmental policies and procedures have been developed to ensure that unauthorised activity is identifiable and auditable.

(4) The department’s policies and procedures are supported by the conduct of regular audits and staff training.
Immigration and Citizenship: Unauthorised File Access  
(Question No. 4612)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, in writing, on 15 December 2006:

(1) For each financial year since 1 July 2000, on how many occasions have departmental employees accessed files or records without proper authorisation.

(2) In each instance identified in Part (1), (a) what action was action taken against the employee and (b) If the unauthorised access involved customer records, in how many instances was the customer notified.

(3) Are employees able to access personal or customer files without (a) being detected, or (b) leaving a record of their access.

(4) What auditing procedures exist to monitor employee access to files and records.

Mr Andrews—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Values and Conduct Section have provided the following information (question 1 and 2a) regarding incidents of unauthorised access to files or records that were formally investigated.

- 2000 / 2001 - there were nil reports;
- 2001 / 2002 - there were nil reports;
- 2002 / 2003 - there were nil reports;
- 2003 / 2004 - there was one report;
- 2004 / 2005 - there were 10 reports, and
- 2005 / 2006 - there were 13 reported.

(2) (a) The following sanctions were imposed for the unauthorised access to files or records:

2004 / 2005
- Two reprimands;
- Two re-assignments of duties;
- One counselling;
- One criminal prosecution, and
- Two resigned from APS prior to completion of investigation.

2005 / 2006
- Four reprimands;
- One reduction in classification;
- One re-assignment of duties, and
- One termination.

(b) When an unauthorised access has been identified and investigated, the department does not notify the person or persons whose records have been accessed because the records are property of the Commonwealth and not the property of the customer/client.

(3) (a) Employees are unable to access personal or customer files without being detected.

(b) Employees are unable to access personal or customer files without leaving a record of their access.

For parts a) and b) of this question, when an employee accesses a record or file a log of that event is captured. The information contained in the log displays which employee accessed which record.
In order to identify that an employee has accessed a file without authorisation, the logs of their actions must be manually examined.

(4) As mentioned, logs are recorded by systems for every action a user makes when accessing customer records.

Logs are kept, and held by system owners. At present user logs are audited in both a reactive and proactive manner. If it is assumed a user is wrongfully accessing records or if it is found that a record has been modified then logs will be examined. In addition, randomly chosen clients records are audited to determine if their records have been incorrectly accessed. Randomly selected user accounts are also audited; in this situation the records they have accessed are investigated for improper use.

There are procedures in place to ensure staff access privileges are removed if they are no longer required. For example, if a staff member moves into a position where their previous access privileges are not required, their access will be removed.

Environment and Water Resources: Unauthorised File Access

(Question No. 4616)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

(1) For each financial year since 1 July 2000, on how many occasions have departmental employees accessed files or records without proper authorisation.

(2) In each instance identified in Part (1), (a) what action was action taken against the employee and (b) if the unauthorised access involved customer records, in how many instances was the customer notified.

(3) Are employees able to access personal or customer files without (a) being detected, or (b) leaving a record of their access.

(4) What auditing procedures exist to monitor employee access to files and records.

Mr Turnbull—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) Nil

(2) Not applicable

(3) (a) and (b) No

(4) No specific auditing procedures are in place

Treasury: Accommodation

(Question No. 4624)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Treasurer, in writing, on 14 September 2006:

Is the Minister’s department, or any portfolio agency, in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location; if so, (a) what is the total construction cost and (b) when will construction be completed.

Mr Costello—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Australian Bureau of Statistics

The Australian Bureau of Statistics is leasing new accommodation for the regional office in South Australia and is in the process of constructing the office fit out at the new location.

(a) The total fit out construction is underway and costs are estimated at $5m.

(b) The work is scheduled to be completed in mid February 2007.
Australian Competition & Consumer Commission
The ACCC is scheduled to move from its current Dickson sites to 23 Marcus Clarke Street, Canberra, in July 2007.
(a) The original project cost estimates for the ACCC component of fitout in the new building (as approved by the Public Works Committee) was $5.48 million. The owner is also directly contributing capital of $1.2 million (GST inclusive) to fitout. Costs are continuing to be monitored given recent significant increases in trade costs within the construction industry which may impact on cost estimates.
(b) The contractual construction completion date is 30 June 2007.

Australian Office of Financial Management
The Australian Office of Financial Management is not in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.
(a) Not applicable.
(b) Not applicable.

Australian Prudential Regulation Authority
The Australian Prudential Regulation Authority is not in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.
(a) Not applicable.
(b) Not applicable.

Australian Securities and Investments Commission
ASIC is in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.
(a) The total construction cost for the new office accommodation is $8.55 million.
(b) The construction is due to be completed by end November 2006.

Australian Taxation Office
The ATO is not undertaking construction of any new office accommodation.
The ATO is committed to leasing new office accommodation currently under construction in the Canberra CBD and the Sydney CBD in 2007. These new leases will replace existing leased premises in the Canberra CBD and Sydney CBD where fitouts are nearing the end of their useful life.

Corporations & Markets Advisory Committee
The Corporations & Markets Advisory Committee is not in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.
(a) Not applicable.
(b) Not applicable.

Inspector-General of Taxation
The Inspector-General of Taxation is not in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.
(a) Not applicable.
(b) Not applicable.

National Competition Council
The National Competition Council is not in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.

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Productivity Commission
The Productivity Commission is not in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.
(a) Not applicable
(b) Not applicable

Royal Australian Mint
The Royal Australian Mint is not in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.
(a) Not applicable
(b) Not applicable

Treasury
The Treasury is not in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location.
(a) Not applicable
(b) Not applicable

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry: Accommodation
(Question No. 4636)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, in writing, on 14 September 2006:
Is the Minister’s department, or any portfolio agency, in the process of having office accommodation constructed at a new location; if so, (a) what is the total construction cost and (b) when will construction be completed.

Mr McGauran—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Yes, at the following sites:

Canberra
(a) The department is not aware of the total construction cost as it will be leasing the new accommodation from the owner Industry Superannuation Property Trust
(b) October 2007

Fisherman Islands (Port Central) QLD
(a) The department is not aware of the total construction cost as it will be leasing the new accommodation from the owner (Port of Brisbane)
(b) late May / early June 2007

Karratha WA
(a) The department is not aware of the total construction cost as it will be leasing the new accommodation from the owner (Glensal Pty Ltd)
(b) January 2007

Sydney
(a) The department is not aware of the total construction cost as it will be leasing the new accommodation from the owner (SACL-Sydney Airport Corporation Limited)
(b) February 2007
Gladstone QLD
(a) The department is not aware of the total construction cost as it will be leasing the new accommodation from the owner (Cromcorp Australia Pty Ltd)
(b) October 2007

Gove, Nhulunbuy NT
(a) The department is not aware of the total construction cost as it will be leasing the new accommodation from the owner (Alcan Pty Ltd)
(b) March 2007